### Bite-Sized For Convenience

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| Additional Tags:| Plot Bunnies - Freeform, Bleeding Effect, Winter Soldier Bucky Barnes, Bucky Barnes Recovering, It's a work in progress, Unreliable Narrator, misleading chapter titles, Drama That Turns into Humor Real Quick, Kyuubi POV, Kurama is Overpowered, Kurama is Tired of Your Shit, The Asset in the Commonwealth, Self-Insert, but not really, And Also An Unrelated Self-Insert Harry Potter, At the same time, Everyone's Confused About It, POV Second Person, kind of, Mutant Powers, Also kind of, Another Unreliable Narrator, emotions are difficult, Especially When You Can't Feel Them, Alternate Universe, Not Captain America: The Winter Soldier Compliant, duh - Freeform, Minor Character Death, Non-Graphic Violence, There's a Man Drinking Tea, He's Kind of a Big Deal, Death (As a Character), Does "Major Character Death" Count as a Tag if the Major Character is Death, winter soldier programming, Logical Alex Mercer, Amnesia is Merely a Setback, Prompt 18, Muggle Life, Parseltongue is Such a Nuisance, The Best Kind of Kill is Overkill, Zombie Apocalypses are Not Fun, Never Trust a Man With Teeth Like a Shark, Close Encounters of the Alucard Kind, SI AU, Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Why Did I Write This?, This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things, Self-Indulgent, Not Avengers: Age of Ultron (Movie) Compliant, Not Captain America: Civil War (Movie) Compliant, Not Canon Compliant, Alpha Bucky Barnes, Case 53, Waking Up In
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Summary

A collection of plot-bunnies from various fandoms that I'm mostly putting here for my own reference, but figured maybe one or two might get an intrigue out of a person. If someone happens to see one they want to adopt, though, feel free to ask me about it. Some of them I plan to continue, but most of them are just ideas that aren't all that fleshed out yet.

Any crossovers will be marked as such in the chapter titles.

Fair warning, some of these cut off in weird places, because they aren't at a realistic stopping point yet.

Tags and fandoms will be updated as works are posted.

Notes

The Bleeding Effect had driven Subject 16 mad. To Desmond, it does something else entirely.
Hemorrhage (Assassin's Creed)

Altaïr awoke to voices in a language he did not understand. A sharp spike of confusion registered briefly—*hadn’t he just been running across rooftops in Jerusalem?*—before it was discarded in favor of more pressing matters. There was a female voice to his right, sounding lighthearted and easygoing; a direct contrast to the sarcastic, nearly-snarling male voice from across the room—*room? Hadn’t he just been outside?*—and the irritated female one from between them.

His armor felt strange, and as he slit his eyes open just enough to observe but not be observed he became aware that his hood was missing. These people could see his face! Instinctively he flexed his wrist and was reassured by the comforting weight of his hidden blade, even if his other weapons seemed to have been taken. Why did they leave him with his blade if they had taken his swords and daggers?

He shifted his eyes to the right as they gleamed molten gold, his Other sight shivering into place like ripples of water. The friendly female glowed a reassuring blue, as did the angry male across the floor. The other female, however, glowed a sharp, angry red.

*Enemy,* was all that Altaïr registered before he was tensing his muscles in preparation to leap. He didn’t know who his two allies were, or why they hadn’t attacked the enemy yet, but Altaïr would not allow his comrades—*possible brother and sister*—to be deceived by this obvious traitor. Why else would they be conversing with the enemy—a Templar?—unless they didn’t know of the true threat?

Altaïr steadied his breathing and slowly peeled his eyes open, wrist tensing and ready to unsheathe his blade the moment the traitor drew close enough to—

—Desmond awoke with a gasp, sitting upright on the animus and feeling like a bucket of ice water had just been poured down his back. He looked around wildly, feeling oddly disconnected from reality in a manner reminiscent of the Bleeding Effect, only a thousand times worse.

His Eagle Vision flickered on and off like a broken switch, casting the others into various shades of color too quickly for him to catch. He grimaced and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes to try and ease some of the pressure gathering there, and when he looked up and blinked a few times he could have sworn Lucy flashed red for a moment before slowly turning blue again.

*Strange,* Desmond wondered dazedly. *For a second it almost looked like…*

He shook his head and swung his legs over the side of the animus. Obviously the Bleeding Effect was putting his Eagle Vision on the fritz. Lucy was an Assassin just like the rest of them—hell she’d *rescued* him from Abstergo!—and there was no way she would show up red under other circumstances, he was sure.

But he couldn’t stop himself from keeping his distance from her, or from feeling unusually wary about everything she said and did for the rest of the night.

Altaïr blinked, momentarily confused before ingrained reflex took over and he swung back around the corner he’d apparently just rounded—*but, no, that’s not right at all, he was in Masyaf walking*
through the Gardens—and pressed his back to the strange wall found there. Gold eyes flicked around the narrow corridor, not recognizing the materials used in its construction. The lines were too smooth; there was no brickwork or thatch, no stone or wood. There were no inconsistencies in the surfaces to act as handholds or scaffolding to gain access to higher ground.

Altaïr didn’t like this. He didn’t like this at all.

Remembering the last time he’d awoken in a strange, unfamiliar place, he quickly glanced down at himself and cursed under his breath. Again, he had been stripped of his armor and most of his weapons save his hidden blade and put in these odd, loose garments that were entirely unsuitable for protecting his flesh from Templar steel.

Altaïr paused, looking back down at his blade. There was something different about it. About the blade itself. About his hand. Something wasn’t right. He flexed the fingers—all five of them—on his weapon hand, confusion mounting—

—Desmond blinked back a flash of dizziness, finding himself leaning up against a wall near the animus room. He must have blacked out for a second; he was awfully tired thanks to all the time spent in the animus running around Renaissance Italy.

Shoving himself off the wall he continued towards the others, glancing down at his hidden blade and unsheathing it a few times, disquieted.

Why did it feel like something was wrong with his hand?

Altaïr found himself staring into the face of the sarcastic male from before, the one who glowed blue after an eye-blink of Other sight to check, between one step and the next. More prepared this time, he quickly and surreptitiously flexed the fingers on his left hand—he had not imagined having all of his fingers then—and carefully schooled his expression into a blank mask. He did not know what the male was saying, where he was, why his hand had an extra finger, or why he kept reappearing in this alien place deprived of his armor and weapons.

The possible brother stopped talking immediately, staring intensely at Altaïr’s face. Altaïr checked his Other vision again, just to be sure, and the possible brother’s gaze flicked up to his eyes and lightened with something—recognition?—before his body language changed from confrontational to wary.

Altaïr observed the change cautiously, muscles tensing. The man may be a potential brother, but even brothers can become threats if pressed. He took a moment to observe the possible brother before him, finding him wearing similar useless garb as he himself was, as well as in possession of a strange contraption resting in front of his eyes like small windows.

“…Altaïr?” the brother—no longer potential, but rather brother—asked warily. The pronunciation was strange, the accent even stranger, but it was recognizably his name.

Altaïr furrowed his brows, taking a slow step back even as he flexed his wrist again. The brother knew his name, but he didn’t know the brother.

“I am he,” Altaïr replied. “Your name, brother?”
The brother’s face paled starkly, and Altaïr’s muscles coiled in reaction, ready for anything—

—Desmond shook his head, pressing a hand to his temple as a migraine threatened to set fire to his nerves. Shaun was staring at him, pale and worried, and Desmond felt a fission of dread spiral down his spine. Why was he looking at him like that? Desmond hadn’t noticed anything strange happen.

“Shaun?” he asked, attempting to sound casual.

It didn’t work.

“…you were Bleeding, Desmond.”

Desmond stared blankly for a moment before sighing. Well, he’d been spending so much time in Ezio’s head he supposed it was only a matter of time before he started showing up in the real world, too. Maybe he’d cussed Shaun out in Italian? Or flirted with him? Desmond managed a small smile at the thought as he took Shaun’s moment of shock to escape.

He didn’t feel up to confronting the man about it right now. Shaun would yell at him later when he got around to it.

Altāïr stopped mid-stride as he once again found himself in the impossible, unnatural corridor he’d almost confronted the strange foreign brother in. More wary than curious now—*it had happened four times, after all, and he could no longer discount the occurrences as coincidence or happenstance*—he cautiously prowled across the eerie floor. It appeared to be made out of the same unnatural material as the walls and ceiling, as if the entire area were simply the inside of a metal helmet.

He took a brief second to once again flex his fingers, bemused at the sensation of having all of them once again. He did not regret the loss of it, of course—it was a sacrifice to show his dedication to the Order and the Creed—but to suddenly have it returned (however temporarily) was an odd experience indeed.

Altāïr wasted little time in discovering how this new, strange blade works—*from beneath the wrist, rather than through the fingers; he’d known it had to be possible, but had never been able to make a working prototype*—and acclimates himself to the body he apparently was temporarily borrowing. He knows it is not his own—*not merely because of the rejuvenated finger*—because it is both shorter and weaker than his own. His effortless silence and grace now require a modicum of effort to achieve, and while the scar on his lip appears to be the same there are other scars that are missing entirely, and a few he does not recognize.

He passes what appears to be an indoor window—*how strange*—and catches a glimpse of his reflection. It is enough to make him pause. It is remarkable how much this other body resembles his real self; his features are too soft, his jaw too narrow, and his eyes the wrong color—*hazel instead of eagle-yellow*—but it is most definitely Altāïr’s face looking back at him.

He reaches out and presses his renewed hand against the translucent surface and wonders if he can find the foreign brother before—

—Desmond groans when he blinks awake to find himself staring into a window with his hand on the glass. He knows he should really tell someone about how bad the Bleeding Effect is getting, but he
doesn’t want the others to worry. There isn’t anything they can do to stop it except cut him off from the animus, which is out of the question considering their mission. Plus, he isn’t entirely sure it actually is the Bleeding Effect. He isn’t hallucinating or anything; he’s simply losing spaces of time, where he apparently walks down empty corridors and studies his reflection in a window…

Desmond freezes. He was studying himself in a window. If he was Bleeding, that meant that whichever ancestor had hijacked his body knew that something wasn’t right. His ancestors weren’t idiots; they would definitely notice that they were in the wrong body and the wrong clothes if given half a second to think about it close enough.

Was it Ezio? The Italian Master Assassin was vain enough to probably spend time staring at himself in a window. Desmond doubted it had been Altaïr. He had never synched with the Syrian Grandmaster well, not in comparison to Ezio, and the old assassin wouldn’t have wasted time with his reflection if he suddenly found himself in a strange place.

Plus, Altaïr would have attacked someone by now. He was twitchy like that.

With a sigh, Desmond headed towards his ‘room,’ hoping to catch up on some sleep. Hopefully he’d stay there this time.

“…wrong with Desmond,” a semi-familiar male voice was saying in a vaguely-familiar language. It was almost like the English the Templars used, but different enough that Altaïr did not immediately jump to incorrect conclusions.

His eyes burned gold as he studied the three strangers out of the corner of his eye, and saw the female glowing crimson. Well, he corrected himself, not entirely incorrect conclusions. He was once again laid out in the strange chair he had awoken in that first time, but this time the traitor and the brother and sister were huddled together across the room rather than spread out.

“…Bleeding Effect… not Ezio… Altaïr,” came the fragmented murmurs. The words themselves were incomprehensible to him, except for his name, again said in that strange, foreign accent with its strange pronunciation.

Whatever this Bleeding Effect was, all three of them—traitor and allies alike—were severely concerned about it. To have it used in conjunction with his name, even loosely, did not bode well. Had the traitor not been present Altaïr would have confronted his brother and sister about all that had happened, but he knew better than to reveal to the traitor that he was both awake and aware.

Likewise, had only the traitor been present, she would have already been dead. But for now his allies trusted the traitor, and to kill her without a common language between them with which to explain himself would merely engender distrust. Trapped in this strange, foreign place he could not afford to alienate himself from his only allies.

Altaïr half-expected to blink and find himself back in Masyaf, as had happened the previous times he’d awoken in this odd building, but the longer he remained motionless on the chair and listened to the worried whispers of the others in their incomprehensible language, the more convinced he became that he’d be stuck here for a while longer.

Keeping still but with muscles tensed in case swift action was needed, Altaïr considered his presence here. The foreign male had known almost instantly who he was when he’d blinked into awareness
while he and the usual inhabitant of this body had been speaking, so at least one of them knew of what was happening and was aware that Altaïr existed. He wondered how he’d come to the correct conclusion so quickly.

Perhaps it had been his instinctive clearing of expression? But, surely, if these were truly his brother and sister assassins they had been trained to show no emotion to a potential threat? Why would such an obvious reaction to a new situation reveal Altaïr for the imposter he had been? If he had woken into the body of a novice it would make a bit more sense, for the amount of control between a novice and a Master like himself was vastly different, enough to be noticeable to any halfway-decent assassins of caliber.

A flicker of blue out of the corner of his eye drew his attention to the friendly female as she bounced to the side of his chair, where a strange pedestal made of the wall and floor material rested.

“All right, Desmond! Break time’s over; time to go back into Baby.”

Altaïr didn’t understand a single word the sister had said, but he did recognize the word Desmond, which seemed to be a name. Was that the name of the body Altaïr had woken up in? How strange.

The sister was doing something on the pedestal, and before Altaïr had a chance to risk opening his eyes and asking her what was going on the world dissolved into a landscape of white and—

—something was wrong with the animus, because Desmond could feel the white in-between cracking and fragmenting and—

—surely this was a work of sorcery, because the ground had become the sky and the walls had dissolved into an endless expanse of white unlike anything he’d ever seen before—

—and Desmond could feel his hold on reality slipping, as if he’d just been dumped headfirst into a Bleeding Effect, but it wasn’t going away—

—and the conjured land heaved like the ocean as foreign thoughts and foreign emotions crashed over him and Altaïr struck back instinctively, fighting even in his own mind with all the ruthless skill of his waking hours—

—as pain erupted across his consciousness as the Bleeding Effect fought back in the way it wasn’t supposed to be able to and Desmond wasn’t ready for this at all and was utterly unprepared for—

—the way Altaïr lurched forward with a hidden blade that hadn’t been there until he’d instinctively sought to use it, with a body that belonged to him and possessed all of the power and grace he knew it should—

—while white-hot agony speared through a chest Desmond shouldn’t have yet at this point in the loading process, and he glanced down to see a hidden blade attached to a hand with only four fingers embedded in his torso and looked up to see—

—confused, pained hazel eyes staring back at him out of a face he’d only ever seen in the window, and suddenly he knew that this was Desmond—

—and Altaïr had reacted entirely on reflex to the animus attempting to shove them both into Ezio’s memories and had struck to kill—

—just like he always did, and Altaïr’s eyes flashed gold as Desmond glowed blue and Altaïr pulled his blade free with a sense of resignation because—
—Altaïr glowed blue under stress-activated Eagle Vision, and Desmond could see the regret on his face as the Syrian Assassin realized what had happened and—

—Desmond collapsed and Altaïr caught him, caught this strange brother whose body he’d awoken in and had just killed—

—and he didn’t know what would happen to him if he died like this in the animus, before a memory loaded and without Rebecca noticing, and he was afraid of dying and failing and—

—Altaïr didn’t know where he was or what was going on, but he’d just assassinated a brother in a moment of reflex and only his iron control of his mind kept him from panicking—

—as his vision dimmed and the animus flickered around them, strobe-like, Desmond reached up and grasped his ancestor on the shoulder, knowing he was dying and wanting Altaïr to know that—

—forgiveness shown in pained hazel eyes, and Altaïr felt his chest tighten in response because he was a killer and an assassin and never had a target forgiven him before—

—words flared around them, DESYNCHRONIZATION IMMINENT, and Desmond had a moment to hope that maybe the wound wouldn’t follow him to the real world as he locked eyes with sharp eagle-gold and—

—Altaïr grasped the hand on his shoulder and squeezed, because this was a brother and not a target and as the world around them broke like glass he hoped Desmond would live to see another day even as—

—the animus desynchronized and tore him out and into consciousness.

Desmond shoved himself free of the animus, terrified that it would suck him back in, back to where he had a blade shoved through his heart and was seconds away from death, and rolled as far from as it as he could get, both hands clasped over his chest as he gasped for breath. It felt like his lungs were full of water, and he coughed but the sensation did not go away, so Desmond clawed at his tentative control over his own emotions and forced himself to calm down, breathing slightly easier as he did so.

“Desmond!” Lucy cried, hurrying over and crouching to help him.

Desmond saw only a blur of red through dilated eyes still stuck in panicked Eagle Vision, and jerked away from her as if she were contagious. “Stay back!” he barked in Arabic as a wave of aggression rose up from somewhere deep in his mind. It was cold and sharp like a hidden blade, and Desmond was afraid if Lucy got much closer to him that it would lash out without his consent.

Shaun—thankfully still blue—grasped Lucy by the arm and hauled her away, not entirely understanding the words but knowing who the language was associated with, and Desmond let himself collapse back to the ground, panting and exhausted.

“What the bloody hell just happened?” Shaun demanded, looking wild and angry even as he aggressively fixed his glasses from where they’d been skewed when he launched himself at Lucy to pull her to safety.
“I…” Desmond coughed to clear the water-feeling from his lungs with little success. “I was Bleeding… when you put me into the animus,” he wheezed, short of breath, still feeling the hidden blade jammed through his sternum and into his chest. “It wasn’t… a good idea.”

Lucy frowned, seeming aggravated for no reason Desmond could really discern. “You were unconscious, Desmond. You couldn’t have been Bleeding; we would have noticed. Your ancestors aren’t exactly quiet.”

“Altaïr is,” Desmond rasped back, angry that she didn’t believe him. He should know; he’d just learned firsthand how dangerous his ancestor was when startled. “We… were both in the animus… at the same time. He… attacked out of reflex and… stabbed me in the chest.”

Rebecca hurried to his side—glowing a calming blue—and pried his hands from his torso, prodding his chest and checking for bloodstains or injuries. “Well, it didn’t seem to follow you out of the animus, at least,” she said cheerfully. “So that’s some good news.”

Desmond let his head drop back to the ground, feeling tired all the way to his bones. The confrontation—if you could call it that—with Altaïr had been entirely mental and lasted merely seconds, yet he felt as if he’d gone toe-to-toe with the Syrian for several hours wielding only a spork.

Lucy shifted closer, and Desmond felt a sensation akin to icy fingers grip hold of the back of his neck as a presence he hadn’t entirely noticed prowled closer to the surface, radiating hostile intent. “Stop,” he shouted at her as loud as he could, which wasn’t very loud at all but got his point across. Lucy halted, and the metallic rasp of someone slowly unsheathing a blade echoed through his ears, even though no one was there. Desmond wracked his mind as he desperately tried to understand what was happening, but every time he grasped at the presence lurking behind his eyes it drifted through his mental fingers like smoke. “I… don’t think the Bleeding has… quite stopped yet.”

All three of them stilled, as Desmond slowly calmed his erratic breathing on the ground. When no one moved further, the fingers on his neck faded and the feeling of danger in the air eased slightly. Desmond waited a further six minutes before relaxing, no longer able to feel or sense the presence he was pretty sure had piggybacked out of the animus with him.

As the others exchanged glances over his head, Desmond couldn’t help but wonder how much this was going to change things.

Altaïr was almost relieved when he found himself back in the grey room, even if it was the traitor who he was apparently in a conversation with. This meant Desmond had survived the strange experience in the Beyond when the world had broken apart, which Altaïr freely admitted to have been curious about for the past few days.

The traitor was still talking to him, apparently not able to tell that Altaïr had taken over in the way the male brother had been able to, and Altaïr flickered his Other vision briefly to double-check that they were alone. He saw neither of his possible allies in the room or the nearest adjacent one, and tensed all his muscles in preparation.

This, the traitor noticed. Her voice cut off as her blue eyes quickly darted all over his face and form as if finally realizing that it wasn’t Desmond she was speaking to at all.
“Desmond?” she asked, voice wavering, and Altaïr mentally scoffed at her naivety. Obviously he wasn’t Desmond; the male brother had been able to tell that right away, and it had taken him actively preparing for hostile action before the traitor noticed? Foolishness. She repeated the name of this body louder, as if seeking to draw out this ‘Desmond,’ and Altaïr felt a prickle of weary curiosity from somewhere behind his frozen emotions and grim determination.

Altaïr isolated that emotion immediately, knowing it did not belong to him, and observed it from all angles even as he shifted his stance minutely in case the traitor made any sudden movements. At this thought, the curiosity transformed into alarm, and he felt a tug at the back of his mind as if someone were trying rather desperately to get his attention.

Irritably, Altaïr shoved the image of the traitor glowing red under his Other sight at the presence even as he lashed out snake-strike quick and took the traitor’s throat in his left hand, hidden blade pressed to her flesh but not yet extended. The presence stilled, shocked and appalled, and Altaïr felt mildly regretful that apparently ‘Desmond’ had been equally deceived by the traitor in his grip. Even now the betrayer was crying out for help and for a Shaun and a Rebecca, whom Altaïr decided must be the possible brother and sister who lived here, while the weak presence Altaïr had tentatively identified as Desmond struggled to rationalize why the woman might have shown up red under his sight for any reason at all.

The brother stumbled into the room, eyes wide with panic behind his strange miniature windows as he took in the tableau. The brother approached, hands spread and palms facing Altaïr as he slowly drew near them.

“No hurt her,” the brother stuttered in broken Arabic. “Friend. Lucy.”

Altaïr raised a disbelieving brow at the man. While pleased that at least one of them had some sort of knowledge of a language he knew, it was far from enough to have a lengthy conversation on the traitor’s guilt.

“She is a traitor,” Altaïr informed the man anyway, hoping that perhaps his limited vocabulary included the necessary definitions. He let his eyes flare gold to emphasize his point, knowing that the brother had recognized the Other vision when he’d used it during their brief conversation.

The man went still at that, eyes flicking quickly between Altaïr and the traitor whose throat he still held, despite the woman’s attempts to free herself. Altaïr watched as the man shifted his stance from wariness towards himself to disbelief and caution towards the traitor. Good, that meant the brother trusted him and knew what the Other vision could do.

“You certain?” the brother demanded, straightening and taking his eyes off of Altaïr entirely to stare down the frightened traitor.

“Yes,” Altaïr replied, tightening his grip and watching dispassionately as the traitor began choking for breath.

The brother’s entire demeanor shifted into something harder, colder, and Altaïr smiled in grim approval. “We deal with her,” the brother said, his broken vocabulary and odd accent not nearly as attention-grabbing as the icy voice he spoke it in. “Our traitor.”

Altaïr squeezed the woman’s throat harder until she went limp, where he let her drop to the ground. He wouldn’t deny the brother his vengeance against the traitor, and now that he’d rendered the threat unconscious he wasn’t as loathe to leave it be. Satisfied that things would be taken care of, Altaïr turned to the stone-faced brother standing a few feet away, staring down at the unconscious rat.
Altaïr reached out and clasped a five-fingered hand—*he still marveled at it*—to the brother’s shoulder briefly. When the brother turned startled eyes to him, Altaïr smirked and nodded at him in approval. Mentally laughing at the brother’s stunned expression, Altaïr patted him on the shoulder before he tugged on the still-shocked presence lurking behind his eyes, stepping back and ceding control.

This would prove to be very interesting indeed.
The Ghost of Captain (Avengers)

Chapter Summary

There is a man. The Soldier knows the man, recognizes the man, sees the man’s face in every window, in every mirror. The man does not speak to the Soldier, because no one speaks to the Soldier, but sometimes on solo missions without handlers in his ear, the Soldier will speak to the man.

There is a man the Asset does not recognize, but knows in its bones. The man is tall and broad and golden (short and thin and sickly) and looking at him hurts the Asset, except the Asset isn’t programmed for pain, doesn’t know what to do with it, and so the Asset stops thinking about the man entirely.

But the man does not go away.

He is there every time the Asset blinks, every time it thaws and falls to its knees outside the cryo-chamber. He is ingrained in the Asset’s every muscle, every nerve, every thought—the Asset reports these thoughts to its superiors as it was trained to do, but not even the Chair can fully wipe them out.

The Asset does not dream, but if it did, it would dream of the man.

It does not know the man’s name. Its mind is a jumble of incessant screaming any time the face of the man shows itself, but that is not so different from the Asset’s usual state of being. There is always screaming, somewhere.

Sometimes, in the soft calm as it stands in the cryo-chamber before the ice comes, it will picture the face of the man it does not recognize, but knows.

The screaming voice always devolves into shuddering sobs when it does, which is preferable, so it pictures the face often.

The tears are quieter than the screaming.

The Russians had created the Asset from its original bones, a piecemeal conglomeration of science and steel.

HYDRA took the Asset and burned it down. The Soldier was what rose from its ashes.

There is a man. The Soldier knows the man, recognizes the man, sees the man’s face in every
window, in every mirror. The man does not speak to the Soldier, because no one speaks to the Soldier, but sometimes on solo missions without handlers in his ear, the Soldier will speak to the man.

*The Soldier is lonely, but never alone. He knows the man does not exist, knows the man is not real. But he is real enough. The Soldier gives the man a name (Captain, because the man is authority, is justice, is bloody fists in back alleys, is care and laughter and all the things the Soldier is not allowed to have), and creates elaborate backgrounds for Captain whenever he is left on his own.*

*Sometimes Captain is his handler, his true handler, and he will come bursting through the reinforced steel walls to take possession of his asset again. Sometimes Captain is an asset just like the Soldier, and he will follow in Captain’s wake as they go on missions and make the world a better place one bullet at a time.*

*Other times Captain is a ghost, the Soldier’s first victim, haunting him through the wipes and the ice, disappointed yet forgiving. The Soldier considers the way he is the only one who ever sees Captain, the only one who speaks to him, the only one who feels as if he could reach out and touch Captain if he were so inclined.*

*The Soldier knows his brain is broken. He knows his current handlers and the Red Room had cracked something inside of him that will never be whole again. But if this mind-break had let him see the ghost of Captain?*

*Perhaps it is not so bad, to be broken.*

---

‘You have shaped the century,’ says the handler to the Soldier.

From over the handler’s shoulder, the ghost of Captain scowls fiercely.

It is a very nostalgic expression, for all that he’s never seen it before.

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*There is a man wearing Captain’s face, and the Soldier has been instructed to kill him. The Soldier does not tell the handlers about the way the ghost of the man they’ve sent him to kill is hovering anxiously at his back. The Soldier does not mention the way his lungs had stuttered, how his adrenaline had increased, how the Arm had curled into a fist at his side.*

*The Soldier follows his orders, and gets into the van.*

*He ignores the sad frown the ghost of Captain is giving him. He’s had plenty of practice.*

---

‘Bucky?’ whispers the man wearing Captain’s face.
Beside him, his ghost is laughing hysterically.

The Soldier thinks they are both quite mad, and answers the question with a gunshot.

Who the hell was Bucky?

The Soldier drags the man out of the Potomac. He does not know the man, but he has Captain’s face and his ghost had scowled at him until he’d jumped into the water after him. The Soldier gives Captain a look. Captain just grins smugly back at him, which instead of irritating him just makes him feel irrationally fond.

This is not a new phenomenon where Captain is concerned.

But no matter how much like Captain the man is, the Soldier cannot afford to stay here and wait for him to awaken. He ignores Captain’s face and Captain’s double and leaves. After this incredible failure, he will surely be terminated by his handlers. Terminated, or reset so thoroughly that he can no longer see Captain at all.

The Arm grinds against itself as it whines in protest at the fist he’s making with it, but the Soldier keeps walking. He may not always appreciate Captain’s opinions on what he does and how he does it, but Captain has been his only company for… decades. He is not willing to give him up, not even to his handlers.

The Soldier will go to ground until it is safe to begin purging the handlers who held his deactivation codes. He spares an idle thought to hope the man with Captain’s face survives. He has the feeling Captain will be insufferable if he doesn’t.

The man wearing Captain’s face is called Captain America.

The Soldier does not believe in coincidences.

At his side, Captain (America?) just sighs, longsuffering.

The Soldier wishes he were tangible enough to hit with something.

The Soldier quietly creeps back out the window, the cooling corpse of the last handler who knew his codes spilling blood over the bedsheets from an open throat. (The ghost of) Captain is waiting outside, disapproving and impatient, but the Soldier does not have time for him tonight.

It is now safe enough to move on, secure in the knowledge that no one alive knows how to shut him down with a word. It is a heady feeling for the Soldier, who so rarely feels things.
(The ghost of?) Captain trails along beside him, eyeing him sideways but not saying anything. (The ghost of?) Captain hasn’t said much of anything to him since he’d pulled Captain America out of the river, but the Soldier isn’t worried. (The ghost of) Captain had once gone five years without saying a single word to him after he’d completed a mission to arrange a car accident for an engineer. In comparison to that, this brief stretch of silence is nothing to be alarmed about.

Perhaps it is time to look a little closer into ‘Captain America’? If this man is, in fact, the living body of the ghost of Captain, the Soldier has an obligation to ensure he is well protected. If for no other reason than as thanks for lending the Soldier his ghost for so many years.

The ghost of Captain palms his face with a sigh.

The Soldier haughtily ignores him. He ignores the amused grin that follows, too.

There is much information to be had about Captain America.

The exhibit is equally informative about ‘Bucky.’

The Soldier has the unsettled feeling that he had once been ‘Bucky.’

At his side, the ghost of Captain smiles in sympathy.

It is simple to track down the location of where Captain America resides. It is less simple to infiltrate ‘Avengers Tower’ and conduct surveillance. Twice he is almost caught by Чёрная вдова, but he taught her all she knows and he is able to evade her successfully. The voice in the ceiling is also difficult to circumnavigate, but the frequencies passively emitted by the Arm are enough to keep him invisible—if not inaudible.

The ghost of Captain is, of course, unnoticed by everyone.

The Soldier (Bucky?) watches as the ghost of Captain follows his namesake around the floor, making faces at the back of his head and generally being a nuisance. The Soldier (Bucky?) has never seen this behavior in Captain before, but finds slight amusement in it nonetheless. From the beaming smiles the ghost of Captain sends him from time to time, the Soldier (Bucky?) is relatively certain that was the intent.

Punk, the Soldier thinks of the ghost idly.

The ghost of Captain laughs joyously at him in reply.

The first Avenger the Soldier (Bucky?) makes contact with is the archer. He corners the man in the
vents and restrains him until the archer ceases attempting to escape or stab him with an arrow.

The man is bemused by the Soldier’s halting introduction, but is amenable to sharing ‘gossip’ about Captain America with the Soldier.

The Soldier valiantly ignores the ghost of Captain’s wide grin. This is valuable intel, punk.

Captain America is not taking very good care of himself. The Soldier watches with a frown as the man skips meals, works himself to the bone in the gym, and shies away from social interaction with his team.

This is mission noncompliant behavior. It must be rectified.

The Soldier waits for Captain America to lie down and pretend to sleep, before moving through the kitchen and scrutinizing the shelves. There is a great deal of nothing in the cabinets. Unacceptable.

The ghost of Captain follows gamely on his heels as the Soldier squirrels himself out of the tower, aimed at the nearest cache of supplies. When the Soldier returns, he is laden with bags of edible products that make stealth incredibly difficult. But he is the Winter Soldier, and will not be defeated by food.

He swiftly puts the items in the cabinets and retreats to the vents. Perhaps Captain America had merely not been eating because he had not been provided sustenance? It had taken the Soldier a long time to realize he was capable of procuring his own supplies without a handler to assign provisions.

The ghost of Captain looks pityingly at him, but the Soldier cannot understand why.

Captain America does not notice the new supplies.

The pity from the ghost of Captain makes much more sense.

It is now apparent to the Soldier (to Bucky?) that Captain America is an idiot.

Notably, his ghost does not disagree.

The Soldier (Bucky) takes extreme measures. He takes a ration bar and—utilizing the stealth and skill that had been burned into him over seventy years—places it delicately on the pillow beside Captain America’s fat head. Surely this is a clear message? Surely it cannot possibly be misconstrued?
The ghost of Captain won’t stop laughing at him. It’s becoming annoying.

Captain America finds the ration bar.

He does not eat it, instead complaining under his breath about ‘Stark’ and his ‘nosiness.’

The Soldier feels real frustration for the first time in decades.

The ghost of Captain is still laughing at him. The punk.

The Soldier (Bucky) is a little more forceful in his next attempt. The ration bar is nailed to the wall with a combat knife he’d scavenged from Чёрная вдова when she was distracted by the archer. The knife is planted in the doorframe of the room where Captain America pretends to sleep. He vanishes into the vents in seconds, moments before the door is kicked open as a bewildered Captain America appears in nothing but boxers patterned with the American flag.

The ghost of Captain howls at the sight of them. The Soldier agrees.

Captain America sees the ration bar nailed to his doorframe. He seems aggrieved. ‘Nat too?’ Captain America huffs. The Soldier watches with incredulous bafflement as Captain America disregards the blatant threat and removes the knife and does not eat the bar.

Captain America goes back into his room to pretend to sleep for another three hours.

The Soldier shares a very long, steady look with the ghost of Captain, who is badly stifling laughter.

The Winter Soldier has never failed a mission.

(Except that one time he pulled his mission out of a river.)

His research revealed that this is not, perhaps, a new situation to find himself in.

That doesn’t make the ghost of Captain’s sniggering any less annoying.

The next ration bar is duct-taped to the shield. When that one is cast aside with an irritated glance, the Soldier stuffs all of Captain America’s shoes with ration bars. That one earns him a scowl, but Captain America still refuses to eat them.
The Soldier (who is pretty sure his name is Bucky), had he been less disciplined, may have been inclined to pull his hair out. Captain America is so aggravating. Why had this not been included in the exhibit? Why had no one taken notice of this particular personality trait?

The Soldier steals a crate of ration bars and pours them into Captain America’s bathtub. Captain America sets his jaw mulishly and takes his showers on a different floor rather than confront them.

The Soldier makes strangling motions towards Captain America with both hands. The ghost of Captain suffocates with laughter.

Desperate measures must be enacted. Captain America’s lack of sufficient nutrition is mission noncompliant.

The ghost of Captain’s guffaws are also mission noncompliant.

Bucky really just wishes these idiot punks he got saddled with could take a hint.

He glues ration bars to every square inch of Captain America’s living room.

He stuffs the elevator to the brim with them so that when the doors open on Captain America’s floor he’s drowned in the pile that pours out.

He steals all of Captain America’s clothing while he’s out on a mission and replaces them with ration bars.

Captain America, bastion of peace, justice, and the American way, sets his jaw and resolutely ignores all of it.

Bucky Barnes is about ready to punch his perfect teeth in. With the metal hand.

The ghost of Captain continues to be unhelpful. Bucky Barnes wants to punch his teeth in, too. But until he learns how to interact with intangible beings, he’ll settle for handling the one he can actually touch.

Captain America has dark rings under both eyes. He is noticeably thinner.

Captain America is making noises about going out to ‘look for Bucky.’

From three feet above him and six to the left, Bucky Barnes looks down at this idiot punk and shakes his head.
The ghost of Captain smiles quietly and says nothing.

Bucky Barnes is at the end of his rope. He moves all of the furniture in the living room to the edges, leaving a large blank space. He proceeds to spell out PUNK in capital letters using ration bars. He considers the message he is leaving, having reached the conclusion that his time on ice had turned Captain America into a moron. He surrounds the PUNK with the rest of the ration bars in the apartment, forming arrows pointing at the word and then another arrow pointing at where Captain America would be standing in the doorway.

The ghost of Captain surveys his work with a grim nod. Bucky watches the ghost of Captain from the corner of his eye as he retreats to the vents. The ghost stays in the living room, staring down at the word written out in ration bars with an inscrutable look on his face.

He is looking faded around the edges. Bucky resolutely tries not to let this worry him.

He fails.

Captain America walks out of his apartment and stops dead, staring with huge eyes at the display on his living room floor. Captain America stumbles forward, collapsing to his knees as he trembles, breathing audibly.

He still has dark rings under his eyes.

Bucky watches through sharp eyes as Captain America reaches out a shaking hand and delicately opens the closest ration bar as if he were diffusing a bomb. He puts it in his mouth and bites down.

In the ceiling above him, Bucky Barnes smiles in satisfaction.

The ghost of Captain, standing unnoticed in the corner of the room, mirrors him.

The next time Bucky looks for the ghost of Captain, he is nowhere to be found.

By then, however, he had Captain America and his huge hero complex to focus on, and didn’t have much time to wonder what had become of him. Sometimes Captain America would tilt his head just right, or smile just so, and Bucky could see his ghost overlaid across his features.

It makes it easier to let the Captain close, to know that he and his ghost are one in the same. He isn’t ready to call the Captain ‘Steve,’ and he still flinches whenever the Captain calls him ‘Bucky.’

He still automatically looks for the ghost of Captain when he wakes up in the mornings. He probably always will. But then his eyes will catch on the Captain’s at the kitchen table, and he’ll see
whatever’s left of his ghost behind them. Oftentimes, the ghost is still laughing at him.

The punk.

‘Thank you for lending me your ghost,’ Bucky tells the Captain.

The Captain seems bemused, but also pained. ‘Anytime, Buck.’

Behind the Captain’s eyes, the ghost is smiling.
Kurama opened his eyes and abruptly found himself in a sewer. He wasn’t especially bothered by the situation. His many tails flicked in curiosity at this new development (and especially so at the idea of a human sewer being large enough to encompass his entire form quite comfortably), having been quite sure that he’d fallen asleep in the Den he’d carved for himself inside a mountain in the human world—he’d gotten quite tired of upstart kits trying to overpower him and take the title of Kyuubi for themselves.

He wasn’t especially bothered by the situation. He’d been alive for more than nine thousand years, and in that time a great many strange and unexpected things had happened to him. He extended a tendril of yokai and was met by a strange translucent barrier which stopped it from going very far. He paused to examine this new structure, fixing each of his senses upon it to determine its purpose. What could have been mere moments or entire days passed before the kitsune emerged from his trance with a great many answers to his questions.

Apparently he’d been sealed inside a human vessel at some point when he’d been asleep—spinning red pinwheels met sleep-dazed crimson and the world twisted sideways—and this barrier was meant to prevent his escape. Not that it was doing a very good job, Kurama observed dubiously. It was an impressive piece of fuuinjutsu, no doubt about it, but not, he gathered, especially designed to contain a demon of his power. A lesser demon, certainly. Perhaps even a six-tailed kitsune if the sealer was especially strong.

But the Kyuubi? No. The most this barrier would do should he ram his full might against it was break like glass, and utterly obliterate the vessel in which he found himself in the backlash.

But Kurama didn’t feel the need to escape at the moment. The knowledge that he could was enough for him. Plus, there was almost no chance of those irritating lesser kitsune tracking him down in here, which gave him plenty of time to rest and gain further strength for their next inevitable confrontation. Sealed or no, he would still gain power just like he would have were he free.

Somehow he doubted the person who’d put him here had taken that into account. He’d have to be careful to keep his growing yokai away from the barrier in case he broke it by accident.

The next time he pushed his power at the barrier, the intent was not escape or interrogation. He meant to simply explore the boundaries he’d been given, and the seal—designed only to react to an attempt to break free—sensed this and did nothing to stop him.

Kurama refrained from scoffing as he felt the “extent” the seal contained him. If he’d been more inclined towards domination like the lesser kitsune he shared kin with, he could simply hijack the vessel’s chakra system and control it like a puppet. As it was, he simply settled for placing a small—almost infinitesimal—portion of his yokai into the vessel’s chakra system so he could see and hear what the vessel did. Danger of termination of the vessel would draw his attention so he could put a stop to it; Kurama was already fond of the idea of this brief vacation from Makai, and had no
intention of letting his vessel die before he had a chance to really relax.

A brief check of the vessel’s senses showed its vision to be too blurry to be of use—the vessel must have been fresh from its mother’s womb for it to be this bad—so Kurama settled in to get some sleep. He didn’t expect to be woken for several years yet. After all, what kind of danger could his infant vessel get into at this age?

The answer, it appears, was quite a lot.

He was jerked into full awareness by an echo of the sensation of having a blade stuck through one’s chest. Naturally, this was not a very nice way to wake up, and Kurama had never been much of a morning demon. Grumpy and irritated at this intrusion to his nap, Kurama lashed his yokai through the barrier—with the intent to protect its vessel, which was accepted and ignored—and manifested it in the physical world as a huge red tail. He whipped the tail towards where his vessel’s most panicked attention was currently pointed and quickly enveloped the human-shaped figure it found there in its yokai-tail before crushing it into a paste. When the vessel refused to calm itself—it was, after all, still a kit—Kurama dropped the remains of the attacker and wrapped the tail around its vessel to soothe it.

Surrounded by a wall of flickering red fire and yokai that had been present with the vessel almost since birth, the vessel calmed—reassured that the danger was passed. Content with the emotional state of his vessel, Kurama recalled the yokai-tail and settled back to sleep. Surely, he thought, this was an isolated incident. The humans that lived with his vessel would watch over it more carefully in the future to prevent another occurrence.

He was mistaken.

What felt like minutes later, Kurama was awoken again. This time, by the phantom pains of extreme hunger. Irritation bloomed. Were these humans utterly incompetent? How difficult was it to feed his vessel properly? It was on the verge of starvation as it was, which was why his yokai had alerted him to the problem.

Kurama extended his yokai out of the vessel—the seal having “learned” by this point that all of his actions had thus far been to the betterment of the vessel—and searched for an appropriate female which would feed its vessel before it starved. His befuddlement grew as he found not a single female in the surrounding area which did not hold extreme disgust and hatred towards his vessel. Had he been sealed by a society which abhorred kits? Further exploration disproved that theory; there were other kits in the vicinity that were not being starved to death, so it was only his vessel they took issue with. Were they perhaps trying to kill the kit in a mistaken assumption that that would cause Kurama undue harm?

Idiots.

With a rolling grumble, Kurama manifested several yokai-tails—four, this time—and set three of them to finding something edible for his vessel. The fourth he kept wrapped around the vessel for its protection, the last time he’d been awoken fresh on his mind.

It was good that he did so, because it was not long before his questing yokai-tails were attacked by several human figures with small blades. He ignored them, because his ‘tails’ were made of yokai
and thus felt nothing, but did take the time to swat a particularly annoying one out of his way when it blocked him.

When he located a jar of something that felt/smelled/tasted like it would be something appropriate for a fangless kit like his vessel, Kurama carefully gathered the item in one of his tails and pulled them back to where the fourth waited, wrapped around the kit in question. Another human had been attempting to get at the kit from behind the tail without success, but as his intention did not seem hostile, Kurama had not yet reacted.

When his other tails returned with the edible item they had found, he felt the numerous human figures that had followed them pause. The fourth tail unwrapped itself as Kurama carefully maneuvered the jar he had found open and proceeded to feed the kit with the tip of one yokai-tail.

“It’s… feeding him?” one of the humans whispered.

Kurama ignored them all. They were useless, having let his vessel deteriorate to such a state. Perhaps now that he’d showed them how badly they’d failed, they would step it up and do a better job of looking after his vessel. When the vessel was no longer about to pass out from hunger, Kurama set the jar on a nearby table so the useless humans could see what it was and go get more of it before recalling his yokai again. As he settled in, once again, to rest, Kurama could only hope the worthless humans got their act together soon. This vacation was becoming quite troublesome.

Time did not pass quietly. Kurama was awoken almost once a week due to some sort of life-threatening event his vessel was going through. Four times it was dehydration, another sixteen was starvation, and a further twenty were actual attacks. When the most recent attack came—another human assassin—Kurama had had enough.

“That is it!” Kurama roared from within the seal. Obviously, these humans were incompetent and as worthless as he’d thought they were. It was not that difficult to watch over a single human kit. Kurama knew this. But, apparently, he’d been sealed into a village of idiots.

With a surge of yokai larger than any he’d dared against the barrier, he flared nine yokai-tails into being around his threatened vessel and obliterated its attacker with extreme prejudice. The amount of yokai he’d pushed into manifesting was not even a full tail’s worth, but it was more than sufficient to protect a single kit from humans.

Kurama was normally very slow to anger. Living almost ten thousand years tended to instill in one great patience, after all. But this… this was infuriating. It wasn’t just the fact that the humans were so hopeless at protecting his vessel, but that they were letting all of this happen to a defenseless kit. Kurama generally had little care for kits, personally—as did most male kitsune—but he had protective instincts like nobody’s business. As Kyuubi, he tended to see every kitsune with under five tails as his kit (which was almost all of them), and it wasn’t too surprising that he’d see his own vessel as his kit as well.

Forget sleeping. Kurama didn’t need sleep anyway, he just did it to pass the time. It was now apparent that he would have to be hyper-vigilant in the defense of his kit, since the humans were doing such an awful job at it. The tails stayed out. He would be much quicker to react if he had yokai already manifested in the physical world, and perhaps the sight of them would keep the idiots at a safe distance from his vessel-kit.
Kurama was awake, and he was angry.
Neither of those boded well for Konoha.

“They’re still there, then?”

Hiruzen puffed on his pipe as he observed the sleeping boy. Little Naruto had been perfectly normal—if a bit neglected—until he was about five months old. The “tails” had first appeared when an assassin had broken past the ANBU and stuck a kunai in his little chest. Reports claimed that a massive tail made out of red chakra had erupted from the boy and crushed the attacker like a grape. This was ruled as involuntary self-defense due to Naruto’s age and the obviousness of his tenant’s actions, and nothing came of it but an increased watch.

Then came the day when four tails had manifested themselves, effortlessly weaving through the building with purpose and swatting Kuma out of the air when he got too close. When the tails revealed themselves to have only appeared in order to feed an almost-starved Naruto, Hiruzen had put out the order to stop interpreting the tails as hostile.

This turned out to be wise, as any time anyone harmed or neglected Naruto, the tails appeared to solve the problem with the sort of single-minded efficiency of a veteran shinobi. They never stayed manifested very long after the danger was passed, so eventually their existence was more or less ignored as something intrinsic to “the demon brat.”

Not this time. This time, all nine had appeared in a flare of extremely hostile chakra and wiped the would-be assassin—a Konoha chuunin—out of existence. And then they’d stuck around. It had been two days, and the tails had not disappeared. They were in constant motion, writhing around little Naruto like a living shield of fire and fur, letting no one with even slight hostile intent anywhere near the boy.

Naruto himself didn’t seem to find this at all strange. He was frequently seen playing with one of the tails, babbling like babies tend to do and even chewing on it on occasion. The tails never seemed to reprimand him for this. In fact, one of the ANBU assigned to watch him claimed the tails would often curl inwards and tickle or otherwise play with the boy if there hadn’t been any danger for a while.

It was very apparent that the Kyuubi had taken exception to how his vessel was being treated, and had decided to simply stick around and ensure the boy’s wellbeing itself. This privately amused Hiruzen a great deal, because it solved a great many problems all at once in a manner that couldn’t get him griped at by the blasted civilian council. It wasn’t like there was a precedent for this sort of jinchuuriki behavior, after all.

Jiraya had come by to look at the seal, and claimed it was functioning perfectly. There wasn’t the slightest bit of erosion or degradation in any of its points, which meant the manifestation of chakra tails by the Kyuubi was something that, for some reason, Minato had deemed perfectly acceptable. Jiraya had told Hiruzen that he suspected hostile intent towards Naruto himself would make the seal clamp down on the Kyuubi, but as long as the fox was protecting Naruto nothing negative would happen to it.

Little Naruto seemed to find the sight of the tails to be nothing worrying. They obviously weren’t in
his control, as they often moved counterpoint to his own motions like a series of furry tentacles, but they seemed adept at interpreting what he wanted or needed and acted on it relatively quickly.

Hiruzen wondered how they would affect Naruto’s chances at becoming a shinobi. Obviously he’d be going into the Academy—the council could moan about giving the jinchuuriki more power all it wanted; the boy had already manifested nine chakra tails and it didn’t get more powerful than that—but there was no way conventional teaching would work on a boy who had the strongest demon in the world acting as an overprotective bodyguard.

The first instructor to throw a blunt kunai at the boy was going to get massacred by those tails. Hiruzen had postulated that the tails couldn’t really tell the difference between the various levels of Threat-to-Naruto, and jumped from peaceful waving to spontaneous apocalypse without any steps in between.

He could only wonder if the boy was in contact with the demon, and hoped that if so Naruto could talk it into dialing down the murdering a few notches before the time came.

Kurama lay in the shallow water of the sewer-seal his vessel-kit called a mind, staring through huge crimson eyes at the tiny human child blinking bemusedly up at him. This was the first time the boy had come into the seal—a direct result of the four solid hours of sobbing he had gone through after yet another foiled assassination attempt—and Kurama idly wondered how the kit was going to react. It was shocking to fall asleep and wake up in a sewer.

He would know. It had happened to him, after all.

“Kitty?” the vessel-kit asked.

Kurama very kindly refrained from smacking the boy into the ground with a tail for the insult. He was Kyuubi, not some Nekomata weakling. “Kitsune,” Kurama replied boredly, tails waving idly behind him.

“Kitsy?”

“Close enough,” Kurama sighed, laying his head on his forepaws as the vessel-kit staggered to its feet and toddled towards the cage. Kurama didn’t bother reacting, knowing the bars were more for show than anything else, as the kit passed into his cage and fell against his nose.

The kit was tiny. He was barely the size of one of Kurama’s nostrils, and as the boy braced himself on his snout the kitsune had to resist the urge to either sneeze—and send the boy flying—or breathe in too deeply and inhale him by accident.

The kit stared up—and up, and up, and up—at Kurama, and then past him at the huge tails waving around behind him. The vessel brightened up at the sight of them and pointed excitedly.

“Tails!”

“Yes, those are my tails,” Kurama replied, biting back a yawn. The kit was far too close to his face to risk a yawn.

“Fluffy tails,” the kit proclaimed gravely, as if Kurama had somehow failed to notice that his tails had
fur on them.

Kurama was amused despite himself. Kitsune kits didn’t learn how to speak in anything but barks and yips until their fiftieth year, so the sight of this infant human talking about how furry his tails were was vastly entertaining.

“They are quite magnificent, aren’t they?” Kurama asked the kit as he waved one tail forwards to arc over his head and dangle near the tiny kit. The very tip of his tail was about the same size as the kit, so he wasn’t surprised when the kit giggled and grabbed hold of it in a bear hug.

Kurama lifted the kit holding onto his tail and deposited it onto his snout where he could see it better—and not be at risk of inhaling it by accident—and stared at the boy through huge slitted eyes as he carefully tickled the vessel with his tail.

He entertained the vessel until it blinked sleepily at him and curled up on his nose, promptly vanishing as it departed from the sewer-seal mindscape. Kurama finally gave in to the urge to yawn, flashing a jaw-full of deadly fangs, before turning his attention outwards to the incessant protection of his vessel.

He’d infused the yokai-tails with enough of himself to give them rudimentary sentience—enough to react on their own to threats when he was otherwise occupied—but he preferred to take manual control of them when he was able. His reaction time was far faster than the tails on their own, and he would let nothing harm the vessel-kit on his watch.

“Kit-san, Kit-san wake up!”

Kurama was already awake, of course, but he refused to respond to such a degrading name. The kit knew his name was Kurama, and that he also answered to Kyuubi, but somehow that initial correction of Kitsune instead of Kitty had earned him the shortened form of Kit, which was both the first three letters of both his correct species and the wrong one, as well as the name of a baby fox.

Kurama was not a baby fox. He hadn’t been for almost ten thousand years, but try explaining that to his thick-headed vessel.

“Kit-saaaaan,” the vessel dragged out, shoving at his forepaw.

Kurama stubbornly kept his eyes closed and his breathing even. He’d train the name out of the kit or he’d eat his tails.

The vessel heaved a very put-upon sigh. “Kurama.”

Kurama opened his eyes with a foxy grin, and the kit groaned in exasperation. “Oh, hello kit. When did you get there?” he asked, all innocence.

The kit leveled a very unimpressed look at him before—as usual—his short attention span kicked in and he immediately forgot to be annoyed. Kurama often took advantage of this to win arguments by default, as well as consistently get his way when the kit was trying to do something stupidly dangerous, such as pranking the ANBU.

“Guess what, Kit-san!” the vessel shouted exuberantly, obviously already having forgotten the
correct name he’d used not five seconds ago. Kurama sighed and decided to let it go just this once

“What?” Kurama drawled lazily, obliging the kit by asking even though he knew everything the kit knew the instant it knew it—he lived in the brat’s head, after all.

“The Academy starts today, Kit-san—” Kurama sighed again. “—and jiji promised he’d take me out to ramen!”

Kurama found it amusing that his vessel was far more excited about the promise of cheap noodles and broth than the idea of becoming a shinobi. He was less amused about his kit’s attachment to jiji, otherwise known as the Sandaime Hokage, as this severely limited his ability to crush the man into a pulp for being such a damn idiot when it came to the protection of his defenseless vessel.

He hated to see the kit upset, and obliterating jiji would likely make the brat just a tad upset.

“Joy of joys,” Kurama deadpanned. “Be still my beating heart. Oh glorious day.”

The kit punched his tiny fist into his nose with what he probably thought was a fierce scowl, but thanks to the puffy whiskered cheeks and almost-closed eyes it looked more like a pouting chipmunk. “Don’t mock the ramen, dattebayo! Ramen is the food of the gods!”

“No it isn’t,” Kurama replied boredly, idly examining a claw for imperfections—there weren’t any, of course. Inarizushi was the food of the literal gods, and nothing the kit had to say would convince the Kyuubi otherwise.

Kurama prudently tuned out the fifteen minute rant on the awesomeness of ramen that followed, only intervening when the kit paused for breath (never having learned that he didn’t need to breathe in his own mindscape, thank Inari).

“The Academy?” the kitsune prompted, derailing the previous argument and shamelessly taking advantage of his vessel’s terrible attention span.

“Yatta! I’m gonna learn so many awesome jutsus, Kit-san!” the vessel punctuated this by punching the air instead of his nose. Kurama highly doubted that the kit would be learning any awesome anythings for many years to come, but it wasn’t like the kit needed them. He didn’t need any pathetic human magic-whatsits when he had Kurama and his magnificent yokai tails.

“You won’t learn anything if you’re late,” the kitsune pointed out blandly, not really caring either way. He didn’t trust the humans of this cesspit of a village to fight their way out of wet paper bag, so he wasn’t terribly worried that they’d somehow manage to get past his tails and hurt the kit no matter how unskilled he was. If worse came to worse, he’d simply bust out of the seal and eat them.

He’d worked out a way to free himself without killing the kit years ago—he just didn’t feel like dealing with any Makai ridiculousness yet. But if the idiot humans managed to hurt his kit somehow, well… he’d just have to remind them what a horrible idea it was to attack something owned by the Kyuubi no Kitsune, wouldn’t he?
kit’s questions, yelled at him for breathing too loudly, mocked him for his poor reading and writing skills in front of the entire class, and was now proceeding to teach him what Kurama was pretty sure was the wrong kata for this taijutsu set.

To be fair, Kurama could be mistaken. He knew almost nothing about the little war-dances the humans did to fight each other, but he was relatively certain that no human battle-stance in the world required one to purposefully misbalance oneself. And there had been no one to teach his kit how to read or write—Kurama could read the little human squiggles if he put his mind to it, but even if his clawed hands had thumbs he was far too large to wield any sort of writing implement—so it wasn’t surprising that his vessel-kit was pretty poor at both.

The teacher had done everything but outright attack the kit, which was the only reason he still possessed all of his internal organs. Kurama watched as the sensei ‘corrected’ his kit’s stance—into something even more unbalanced—and three of his yokai-tails flicked in an echo of their owner’s ire. He watched, eye twitching, as the teacher sneered at his kit (while the kit was looking, even!) and proceeded to set the final nail in his proverbial coffin.

“Useless demon-brat,” the teacher muttered, just loud enough for the kit—and therefore Kurama—to hear. “Should have just drowned it at birth like the other freaks.”

His kit froze, eyes watering, and Kurama’s waving tails stilled. The kit sniffled, and Kurama hammered the teacher into the ground with a yokai-tail. The audible crack of several highly-important bones breaking like toothpicks was almost as pleasing as the shrill scream the man had enough time to let out before Kurama flared his yokai and flash-fried the pathetic worm into a puddle of ichor and blood.

Predictably, the entire academy devolved into a panic of screaming, fleeing kits and useless teachers attempting to regain order. Kurama’s tails went back to their lazy waving as his kit sat down with his back to a tree, reaching over and pulling a tail to his chest to hug it tightly, eyes still wet and nose still sniffling occasionally.

Thanks, Kurama, his kit sniffled.

You know I won’t let anyone badmouth you like that, kit. Kurama snorted. This scene had been repeated so often that his kit had long since stopped freaking out when Kurama acted in his defense.

I know, came the kit’s small voice in reply, and Kurama resisted the urge to pull the man’s soul from the afterlife just so he could kill him again.

Don’t forget about ramen with the Hokage, Kurama prodded, feeling pleased when his vessel jumped upright again with a wide beaming smile as he punched the air in victory.

It was times like these he was truly grateful his kit was such an airhead.

Sarutobi Hiruzen shook his head. It boggled the mind that there were people who still said things like that to Naruto’s face; you would have thought that after the first twenty times the Kyuubi had taken offense to a slight like that, they would have gotten the memo. As he sat serenely next to his honorary grandson eating ramen at a much more respectable pace than his companion, Hiruzen contemplated the Kyuubi.
Its tails were curling around the ground beneath Naruto’s stool lazily, hissing faintly with corrosive chakra and the sound of dry scales over stone. It was a thoroughly unnerving sound, never mind the utter monster they belonged to. As if it were aware of his sudden scrutiny, one of the tails twitched in his direction like a dismissive ear-flick and Hiruzen smiled ruefully.

He wasn’t entirely sure how much of the outside world the Kyuubi could actually perceive, but he knew it could at least hear what Naruto heard—it stood to reason that that meant it could see out of the boy’s eyes too. One pleasant side-effect of the Kyuubi’s all-too-obvious presence in the village was the civilians’ hesitance to outright assault the boy. Even the shinobi attacks had dwindled over the years, but the damage was done. Naruto trusted the village about as far as he could throw it, and the demon sealed in his gut had gotten so fed up with humanity as a whole that it had permanently manifested itself in the physical world.

“Have you spoken to your tenant about the Academy, Naruto-kun?” Hiruzen asked the boy while he was taking a breath between ramen bowls. He never referred to the Kyuubi as a demon in Naruto’s hearing range, or spoke its title or the name Naruto had told him it had given him. It was a theory of his that the Kyuubi would pay more attention to what was going on in the outside world if it heard its own name mentioned, just like any human would.

Naruto stopped mid-motion reaching for the next bowl, as he turned a pouting scowl on the Hokage. The boy hadn’t been very impressed at this request originally, likely thinking about as highly of the idea as the Kyuubi itself. “Yeah. Kit-san says he won’t pull the tails back ‘cuz people are idiots.”

Hiruzen checked a sigh. He’d been afraid of that. “Will he at least refrain from killing any more instructors? I’m running out of competent shinobi for the post,” Hiruzen asked wistfully. If he could just get the Kyuubi to agree to stop killing people for talking instead of acting, his life would improve by about a thousand percent.

Naruto frowned as his eyes glazed over a bit, a common tell for when the boy was talking with his tenant. It had, at first, concerned Hiruzen how much contact the two of them seemed to have, but as Naruto had yet to go on a bloody rampage or grow fangs or claws he had decided to let sleeping foxes lie.

Hiruzen watched the tails rather than his pseudo-grandson’s face. They were a far more accurate measure for the Kyuubi’s mood than Naruto’s expressive face. They were lying still, which Hiruzen had gathered was an indicator of either being extremely unimpressed with something, or intense consideration. He hoped it was the latter, honestly.

“Kit-san said he’ll stop ‘swatting the useless humans like the flies they are’ when they quit being mean to me,” Naruto finally replied, puffing out his cheeks in rebellion.

Hiruzen felt a headache forming behind his left eye. The villagers would never ‘quit being mean’ to Naruto, and he had a feeling the Kyuubi knew that and was shamelessly taking advantage of it as an excuse to kill people. He had, once, attempted to impart on Naruto some sort of moral code in an effort to make him at least feel remorse for all the people the Kyuubi killed on a regretfully regular basis. He’d failed rather spectacularly. Either the Kyuubi had a firmer grasp on the boy than he thought, or Naruto had simply responded to the constant attempts on his life with a disconnection of his ability to feel guilt or regret.

Neither possibility was promising.

One of the chakra tails reached for a bowl of ramen and pulled it closer to Naruto, which instantly diverted his attention from the conversation wholly. Hiruzen narrowed his eyes at the tail, which almost seemed to undulate in his direction mockingly.
This isn’t over, he promised the Kyuubi, which only flicked its tails at him in reply.

"Yo."

Kurama watched as his vessel jumped to its feet and pointed at the silver-haired intruder, scowling magnificently.

“You’re late!” his vessel howled, and Kurama turned his attention away from the current situation in boredom.

The silver human seemed semi-competent, and smelled exactly like the dog-mask that had tried to ‘rescue’ the kit from Kurama’s yokai-tails that one time, so he felt marginally comfortable leaving the brat in the human’s temporary care. Kurama tried not to pay too much attention to the kit when he was with his ‘teammates,’ because the sight of the black-haired one sent him into a random, unprovoked rage of truly epic proportions. It was baffling, because the little human brat was truly pathetic in the manner of most mortals and honestly not worth the amount of sheer vitriol his mere presence inspired in the kitsune. If Kurama focused hard enough on the reason for this rage, he got a flash of red eyes with black things around the pupils and a sense of vertigo, and nothing else.

Kurama just decided that if he ever has to leave the kit for some reason, he’d ‘accidentally’ step on the black-haired one as he emerged. That would solve the problem nicely.

Some of his rage seeped through to his vessel, triggering a ‘rivalry’ between the two human kits that truly tested his patience sometimes. Kurama very rarely felt actual emotions strongly enough for that to happen, which made this incredulous rage even more baffling.

Yatta! came his vessel’s exuberant mental shout, dragging Kurama’s attention back to the matter at hand. A quick poke at the kit’s memories revealed the reason for the excitement; apparently the silver human had gotten permission to teach the kit some kind of clone thing that he had previous trouble with.

Kurama had privately found great amusement in the kit’s inability to perform the clone thing, since they all looked like watered-down versions of a sickly kit before they imploded in on themselves. Kurama wondered if he could somehow mimic that effect with his yokai on an enemy mortal.

And then the kit’s chakra was doing something weird. Kurama’s ears stood at attention as he watched the kit’s chakra split apart into pieces and implant itself into other vessels. What? What? Kurama was on his feet before he realized what was happening, tails still and fur bristled. Chakra didn’t work that way. Mortal chakra didn’t just divide itself and reform into separate vessels. Demon yokai could, though. In fact, demon yokai did. Maybe his presence in the kit for so long had actually had some sort of side effects after all?

Kurama watched through his kit’s eyes as the ‘clones’ acted independently of their creator, and how no one in the clearing seemed to find that concerning at all. Each clone had a miniscule portion of his yokai in it—he’d been threading the kit’s network with yokai for so long that it was all but in the kit’s blood by now—and he could feel them as if they were his actual vessel, only disconnected from his main self.

It was perhaps a bit of a misnomer to call his current consciousness his main self, because Kurama was a yokai construct and the full weight of his mind and soul resided in every drop of his power, no
matter where it was or what it was contained in.

So, theoretically, he now had about (he did a quick headcount of the clones he could see and feel) twenty-seven different vessels right now. With the sort of wild recklessness he hadn’t indulged in since he earned his third tail, Kurama set his sights on the nearest clone and “jumped ship.”

Kakashi snapped to attention the second the ever-present chakra tails curled at Naruto’s feet fizzled out. He had just enough time to appreciate the truly flabbergasted expression on his genin’s face when one of Naruto’s shadow clones suddenly burst into red flames. *Familiar* red flames. The same red flames that Naruto’s tails had been made of.

Kakashi had a very bad feeling about this.

When the flames died down, Naruto’s clone was no longer standing there. Instead, there was a tall red-haired man wearing what looked like a robe made out of burnt orange wolf pelts with nine *actual* tails waving casually behind him, not simply chakra replicas. From the wild mane of hair emerged two long vulpine ears, and his eyes were a burning slitted crimson that put the Sharingan to shame.

What was obviously *the Kyuubi itself* looked down at its body as if surprised, tails flicking around behind it, before it turned those burning eyes on Naruto and Kakashi prepared himself to leap to his student’s defense against the demon that had been imprisoned inside him since birth.

“Kit,” came an impossibly deep, rolling voice that sounded like something that belonged on a hundred-story tall fox and a not a six-foot tall human. Naruto lit up like someone had just told him he was being given free ramen for the rest of his natural life and leapt at the Kyuubi and latched around its waist like a baby koala.

“Kit-san!” Naruto blubbered back, sounding absolutely *ecstatic* about this turn of events, which almost shocked Kakashi out of his frozen horror. He hadn’t been aware his cute little genin was on *glomping terms* with the greatest demon ever known. “You’re here!”

Three of the Kyuubi’s *actual physical tails* lazily drifted forward and wrapped around Naruto until he was all but plastered to the demon’s front. A fourth tail lifted and ruffled over the large red mantle of fur currently masquerading as the collar of what Kakashi was beginning to seriously doubt were *wolf* pelts at all.

“Indeed,” the Kyuubi confirmed, which didn’t help Kakashi back down from the edge of panic *at all.* “These clone things are highly malleable,” it admitted then. “I was not quite expecting my yokai to take this form, however.”

“What, you just wanted to pop up as a huge ass fuzzball?” Naruto demanded, much to Kakashi’s relief that he wouldn’t have to do so instead. “You could have squashed Sakura-chan!”

The Kyuubi cast a doubtful eye over the trembling pink-haired genin, and Kakashi smoothly shifted her to stand behind himself. Sasuke was out of luck; he was on the other side of the demon and Kakashi wasn’t about to go fetch him. That vicious crimson stare locked on Kakashi then, and he very carefully did not react to the realization that if the Kyuubi could manifest itself like this, it was very possible that the seal wasn’t actually holding it back in any meaningful way.
“It would be no great loss,” the Kyuubi rumbled, earning a pouting frown from Naruto but no actual protesting. That worried Kakashi more than he’d like to admit. “She is hardly a morsel, barely worthy to be your vixen. You could do better.”

Was the Kyuubi actually trying to say it disapproved of Sakura? Kakashi felt a migraine start up behind Obito’s eye.

“Maa,” he interjected before the demon could malign his cute little student any further. “Kyuubi-san, I presume?” There was no reason not to be polite to the strongest tailed beast to ever live.

“You presume correctly, insignificant worm,” the Kyuubi announced in a rumbling growl. Oh dear. Kakashi got the impression the demon wasn’t entirely impressed with him. “I will refrain from ripping the flesh from your bones and gnawing on your marrow because my vessel holds some small fondness for you.” The demon actually sounded magnanimous as it said this, which did not bode well for Kakashi’s continued survival. Then it turned back to Naruto, still wrapped up in those red tails, utterly dismissing Kakashi as a threat—which stung, no matter how true it was. “I will learn this technique,” the demon fox announced to the genin, “It holds vast potential for future interactions with your cesspit of a village.”

The Hokage was not going to like this.

The Kyuubi nodded firmly, patted Naruto on the head like he was an errant house pet, and dissolved into crimson embers as its yokai flared briefly. Half a heartbeat later, and the chakra tails manifested again around Naruto. His cute little student grabbed one and hugged it to his chest.

Nope, the Hokage was not going to like this at all.

Kurama was having the time of his Inari-damned life.

It had taken him about three minutes to reverse engineer the clone thing to be usable with yokai instead of chakra, and could now create yokai-bodies for himself outside of his vessel at will. Each of these yokai-bodies could be given however much yokai he wanted, so he generally stuck about four tails worth of yokai in them so his kit was still protected by the majority of his power. Four tails of a Kitsune of Kyuubi’s power was nothing to sneeze at, though; it was more than the chakra of every shinobi who’d ever lived combined, twice, so he was confident that the five he left with the kit would keep him safe from any and everything the mortal world could throw at him.

The fact that he so blatantly terrified the entire village was just an added bonus, as far as Kurama was concerned. No one had so much as breathed wrong on his kit ever since he’d taken to physically manifesting himself in the way he’d been wanting to ever since the first time his kit had hugged one of his yokai-tails. The ANBU guard rotation which usually shadowed his kit had quadrupled, but Kurama could honestly not care less about them or their paranoia. If no one touched the kit, no one would die. It was that simple.

Kurama currently stood on the head of the Yondaime on the Hokage monument, easily splitting his attention between the vista before him and the five yokai tails still protecting the kit. He was, in essence, in both places simultaneously; controlling multiple bodies was child’s play for a demon of his age and experience.
He could smell the shinobi in the trees around him, watching him with a sort of detached, seething hatred that was almost impressive. But for a demon who’d been routinely fighting off assassination attempts by kitsune a thousand years older than all of them combined, their petty dislike of him was almost adorable in comparison.

Just then, he felt a spike of familiar-foreign-madness-anger yokai from near where his kit was currently shouting about something inane—*becoming Hokage, most likely*—and Kurama abruptly dispelled his current body and reformed it beside the kit, pulling all nine yokai tails into himself and leaving only enough of himself in the kit’s seal to keep them connected.

Kurama locked on the familiar yokai signature of a demon of Makai and readied himself to obliterate the threat to his kit by any and all means necessary. That the threat was currently shaped like a little red-headed boy didn’t matter; there was a lesser demon sealed in that brat and it was absolutely insane enough to risk attacking his vessel before Kurama could put his paw down about it.

No upstart tanuki would be attacking the kit on his watch.

Kakashi—who’d been shadowing his cute little genin and letting his precious kohais take up the task of following the Kyuubi’s body around—barely had time to flinch before the Kyuubi abruptly materialized in between a startled Naruto and Suna’s unstable jinchuuriki. The tails around Naruto had fizzled out again, and the Kyuubi once again had all nine flared out as they writhed through the air like angry snakes.

The Kyuubi flared that horrible, malicious chakra and the stone cracked and cratered underneath it, sending all the genin that had been gathered skittering away in alarm. The nearest civilians were forced into unconsciousness as the seething malevolence of it overloaded their underdeveloped chakra systems; Kakashi quickly signaled for the ANBU to get the civilians out of there and to fetch the genin before they got flattened by whatever was about to happen.

The Suna kid with the red hair clutched his head in agony and screamed as sand swirled out from the gourd on his back, reforming into a vaguely menacing face as the one-tails bared sand-teeth and snarled.

The Kyuubi *twisted*. Its form broke open like fine china, and from the fragments of its body poured forth a frothing whirlpool of red chakra that very quickly reformed into a vague silhouette of the nightmare that haunted the minds of everyone who’d been alive for the attack on the village all those years ago. It didn’t grow fur or acquire any physical features, but that red chakra most definitely had taken on the shape of the Kyuubi’s more bestial form. The Kyuubi roared, a sound so full of violence and hatred that the one-tails actually flinched backwards from where it had half-formed itself out of sand, and then one of its many tails hammered down and crushed the forming sand demon into paste.

The Kyuubi’s chakra flared again, the heat enough to melt the rock underfoot, and the one-tails *screamed*. It was a horrible, horrible sound like a thousand nails being pulled down a thousand glass panes. Kakashi could feel his sensitive ears bleeding and quickly cut the chakra flow to them to prevent himself from going deaf. He hoped the Inuzuka on the other side of the village had enough time to do the same.

When the scream cut off, the Kyuubi lifted the tail, revealing a spider-webbed crater of glass underneath it. Wisps of gold chakra rose from the crater, flickering weakly, and the Kyuubi swung
its head around and closed glowing red fangs around the strands, snapping them into pieces, where they were then dragged into the Kyuubi like victory spoils.

The Kyuubi stared down at the glass crater for a long moment, watching for movement, but nothing stirred. Kakashi highly doubted the Suna kid even existed anymore at this point, not after being crushed by the nine-tails and then being flash-fried by its chakra. It nodded its head decisively, and then unraveled itself back into shards of chakra, which sifted down to where Naruto was currently huddled and dissolved into him.

Nine chakra tails unfurled and curled around him placidly.

Kakashi stared at the glass crater, slowly coming to terms with the fact that the Kyuubi had just obliterated the Ichibi from existence because its container had frowned at Naruto a little.

He was getting way too old for this.
The Soldier was awake. The Soldier was in cryo; it should not be awake.

Something was wrong.

It waited as its body quickly stirred back to life, keeping its muscles still so as not to give away that it was both awake and aware. The doctors would surely notice if it moved, and punishment would surely follow. Perhaps if it remained still, its aware state would go unquestioned?

It watched through the frosted glass as a small group of unauthorized personnel walked quickly by the cryopods across from it, glancing briefly into each window before moving on. The Soldier kept its stare vacant and unfocused as they inspected its chamber, pupils dilated and relaxed. The strange group moved on, and the Soldier’s eyes tracked them as they went. Movement caught the Soldier’s eye, and it spotted the person inhabiting the pod opposite it beginning to awaken.

So it was not just the Soldier who was awakening ahead of schedule? Perhaps the fault lay with the pod itself, and not with the Soldier’s frequent malfunctions. That was acceptable. Punishment would be withheld should the fault not lie with the Soldier itself.

The person in the other pod was visibly disoriented, possibly panicking. **Classified: Civilian.** Faint motions on the Soldier’s peripheral vision displayed other cryopod inhabitants also beginning to awaken and panic. The odd group from earlier may have been a group of technicians checking on the status of the pods, considering all of them seemed to be malfunctioning at once.

The Soldier remained calm. It could free itself from the pod if it proved necessary, but as of now it was content to wait and observe. Time passed. The civilians grew more and more visibly distressed, some even going so far as to strike the glass with trembling fists.

Eventually the group from before returned, this time in possession of a small child—*infant*—that they had not had before. Had they retrieved a subject from cryostasis, then? Why would they have needed to activate all of the other pods if they had only desired one subject?

The Soldier kept its expression placid as it considered that the strange group—*two in airtight hazmat suits, and one wearing leathers*—may not have been technicians at all. The potential for the group to have illegally entered the facility and stolen property was high. It considered breaking free to apprehend them and retrieve the stolen subject, but it heard the pod grinding back to life and the
temperature visibly began to drop.

If they had the codes to reactivate the pods, they likely had permission to be here. The Soldier let its eyes slide closed as it allowed the chill to pull it under, concerns forgotten.

A sound woke it. Muffled crying. Civilian distress. The Soldier opened its eyes, and heard a stuttered gasp in between the sobbing. Through the heavily-frosted glass it could see a woman. She quickly lunged to the left, where the control panel for the pod was. The Soldier doubted she was authorized to release or awaken it. A glance at the pod opposite, however, made the Soldier reconsider the wisdom of protesting. It, and the other pods the Soldier could see, contained corpses. Death was not ideal. The Soldier waited.

The panel made a muffled warning noise, and a computerized voice relayed that the pod would not open. The woman became incredibly distressed, still sobbing and now trying to physically pry its pod open. She would fail, because the pod had been reinforced with the Soldier in mind, but the thought was... nice.

The Soldier rolled its shoulder and let the Arm run through a sluggish diagnostic. Functionality was at 87%. Acceptable. The Soldier shifted into a position for maximum leverage and braced itself against the floor and walls of the pod. The woman caught on and backed to the side. Smart.

The Arm crunched into the reinforced glass, cracking it into a web of fissures. The woman’s eyes blew wide. A second strike shattered the small window, and the Soldier took a shuddering breath of the sudden influx of air. It knocked the remaining fragments out of the frame with the fingers of the Arm and leaned back in the pod, feeling tired and sore. Being awoken from cryo improperly was always unpleasant, and would have been fatal to a non-enhanced Asset.

The woman’s face appeared in the now-open window, worried and streaked with tears but determined above all else. “Just hang on,” she urged the Soldier, “I’ll get you out of there.”

The Soldier was content to let the woman try her best. When she inevitably failed to free it, it would use its conserved energy to shove the pod door open. She vanished towards the master control panel in a back corner, and the Soldier idly watched her as it breathed easily. It heard her cursing at the panel, and then the sound of a fist striking metal repeatedly, before all of the pods in the room whirred to life and began prying themselves open with a metallic whine. Corpses dropped to the ground out of several of them. Others remained propped upright where they’d frozen, terminated at some point in the cryo process.

The woman sobbed again at the bodies now littering the floor before she was hurrying back to its pod. The Soldier took a deep breath and braced its hands against the edges of the pod, heaving itself up and out. The woman reached out to assist it, and the Soldier permitted the touch. She had, in effect, released it from cryo and in the absence of a handler would serve as a temporary replacement.

“Он будет подчиняться,” the Soldier told its new handler. Her face turned from distressed to briefly baffled before realization crossed it.

“Russian?” she mumbled under her breath. The question was not aimed at the Soldier, so the Soldier did not reply. Instead, it stood at attention and waited for orders. “Do you speak English?” she asked it, over-enunciating her words.
“Affirmative,” the Soldier replied, easily switching mindsets and rewiring itself to speak primarily in English. American-accented English, even.

“Thank God for small favors,” she breathed, reaching out to grasp at its shoulders. As its handler she was permitted such liberties with its person. “My son. They took my son. Did you see them? What happened?” she demanded.


“Shaun!” she clawed at its shoulders, as if she were attempting to climb the Soldier like a tree or a staircase. She was much shorter than the Soldier and had to stand on her toes to reach its chin. Obligingly, it obeyed the unspoken order and bent down so she could grab either side of its head without having to strain herself. “Where did they take him?!”

“Unknown,” the Soldier admitted easily. “The Soldier was returned to cryostasis.”

“Damn,” she swore, releasing him and stepping back. She looked around and seemed to remember where she was and what had happened, because she sobbed again at the bodies before visibly steeling her spine and straightening up again. She wiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her jumpsuit. “Do you… know what happened? Why did they freeze us? This was supposed to be a safe place.” She seemed both incensed and terrified.

It was the Soldier’s place to ensure the wellbeing of the handler. It was not adept at emotional interaction, but it was not entirely inept. “Vault 111. Purpose: study of cryogenesis on unwilling human subjects.” The Soldier considered what information about itself and its purpose here it should reveal. “Soldier transferred to Vault 111 for ease of access and cryostorage.” It was much easier to conceal an asset in cryo among other assets in cryo, after all. Hydra was nothing if not thorough, and Vault-Tech was merely one arm among many.

She took several deep breaths. “We… we need to leave,” she stuttered, casting a flickering glance towards the hallway which led to the other storage room. “Everyone’s… they’re all dead.”

The Soldier straightened again and cast its eyes around the room. Its gear would have been stored in a locker nearby in case it needed to be awoken for a mission. Spying a likely target, the Soldier strode towards the metal item with its new handler hot on its heels. The panel which would have required his palmprint and a retina scan was long dead, but it was easy enough for the Soldier to jam the fingers of the Arm through the joint of the locker door and pry it open.

Inside, the Soldier studied the state of its tac gear. It was in good enough shape, but it would need to replace several items as soon as was feasible. Swiftly, it stripped the unmarked tracksuit from its body—idly noting and ignoring the high-pitched squeak from its handler at its back—and began buckling the armor onto its body. Its weapons were in much better shape, although it would need to strip and clean them thoroughly as soon as the handler was safe.

It secreted the handguns and the blades under its armor and quickly assembled the Dragunov, slinging it across its back. It passed a spare handgun to its handler, who took it with untrained hands as if it were a live snake. The Soldier observed the handler’s inexpert handling of the gun and gingerly traded it for a knife instead. She seemed much more comfortable with a blade than a gun, and nodded at it in thanks.

It would have to instruct the handler on gun safety and usage as soon as possible.

The Soldier led the way through the Vault, keeping low and quiet and idly counting each
unnecessary sound the handler made and ticking off all the loud breaths the handler did not hide adequately. Fortunately, there did not seem to be any hostiles present to take note of her lack of stealth.

The Soldier glanced up and froze in place, its handler running into its back with a muffled curse. It swiftly raised one of its two silenced handguns and fired once. A roach the size of a large cat fell from the ceiling and hit the ground in front of them, writhing on its back before curling up and going still.

The handler went dead-silent at its back, staring at the massive insect in horrified incomprehension.

The Soldier considered the size of the insect. It removed a sidearm from a holster and quickly turned on its heel to give its handler a crash course in gun safety.

Notably, she did not complain.

The Soldier stared at the ruined wasteland around them in consternation. This was incorrect. Had the handlers left it in cryo too long? Had something happened to the world while it was frozen? The Soldier was used the world changing around it—a weapon to shape the century—but this was ridiculous. It certainly had no hand in shaping this century.

Its new handler fell to her knees at its side as the elevator came to a stop, the pip-boy device clasped tightly around her left arm. The Soldier would have taken it for itself—it might have been a danger to the handler after so long without a power source—but it was calibrated for a left arm only, and that was something the Soldier currently lacked.

Free from the close confines of the vault tunnels, the Soldier unhooked the Dragunov from its back and cradled it close. They were not safe enough yet to strip and clean it, but it was confident enough in the make of its weapons to feel it could fire a few shots before jamming.

It looked down at the handler. It did not recognize the expression on her face, but it was certainly not a positive one. “Status report?” it asked her from behind the comfort of its mask. The goggles shielding its eyes helped with the glare of the sun, but it would have to look into acquiring black-out paint as a replacement eventually. The goggles simply hid too much of its peripheral vision for its liking.

“Everything’s gone,” she rasped hoarsely in reply. The Soldier quickly glanced around.

That was not entirely accurate. There were some husks of buildings around, and a few clothed skeletons. It waited briefly for orders, but its handler was currently emotionally compromised and was proving useless. In lieu of commands, the Soldier began patrolling the area in search of salvage or information.

It found several handfuls of various ammunition in some boxes which it swiftly pocketed, as well as a stocked med-kit containing a few syringes of some sort of medicine it did not recognize and some dubiously palatable water. It also uncovered a small switchblade in the pocket of one of the skeletons, which it also took.

When it returned to the handler, she was standing upright and only looked mildly wild around the eyes. It handed her one of the unknown syringes and watched her face tentatively light up.
“A stimpack! These things are good forever!” She quickly put the capped syringe in a pocket of her vault suit.

“Stimpack?” the Soldier queried. She gave it a very odd look in return, but answered easily enough.

“It’s a stimulant that speeds up natural healing significantly.”

The Soldier kept in mind to keep a sharp eye out for more stimpacks. They sounded very useful. It passed her the switchblade as well, which she accepted with a grim sort of frown, still tightly clutching the gun it had handed her earlier. She was not a great shot, but at least she had some sort of protection.

“Come on,” she told the Soldier as she began heading down the dirt path. “Let’s… let’s see if anything’s left of Sanctuary.”

The Soldier easily followed at her heels, watching their surroundings for more massive roaches or other hostiles. It saw a few fruit-like objects on a bush a few feet away and swiftly picked them mid-stride. It would test them to make sure they were safe for consumption before offering them to the handler. Very few poisons could affect it, but it would recognize the signs even if it was not immediately impaired.

By the time they reached Location: Sanctuary, the Soldier had filled its duffle bag a third of the way with various edible-looking plants. It would need to go hunting to supplement their diet with proteins, given any animals still existed other than the huge roaches.

“Miss Sarah!”

The Soldier took the handler by the arm and hauled her around behind it, Dragunov up and aimed at the voice which had just came from a dilapidated building to their left. A Mr. Handy floated out of the doorway and the handler pushed her way back to the front with a relieved sounding gasp.

“Codsworth!” she shouted, running towards the robot. Deciding the Mr. Handy was not hostile, the Soldier let the rifle drop and resumed scanning the surrounding area for threats. It ignored the conversation going on between the handler and the robot—her other asset?—as it was not its place to eavesdrop.

The Soldier tuned back in when the handler turned to it as she began jogging after the Mr. Handy. “Come on. We’re going to check the other houses.”

It followed gamely. The houses were in a state of advanced disrepair, many missing large chunks of wall or roof—congruent with a blast wave of a large explosive detonated relatively nearby. It was certainly painting a grim picture of what might have happened while it was in stasis.

The homes were, predictably, all empty of human habitation. There were some unnervingly large insect-like creatures which flew and exploded upon being shot. They also spat acid, which the Soldier discovered to its misfortune when it blocked the projectile from hitting its panicked handler.

The Arm, thankfully, was made of a strong enough metal not to degrade, but the fingerless glove it wore on that hand was entirely dissolved away. It made a note not to let the large exploding insects hit its bare skin.

The Soldier watched as the handler and the Mr. Handy conversed, and considered the way the handler was emotionally compromised to such a degree that she hadn’t even noticed the way the bug-acid had partially eaten through her vaultsuit in an improper place. Had it been capable of such emotion, it would have despaired.
This new handler was going to be a handful, it just knew it.
Collision (Harry Potter)

Chapter Summary

A bemused SI-OC watches as an entirely unrelated SI-Harry Potter attempts to take the wizarding world by storm, and fails miserably.

I took a bite out of a chocolate frog I’d smuggled off the train in my robes as I watched the firsties clumping up around the entrance of the Great Hall like a tiny herd of meercats. I felt only a vague sort of interest in them, despite this being the ‘exciting’ year: the year the story really got going.

My eyes scanned the group of shorties until they alighted on a likely candidate. I stopped mid-chew. His hair was slicked back obnoxiously, baring the lightning bolt scar for all to see. He was dressed in fine pureblood-quality robes that I knew from experience were not sold at Madam Malkin’s, and his expression was a very poor attempt to conceal a great deal of excitement and the sort of breathy is this really happening? that I myself had felt fourteen years ago when I opened my eyes for the first time after dying in my sleep.

I slowly started to chew again as my eyebrows rose into my hair. The brat had a new pair of frameless rectangular glasses that were—I squinted—either gold plated or (hopefully) charmed to look like gold, and while he was a runty malnourished little thing he didn’t carry himself like the sort of kid who’d spent the last decade living under a staircase.

He seemed to be boasting about something to the nervous bushy-haired girl beside him, while a boy with equally slicked back blond hair sneered at him with a surprising amount of hatred from a few spots away.

I licked the last bit of chocolate off my fingers, my eyes never leaving the illogically-behaving form of the Boy-Who-Lived.

One of my housemates leaned over to me with a hissed breath. “Why are you giving the dead lizard eyes to the firsties?”

I blinked my ‘dead lizard eyes’ and didn’t turn to look at him. “Harry Potter has been replaced by a pod person,” I replied blandly, as if I had just commented on the unusual weather we were having.

My nameless, unimportant housemate sighed in resignation and backed away again. “Why do I even bother?” I heard him muttering. I ignored him, though. He wasn’t a main character, so I hadn’t bothered to remember his name. He’d probably die horribly in the war, a fact I’d probably told him sometime in the past few years.

No one really paid attention to my very-valid life advice, though. I suppose it was both a boon and a curse, as everyone was pretty convinced I was either stark raving mad or some sort of addled seer.

I watched as the firsties were all sorted into their right and proper Houses, until it was time for The Imposter to sit under the hat. The Imposter looked very anxious—more anxious than a real eleven-year-old worried about a mind-reading hat would have been—but visibly sucked in his courage and marched up to the stool.
The hat seemed to frown. The Imposter’s twitching grew to new and greater heights.

“SLYTHERIN!” screamed the hat.

The Imposter’s complexion could generously be compared to curdled milk. I watched as The Imposter left the crushed remnants of his hopes and dreams on the stool as he stumbled woodenly to the Slytherin table, which had—notably—not clapped for him at all.

The blond sneering child looked as if he were about to be violently ill, but also as if a great deal of incompetent plots were being plotted in retribution. No one in the entire Hall made a single sound. A Hufflepuff at the table behind me might have coughed.

I pulled out a second chocolate frog and caught it as it attempted to hop away, biting off a leg in retaliation. It would be interesting to see if The Imposter lived to see tomorrow.

I, through a generous use of fortune and apathy, managed to be present in the Potions classroom organizing Professor Snape’s storage cupboard during The Imposter’s first class. Over the years I had cultivated the image of a bored, unmotivated but frighteningly intelligent student (something had to have made the hat pick Ravenclaw) who was willing to do the dredge work professors normally had to assign detentions to get done. Professor Snape often took use of my apathetic attitude towards hard work to clean cauldrons or maintain his numerous cupboards and closets of ingredients. Once I had even been deemed worthy enough to stir a potion exactly three times counterclockwise.

I didn’t pay the firsties any real mind. Nothing life-threatening was going to be happening today, so there wasn’t any point in really keeping my eyes open. Instead, they were mostly closed into squinting slits that were indicative of a relatively peaceful upcoming day to those who cared to notice. So far, that number included Professors Snape, Dumbledore, and Flitwick and no one else.

Professor Snape actually made a habit of staring at my face each morning to see how open my eyes were, and had avoided sixteen separate incidents in his classes as a result of following my system.

My ‘dead lizard stare’ at the welcoming feast fixed on The Imposter had probably made Professor Snape more paranoid than Mad-Eye Moody.

I didn’t really tune into the class going on behind me until I heard Professor Snape start his subtle apology about Lily’s death to The Imposter, which was—predictably—completely misinterpreted.

Even then, it wasn’t until The Imposter went off-script that I turned my head around and stared at him.

“I don’t know,” The Imposter whined—legitimately whined—and thumped a foot against the rungs of his stool. Shorty McShortpants was overacting very, very badly. If he wanted to sneak that sort of behavior by Professor “Legilimens” Snape he was going to have to pick up his game. Then The Imposter sneered, looking preemptively vindicated and smug despite not having done anything yet. “It’s not like I need Death Eater scum like you to teach me anything.”

My eyes slowly peeled open as I stared at The Imposter, observing him and all that he is. Professor Snape’s face could have been carved out of granite. Cold black eyes flicked in my direction, noticed my ‘dead lizard stare,’ and his expression steeled.
“Fifty points from Slytherin,” came Professor Snape’s calm, emotionless voice. The entire classroom of firsties sucked in a startled breath in unison. “For disrespect and slander of a professor. And detention, Potter, for the next two weeks. With Filch.”

The Imposter seemed confused, as if whatever weird script he was acting off of had suddenly transformed into the complete works of Shakespeare. What had The Imposter expected Professor Snape to do? Stoop to the level of a dunderheaded eleven-year-old? That would have been incredibly unprofessional, not to mention very detrimental to his career. Professor Snape hadn’t managed to play double-agent against the Dark Lord Voldemort for so many years because he was an idiot, after all.

Also, I acknowledged as The Imposter’s housemates all promised him a slow and violent death with their eyes, The Imposter’s life expectancy in Slytherin had just dropped by approximately 64%.

I made a mental note to purchase The Imposter a plot of land in the cemetery at Godric’s Hollow. He was likely to need it pretty soon.

The Imposter received the notice of my purchase (on the tasteful black parchment that was used in the Wizarding World to convey condolences for deaths in the family) that evening at dinner. He was red-faced and noticeably not impressed, ranting and screaming that he’d ‘find whoever was responsible for this threat’ and ‘make them wish they were at the end of Voldemort’s wand.’

Professor Snape smiled throughout the rest of the meal.

The Imposter was really very bad at pretending to be an eleven year old. He frequently made jokes or references that sailed right over the heads of his classmates, but that earned him narrow-eyed suspicion from the upperclassmen. He also tended to make oddly curious mistakes regarding wizarding traditions, and had very strange ideas about how magic was supposed to work.

I studied him at breakfast one morning (making use of a subtle listening charm that a sixth-year Slytherin had taught me in exchange for help getting into the Ravenclaw dorms to visit his illicit boyfriend) as he attempted to ‘explain’ how intent was really all that mattered in magic, and that wandless / wordless magic was not only possible, but actually very simple indeed.

He was wrong. On all counts, actually. Intent only played a small part of the structured sort of magic Hogwarts taught, and while wordless magic was possible wandless magic could only be performed by someone with a mature magical core. Meaning, you had to be seventeen before you could do any. It simply couldn’t be done with a child’s core—which all witches and wizards had until magical majority on their seventeenth birthday.

I squinted at him as I wondered where, exactly, he was pulling all this bullshit magical theory from. Fanfiction? That was all well and good for stories, but it really had no relation to real life.

I watched as he attempted to prove his point by boasting that he would (wandlessly and nonverbally) transfigure his fork into a cat, and mentally counted how many things were wrong with that
Firstly, true inanimate-to-animal transfiguration was an OWL level concept that there was no way The Imposter had studied yet. Secondly, forks and cats were in no way similar to one another, being of very different sizes and atomic makeups. Professor McGonagall’s desk-to-pig display for the first year classes was impressive, but it was way easier to make a desk into a pig (since they were of a size) than it would have been to turn a spoon into a pig instead. Also, the desk was made of wood, which had once been part of a living organism and would be simpler to return to a living state than a metal, which had never been alive at all. She could probably have done it, of course, but not nonverbally—which wouldn’t have been as impressive to the cynical little brats she was trying to inspire to enjoy Transfiguration class.

Thirdly, The Imposter was only eleven years old and did not have a magical core capable of wandless magic. Fourthly, it was impossible to perform a spell nonverbally that you had not first mastered verbally which—as a first year Hogwarts student—The Imposter had definitely not done.

Fifthly, cats were one of the very few animals that could simply not be transfigured out of inanimate objects, due to cats being inherently magical enough to serve as familiars. It was the same with owls and snakes. Other animals could be transfigured into cats or familiar-class beasts, but inanimate objects did not have enough innate magic to allow a semi-magical animal to be created from them.

So basically, absolutely everything about The Imposter’s boast was impossible and wrong. Also, he was boasting to Slytherins, who hated him and all that he stood for, which was incredibly poor planning on his part.

I took a bite of my eggs as I watched The Imposter stare very intently at his fork. Nothing happened, of course, but really none of the Slytherins had been expecting anything to. They, unlike The Imposter, had a basic grounding in magical theory and—even if the specifics escaped them—knew that what The Imposter was saying was nonsense.

I could almost see several Slytherins make the mental decision that The Imposter was simply an idiot, and could spot the exact moment they collectively decided to completely ignore him.

Professor Snape, watching from the head table, appeared visibly pained.

I finished my eggs and stood, gathering my bag, and headed for the exit, meandering so I’d pass by where The Imposter sat at his table, still glaring at his fork. I peeled my eyes open to study him as I approached, pausing behind him and studying the back of his head. Several Slytherins watched me watching The Imposter, likely recognizing me as ‘that weird Ravenclaw who helped out Professor Snape in the lab sometimes.’

“You are doing a very bad job at pretending to be Harry Potter,” I told The Imposter, who flinched spasmodically, sending the fork flying down the table where it almost impaled the sneering blond in the eye.

“W-what do you mean? I am Harry Potter,” The Imposter stammered, lying so badly that it was like he’d hung up a flashing neon sign above his head that he had something to hide. All the nearby Slytherins zeroed in on him like sharks who’d smelled blood in the water.

I just hummed at him noncommittally, eyeing him with obvious disbelief. The growing suspicion of the Slytherins was almost audible. “Sure you are,” I placated, using the sort of tone you might take with a small child who insisted they were Batman. I smiled condescendingly and patted him on the head twice before turning to continue on my way.
“Wait, who are you anyway?” The Imposter demanded, standing up sharply from the bench. “I don’t recognize you.” This was said as if his not recognizing me was a grave issue of incredible import.

I turned back to him, squinting at him through almost-closed lids. “Why would you recognize me? You’re a first year. Do you know every student in the school by sight or something? You some kind of stalker?”

While The Imposter tried to stutter his way out of that completely left-field accusation, I ignored him and quickly left the Great Hall. I wonder how long it would take him to realize I hadn’t answered his question.

“Miss Taylor,” came the uncomfortably silky voice of my potions professor. I turned to face him obediently, squinting at him. I noticed his eyes flick to my closed lids and acknowledge them before they returned to my face as a whole.

It was really very unfortunate that Professor Snape had such a delicious voice when his personality was so horrible. Also, he was both old enough to be my father and young enough to be my grandson simultaneously.

“Yes, Professor?” I replied absently, still considering whether it would be he or I that was robbing the cradle if we were to ever enter a relationship. It was probably good that he never tried to use legilimency on me, because my thoughts would likely disturb him slightly.

“A few of your classmates brought your altercation with Potter this morning to my attention,” he began leadingly, looming nearby but not close enough to be taken as aggressive. Professor Snape was always very careful with how his body language could be construed whenever he spoke with female students outside of his own House.

“The Imposter?” I asked, slightly focusing in on the conversation. Was this when I could find out what had happened to the real Harry Potter? “What about him? Did you find the real Harry in his boot cupboard?”

Professor Snape went very still. Much like a snake, I observed as I studied him through slightly open eyes. Were all Slytherins snake-like? No, I reconsidered. The sneering blond child and his two gorilla pals were very much un-snake-like.

“Would you mind expanding on that, Miss Taylor?” Professor Snape asked in a tone that indicated it wasn’t really a question. I peeled my eyes open the rest of the way. It was polite to give people your attention when you were talking about something important.

“Well, I assumed if you were asking about The Imposter that maybe you’d found out where the real Harry Potter was,” I admitted easily. No one ever believed what I had to say anyway, so there wasn’t any point in beating around the bush. “He’s doing a really bad job at pretending to be Harry, after all, and it would probably be best if we found out where the real one was and bring him back somehow.”

“You mentioned… a boot cupboard?” Professor Snape probed. But not literally, because for some reason he was having difficulty meeting my open eyes. They weren’t that scary, I didn’t think. Sure, the slightly glazed, cloudy grey irises were strange, and when I really focused on something they tended to freak people out, but Professor Snape was made of sterner stuff.
“Well that’s where they kept him,” I told the Professor. Really, it was pretty obvious. Everyone knew Harry Potter grew up under a staircase!

“They?”

“The horse and the walrus.”

Professor Snape nodded very seriously. Sirius-ly? I wonder what Sirius would think about The Imposter taking the place of his godson.

“The Imposter has the body of the real Harry, but his mind is wrong,” I told the Professor idly, still wondering about Sirius and Azkaban. Were godfather bonds a thing? I’d have to look it up. “Kind of like Quirrellmort.”

Professor Snape was too disciplined to do a double-take, but he radiated that sort of emotion despite the blank face. “Pardon?”

Oh. Had I not told anyone about Quirrellmort yet? I could have sworn I’d mentioned it to someone. Maybe I’d dreamed that. Or hallucinated it. I tended to hallucinate a lot of things that hadn’t happened yet.

“Yeah. Quirrellmort. He’s got the body of Professor Quirrell, but the mind of somebody else.” I very tactfully did not mention Voldemort by name. I knew how Professor Snape disliked people doing that.

“I believe we should take your concerns to the Headmaster,” Professor Snape said in a rather strained voice.

“Well, if you insist,” I said doubtfully. “But the Headmaster already knows about Quirrellmort, so I’m not sure he’d be all that concerned about it.”

Professor Snape looked very pained indeed, as if he had a very large headache. He was a potions master though, and likely had some sort of potion to cure that.

Maybe the Headmaster would know what to do about The Imposter? I suppose it was worth a shot. What’s the worst that could happen?
Tranquility (Marvel AU)

Chapter Summary

There was a man hiding in your rose bushes. He didn’t look at all happy to be there, but he wasn’t exactly making any sort of move to leave either.

You weren’t very surprised, to be honest.

Chapter Notes

Now with 100% more google translate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was a man hiding in your rose bushes. You stood for a moment, hands on your hips as you lingered in the doorway wearing nothing but your pajamas and considered him. From what you could see through the vines and leaves and thorns (and could you just say ouch), he looked a bit like a homeless person who may or may not also be a serial killer in his spare time.

He didn’t look at all happy to be in your bushes, but he wasn’t exactly making any sort of move to leave them either.

You weren’t very surprised, to be honest.

If you had Triggered at any point in your life—any point at all—other than the one you had, you may have wound up with actually useful powers. You might have become an Avenger, or an X-Man, or a superhero.

Instead, at all of four years old, you’d watched your parents screaming at each other for the nth time and sobbed out hysterically that why couldn’t they just calm down?

Of course you didn’t phrase it exactly like that, because you had been four and barely coherent on your best days, but it was the intent that mattered when it came to Trigger Events. And you’d wanted your quarreling parents to calm down and stop fighting, and so your powers manifested in that direction, instead of into something useful or cool like pyrokinesis or telepathy.

It wasn’t anything you could consciously control, and honestly it took you years before you realized that it was you that was making everyone so calm all the time, even in crises or emergencies. People could be angry around you, but it took a hell of a lot of effort. It was like you were drugging everyone all the time, making them sedate and calm and lazy, and for a long time you’d been horrified that you were basically mind controlling people into not arguing around you.

But eventually you got used to it. You moved out here to the suburbs as soon as you could afford it and worked from home. You kept human contact to a minimum and politely ignored the way the mailman lingered around your property as if taking a small break from reality.
And then the strays started showing up. Dogs with protruding ribs or scars on muzzles and ears, lurking around your house and trusting you instinctually because they were calm and therefore felt safe even if, to them, you were a complete unknown. Cats sauntering by and rubbing against your legs, taking advantage of the abundance of birds and rodents with lowered survival instincts because they simply didn’t register danger anymore. Hawks and owls which would land on branches within reach and not move if you tried to pet them, because to them you were basically just a tree that could move on its own.

Hell, you once had an entire hive of bees set up shop in a tree in your backyard and not even react when you bumped them accidentally.

But your ability to force tranquility on people and animals really wasn’t something that you could weaponize, or put to good use as a hero. Humans, you’d found, could be as calm as a Buddhist monk and still fire a gun. Humans didn’t need anger or fear to be evil, and—honestly—calming them down sometimes only made them more dangerous, because then they could think things through rationally and often turned violent anyway.

You were great in a crisis, because you kept civilians like yourself from panicking and making things worse, but that meant putting yourself in danger, which you were vehemently opposed to on a very base level. So you stayed in your little house away from other people with your ever-growing flock of animals, and were not at all surprised when one day a man showed up in your bushes, pulled to you just like every other stray.

You were a bit thrown by the metal arm, but honestly? It wasn’t even the weirdest thing to happen to you that week.

Your grocery bills had skyrocketed as soon as you started pulling in strays, because for all that the cats could feed themselves the dogs were usually in a pretty pitiful state by the time they reached you. And while you were well-stocked with dog food, your person-food left a lot to be desired.

You figured Homeless Murder Bush Guy probably wouldn’t be too impressed by your stores of cheese and pasta, but you did have an awful lot of protein shakes to make up for your picky habits. You brought one out with you when you went to feed the large pack you’d accumulated over the past year or so, and casually left it on the ground near Homeless Murder Bush Guy’s chosen bush.

You also casually ignored the way the man tensed like a coiled spring as you drew close to him, confirming a suspicion you’d had that not even your field of tranquility was enough to make him really relax.

The pack sedately surrounded you in a very undoglike orderly fashion, not seeing the need to express exuberance at your presence while calmed down so much. They still wagged tails sometimes and panted happily at you, but they never greeted you like how dogs always greeted owners (which made sense, you guessed; you didn’t own these dogs, and most of them barely knew you at all).

They were actually pretty terrible pets, to be honest. They didn’t chase after sticks if you threw them, never barked at the semi-addicted mailman, and could care less if you pet them or not. The cats were better, because even when tranquilized out of their furry minds they purred at the drop of a hat and never bothered walking away if you gave one your attention.

But Homeless Murder Bush Guy wasn’t a dog, or a cat, or a tranquilized bird who didn’t have the sense to fly away from predators anymore. Homeless Murder Bush Guy was a human being—albeit a traumatized looking one—and he was not going to be able to subsist solely on your meager supplies of protein shakes. Plus he looked like he was built like a tank, and even you knew that men
that big needed more food than your miniscule size required.

Fortunately, you lived in an age where anything and everything could be ordered off the internet, and you very rarely had reason to actually leave your house and force your tranquility field on unsuspecting people. Also, when you left the animals you collected tried to follow you and that was both very sad and very adorable simultaneously, especially since they couldn’t really keep pace with a car and you didn’t want to get them lost along these empty back roads if you could help it.

You really, really didn’t want to risk Homeless Murder Bush Guy trying to follow your tranquil field. Because unlike your dogs, he had working thumbs and was more likely to simply stop you from leaving if he was of a mind to.

You didn’t feel like dealing with that today.

The thing was, your powers could really help people. You could keep patients calm in hospitals, coerce twitchy people off of roof ledges, soothe tempers in hostage situations. There were thousands of people in your state alone that could benefit from your help with anger management disorders.

But, the thing was, you didn’t like people. As far back as you could remember, people haven’t really been human to you. You learned about emotion from television, because the actors on the screen felt things and did things that the people around you just didn’t have the capacity to do anymore. You watched with bafflement as women sobbed over dead lovers, as men waged war with grim determination, as children screamed in fear as monsters came out of their closets. Then you looked at the people around you, in the real world, at their glassy eyes and placid smiles, at the vacant pleasantries and blissed expressions, at the utter lack of conflict or grief or fear…

They weren’t real to you, not the way that the actors on the television were real.

So no, you didn’t much care for people at all.

Homeless Murder Bush Guy had moved bushes. You noticed it this morning when you came outside to deliver the first of the five protein shakes you had decided to bring him per day—making an entirely random guess as to how much protein and calories a dude would really need—and found him four bushes closer to your house.

His face was not any more happy to be there, and he hadn’t lost any of the tension your very presence seemed to bring him, but he’d visibly relocated during the night so you were willing to consider that a success. You’d ordered several more cases of your chosen shake the night before—he was going through as many in one day as you did in a week—and bemoaned the hit your bank account was going to take because of it, but you were willing to suck it up and deal. This was for the Greater Good, after all.

You dropped off the first shake of the day and went about feeding ‘your’ dogs. There were two more than there were yesterday, one of which was a massive beast of a thing that looked like a very matted version of those Russian bear dogs you saw on the internet sometimes. You decided you’d take the day to wash as many of them as you could, because you’d always secretly wanted one of those big bear dogs and even if this one was basically drugged into passivity, you would take what you could get.

…you’d have to Google how to get those mats out, though, because that was something college hadn’t trained you for.
Your parents never had another fight with you in earshot after you’d Triggered, but you knew they still had them. Your powers let you keep the peace, but only so long as you stuck to them like glue. And, at ten years old, following your parents around was the absolute last thing you wanted to be doing.

You aren’t sure if they actually caught on to the way that they never felt inclined to fight when you were present, or if they just rationalized it away as not wanting to yell when the kid was around to hear it. But as far as your tiny kid brain was concerned, your parents were playing nice with each other and didn’t keep you awake at night with their screaming rows anymore.

So it was a bit of a shock to come home from school one day to find your father had shot your mother while you were gone. He was sitting on the sofa staring at her body when you opened the door, and he looked up at you with a peaceable smile.

“Welcome home, honey,” he’d told you, still smiling vacantly. There was blood on his shirt and on his hands. “Mummy had an accident while you were at school. Go put your things away and we’ll take her to the doctor, okay?”

Even at ten years old, you had known it had not been an accident. Instead of doing what your father told you, you’d run into the kitchen and called the police just like school had taught you to.

When they arrived, you watched as everyone went around the living room in a very calm, orderly fashion. The police were quiet and smiling as they gently put handcuffs on your father, making jokes with him and with each other as they all laughed softly together. People smiled as they studied the body of your mother—so still—so stillsostillsostillgetupmommypleasegetup—and smiled as they put her in a bag and zipped her up.

One of the officers ruffled your hair as he passed you, staring with horrified eyes at what was going on in your living room.

“Come on kiddo,” the officer had said jovially, tugging you along. “We’re gonna take a ride down to the station, all right? We can even play the sirens! Would you like that?”

They did play the sirens, in the end. You couldn’t bring yourself to smile about it.

“Какова моя миссия?”

This was the first thing Homeless Murder Bush Guy said to you, and it wasn’t even in a language you recognized. He was standing by your door on the porch, staring directly at you very intensely from approximately four inches away. Nothing about his body language or expression read as calm or tranquil. He was the most animated human being you’d spoken to in twenty years, and he still had all the facial expressions of a brick.

It was far, far too early for complex thought. You squinted at him, years upon years of your presence alone diffusing hostile situations having long since trained any sort of fight-or-flight reflexes out of your body. You fumbled around in your pocket for your phone, noting but ignoring the flexing of his—admittedly impressive—muscles at the motion and pulled up trusty Google.

“Could you say that one more time?” you asked him absently, focus on your screen, fingers ready to type out your best phonetic guess of what he was about to say.

“Какова моя миссия?” he obliged you by saying again, in the exact same inflection and tone.

You squinted and tapped out what you thought he’d said as best as you could spell it. Kakova moya
missiya? Google seemed to think that your Homeless Murder Bush Guy was asking what his mission was. Also, Homeless Murder Bush Guy was apparently Russian. This was valuable intel for you to have.

“Right now your mission is to stop creeping in my bushes and get better,” you decided as you humored him, unsure if he even understood English at all. He was too skinny for a man of his size, and if he’d deign to stay on your couch or something your stress about him catching a cold in the rain would go down by about a thousand percent.

“...лучше?” he replied, the inflection suggesting a question even if his expression didn’t do likewise. His eyes tightened afterwards, as if the act of asking had physically pained him. Or if he was expecting you to hit him. It was behavior you were more used to seeing on the more abused dogs that showed up from time to time, for whom even your aura of peace wasn’t enough.

You peered at him from over your glasses as you tapped out your best guess at what he’d just asked you. Lush…she? Well, it was Russian, and they had lots of ch sounds that sounded like sh sounds, didn’t they? You respelled it. Luchshe? He wanted to know what you meant by ‘better,’ according to Google.

Fair enough, you figured. Also, he apparently understood English even if he only spoke in Russian, which was unfortunate but not an insurmountable obstacle now that communication had been established.

“I mean get to a healthy weight for a guy your size, and ideally learn to eat things that aren’t protein shakes.” You’d tried to give him something solid once and you’d heard him throwing it up a few minutes later. You didn’t try again. “Also, you could use a shower. Or a bath. Or a dip in the pond. You smell bad enough that I can smell you over the dogs.”

Tact was not something you learned growing up in a world where no one reacted negatively to anything you ever said. Also, you were telling him the truth. He smelled more like blood and oil and gunpowder than sweat or body odor, but the facts remained. Even your sedated dogs avoided him.

Homeless Russian Murder Bush Guy seemed to seriously consider your definition of ‘better’ for several moments before he nodded once, firmly, seeming to stand at attention despite not moving a muscle.

“Признанный.”

Your fingers were moving as soon as he opened his mouth that time. Preez…nan-ny? You squinted again at the phone. The ever-helpful Google was suggesting he might have said Priznanny, which apparently meant ‘recognized’? That was kind of a weird way to reply to what you’d told him, but maybe it was a translation error? He might have meant something else, like ‘I understand’ or ‘acknowledged’ or something, which would make way more sense.

You put your phone away, pleased and slightly smug that you’d managed to get through an entire conversation with someone who didn’t speak English without crossing any wires. He followed at your heels for the rest of the day as you went about washing your dogs, but he didn’t say anything or get in the way so you mostly ignored this.

It was kind of nice to have company again.

You were eighteen the first time you saw someone react badly to your radius of peace.

It had been an older man in a grocery store, who had apparently been in the middle of a flashback...
when you walked inside and he crossed the boundary of your power. While the nervous bystanders all instantly relaxed, calm and unconcerned, the older gentleman had gone rigid, eyes roiling as every muscle tensed.

_He started shouting out a string of numbers, reaching for a handgun he’d kept at his hip, not trusting his sudden surge of peace in the midst of what—to him—had probably been a battlefield or firefight. He shot six people before you had the presence of mind to bolt out the door and let him come out of it naturally, sobbing and hysterical. You didn’t stick around to wait for the police—you knew exactly how that would go if they showed up with you still there._

_You started ordering your groceries online after that._

_It was the best decision you’d made in a long time._

“Заказы?”

Considering this was the fourth day Homeless Russian Murder Bush Guy had greeted you with this word, you didn’t have to reach for your phone to know he was saying Zakazy, which according to your sidekick Google meant he wanted his ‘orders’ again.

It was kind of like living with a very lifelike wind-up toy, you’d decided. He was a lot like a computer in the way he needed you to spell out everything you wanted him to do, whereupon he’d go do it with the sort of focus and drive you’d expect out a machine rather than a drugged-up human being.

You had learned in the last few days that he didn’t really know how to be a person in any meaningful way, and not in the same ways that you yourself didn’t know how to be a person. But _nothing_, absolutely _nothing_, would ever match the sheer embarrassment you had felt that first night in the bathroom as you taught a fully-grown man how to wash himself.

It had been very educational for the both of you, considering you had never even seen a naked man before and Homeless Russian Murder Bush Guy was both incredibly handsome under all the grime and inhumanly unselfconscious about his sudden spout of nudity. Beneath the warpaint and the dirt, Homeless Russian Murder Bush Guy was supermodel levels of hot, which made you vaguely aware of how _not_ supermodel-beautiful you yourself were. But at least you knew how to use a fork, so you had that going for you.

“Same as yesterday,” you told him as you tuned back into reality. “Maintain an optimal state of hygiene and health, and be sure to take at least four hours of leisure time.” You’d learned that he responded better to military-like terms (which made some small amount of sense considering you were pretty sure he was suffering from some heavy-duty PTSD), and that it was essential that you specify that he needed to take time to relax or he’d spend all day patrolling the area around the house or something.

On the third day you’d had to teach him what counted as ‘leisure’ time, and had haltingly decided to define _leisure_ as ‘a state of being in which your mind and senses can relax a little’ when it became clear that watching a movie or reading a book did not inspire relaxation.

So he’d taken it upon himself to do one of three things during his allotted four hours of ‘leisure’ time. He’d either take apart all of his numerous guns and weapons and clean them (before hiding them back on his person in such a way as to make every one of them entirely invisible), do a truly prodigious amount of extremely exhausting-looking exercise that you honestly didn’t believe could possibly be relaxing (except his face slackened a little and he lost some of the tension around his eyes
when he was in motion, so you figured he knew what he was about), or he’d track you down and plant himself in the same room as you and simply stare at you, motionless, until either you got up and went elsewhere or four hours elapsed.

Some good news though was that you’d finally worked him up to semi-solid food now. He could keep down oatmeal if it was plain and bland enough, and you thought you might be able to work up to adding in some brown sugar soon to give it some flavor. You honestly thought he was adjusting to his new diet way too fast for a normal person, but you didn’t claim to be an expert in how to readjust to solid food.

When it came time to feed the dogs, he followed you outside as had become custom. You considered the all-black tactical gear that you’d had him scrub in the hose outside, and made a note to find out what size he wore and order him some clothes less likely to inspire heat stroke. His ‘gear’ seemed geared towards functionality rather than comfort, which was all well and good unless he wanted to really try and give ‘leisure’ a solid shot.

You studied his face as you fed the dogs, knowing you were being covertly studied in turn. He had nice grey eyes, you thought. He’d probably look good in blues.

Your aura was spherical. You discovered this when the sounds of the couple in the hotel room above you having vigorous sex abruptly petered out as soon as you opened the door. Instead, you got to hear soft murmurs as the previously-amorous lovebirds began having a quiet conversation instead, presumably halted mid-coitus without any sort of aggravation on either side.

Your aura eclipsed blue balls, apparently. You hadn’t thought it was powerful enough to affect bodily functions like that.

This made you briefly consider your own lack of a love life, and the future you could expect for yourself if the couple upstairs was any indication of what your aura did to one’s sex drive. You’d certainly thought about sex before. You’d read some rather raunchy stories and seen uncomfortably-intimate scenes in movies and television shows. You weren’t a complete innocent, as untouched as you were. You rather thought you would have liked to know what all the fuss was about, should you ever fall in love with someone you trusted enough to undress for.

But your aura had just erased the lust and motivation in a couple literally in the middle of sex directly above you. What would that do to someone who you tried to have a relationship with? Would they even have enough emotional capacity to feel love at all? Could they focus past the calm long enough to form some sort of bond with you? Could a man even perform if they couldn’t feel anything towards you at all?

You sat silently on your hotel room bed and listened to the couple above you converse amicably in low tones.

You were still sitting there when they eventually quieted down and fell asleep.

“Это недостаточная защита.”

He waited patiently as you tapped at your phone, frowning at the unusually long words. Eventually he had to sound them out for you slower so you could actually guess at what he’d even said, which he did with extreme tolerance and the sort of calm you associated with movie parents towards their children, rather than the forced-tranquility of your aura.
"Eto nedostatochnaya zashchita," which was a mouthful to even think let alone say or spell phonetically. According to your pal Google, he was trying to explain to you how the casual clothing you’d just handed him was not protective enough.

“That’s because it’s meant for comfort, not practicality,” you tried to explain.

“Комфорт не имеет значения,” he told you in the same inflectionless tone of voice he’d been using for the past week and a half.

He was willing to sound it out for you again when you flailed over the last few words.

Komfort ne imeyet znacheniya. Comfort does not matter.

You looked up into his face and stared directly at him. He seemed slightly startled by your sudden forthright eye-contact (for a given value of ‘startled’), but didn’t change expressions or take back what he had just told you.

“Your comfort matters to me,” you informed him frankly. “Knowing you are wearing comfortable clothing will make me happy. If you don’t want to wear it during the day, at least sleep in it and consider putting some of it on during your leisure hours.”

For the first time since you’d found him in your bush, Homeless Russian Murder Bush Guy made an actual expression.

He frowned at you.

“Мой комфорт... это важно для вас?”

Dutifully, you did your level best to guess at what he’d said that’d invoked an actual facial movement. Fortunately, all the words were pretty simple this time. Moy komfort eto vazhno dlya vas.

He was clarifying that his comfort was important to you, but he sounded unacceptably uncertain and confused about it.

“Yes,” was all you said in reply. His comfort was important to you. Letting him keep walking around in full tactical gear would be like watching one of your dogs go around with porcupine quills in all four feet and try to hobble around on them in stoic silence.

He was quiet for long enough that you actually noticed it for a contemplative pause, rather than him simply not knowing how to person. Then he nodded once, not nearly as firmly as he normally did.

“Признанный.”

You remembered that one, and allowed yourself a small smile of victory. You were learning.

Homeless Russian Murder Bush Guy didn’t exactly smile back, but some of the tension went out of his shoulders in response.

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Your aura did not exactly have a defined circumference. Rather, if you could see or hear them—or if they could see or hear you—they were in your field. As soon as you acknowledged the existence of a person, or a person acknowledged the existence of you, they were caught.

You had spent weeks trying to find some way to make it not work. Blindfolding yourself hadn’t worked. Neither had wearing noise-cancelling headphones. Hiding in your hotel room hadn’t worked either, because people had seen you go into the building and—subconsciously—
acknowledged that you existed as a person there. And as soon as they subconsciously acknowledged that you existed, they were calm.

You figured that if someone lived far enough above or below you and never saw you enter or leave your room or the building, and if they never entered or left their room or the building, they might not be affected by your aura.

But you’d never know for certain, because the instant you were in any sort of position to check it would be pointless.

Watching live television made the news casters calm down. Glimpsing someone a block away as they jogged by did the same. There was not a range limit if they were physically within your line of sight. Hearing someone through a loudspeaker calmed them audibly. You could never listen to live concerts because the very act of you knowing that it was being broadcast live made the singers too tranquil to emote properly and the audience too sedate to notice.

You could turn off the television and the news anchors (according to the internet) would return to normal without any indication that anything had gone wrong. You could leave a room and the people inside it would regain emotion without ever knowing they had lost it.

Physical barriers like walls and doors stopped your aura only if you are the one who left it. People could walk outside and stay calm, but the second you left they’d be normal again. You had no idea why your powers worked like this. You didn’t know what kind of sense it could possibly make.

Maybe, you thought, if you found someone who didn’t acknowledge you as a person? If you ran into someone who thought differently, whose brain worked strangely, who didn’t remember faces or think of human beings as people…? Maybe then they wouldn’t be affected.

But if you met someone like that, who didn’t think you were a person at all… would they even want to talk to you in the first place? Would you want them to?

You didn’t know.

“Я помню своё имя,” came a voice out of the dark shadowy corner of your pitch-black bedroom.

You sat bolt upright on your bed, not really frightened (that particular sense had never developed properly) but somewhat startled at being awoken so abruptly. You turned your head on a swivel and saw a large, looming shape in your doorway that was just visible enough to not be a trick of the eye. You groped for your glasses and put them on, and the vaguely menacing silhouette resolved into the broad outline of Homeless Russian Murder Bush Guy.

What was he doing in your bedroom at—you squinted at the bright light of your phone screen as it unlocked—1:34 in the morning? You flicked the flashlight on your phone and aimed it at him, blinking spots away.

He was wearing the comfortable sleep-clothes you’d gotten for him. They were very tight around the shoulders—the metal arm must be bigger than the regular one—but loose around the hips (he had just progressed to bland chicken, so the weight gain was a work in progress). He also had two guns holstered where you could see them and probably had more where you could not.

You’d take your victories where you could.

You stifled a yawn and clumsily fumbled Google open while keeping the flashlight aimed in his general direction. You noticed he was not squinting or visibly disturbed by suddenly having a very
bright light flashed in his eyes from almost absolute darkness. You felt vaguely jealous.

"Could you repeat that?" you asked slowly, dragging yourself awake through sheer force of will. If he'd shown up in your doorway at o'dark thirty just to tell you something, it was probably important.

He gamely repeated himself, and said it slower without even being prompted this time.

Your pal Google seemed to think he was saying *YA pomnyu svoye imya*, which—if it could be believed—meant Homeless Russian Murder Bush Guy 'remembered his name.'

You hadn't even been aware he'd forgotten his name in the first place, and abruptly felt like a terrible friend. Were you friends? You were close enough to have at least been in a position to have asked the man for his name at some point.

Maybe it was for the best that you hadn't, because 'remembering' his name implied that he'd *forgotten* it, possibly at the same time he'd *forgotten* what forks were and how basic hygiene worked.

You highly doubted there was anything natural about how he'd *forgotten* those things, in retrospect. You should probably have been a great deal more suspicious about that a whole lot sooner than now.

"That's great!" you manage to croak, sincerely glad. "So what's your name?"

“Джеймс,” he replied hoarsely, ducking his head a little. You didn't even really need Google to translate that one, but it was pronounced strangely enough that you typed it in anyway.

*Dzheyms.* James.

“It’s nice to meet you, James,” you smiled as genuinely as you could at him. You were slightly out of practice. “My name’s Elizabeth.” What kind of host were you, not introducing yourself until almost three weeks later?

“Элизабет.” James nodded to himself, and you didn’t even bother putting that into Google since it was basically your name without the ‘h.’ Then he vanished into the dark hallway like a Mirage, despite your flashlight still illuminating a great deal of the area.

You clicked the light off and sat in the dark for a long minute. James had ‘remembered’ his name. James hadn’t known how to wash himself, but he’d known how to field strip and clean six types of handgun and two types of rifle. James had had to relearn how to handle solid food. James expected to be struck if he asked a question. James had thought you, who stood at 5’3” in heels, would hurt him (all 6’4” and almost 250lbs of him) if he didn’t do things right on the first try. James asked you for orders every morning. James had a very high-tech prosthetic replacing his left arm that you should have been way more suspicious about the origins of. James spoke only in Russian although it was obvious that he understood English just fine. James became anxious anytime you turned the television on and it was showing a news channel (so you’d left it off all month in response).

Putting all of it together was painting a very ugly picture of what might have happened to make James ‘forget’ such an odd collection of things, and yet know so many other things and skills. You had dogs come through sometimes that had only been taught how to fight other dogs, and they didn’t know what to do with themselves inside your peace aura. They barely ate or drank, and would only do so if you coaxed them. James was sort of like that, only magnified by about a million.

You’d compared James to a computer, once. A machine.

You didn’t teach a computer how to repair itself, or what ‘leisure’ meant. A computer didn’t think...
about things like comfort or hygiene. A computer was programmed to complete a task, and it did it to
the letter.

You sat on your bed in the dark, and for the first time in a very long time, you felt angry.

Someone had treated James like a computer. Someone had deleted the knowledge on how to care for
himself and how to be a person, and replaced it with how to clean guns and sharpen knives and
perform impossible acrobatic feats under the guise of ‘exercise.’ Someone had deleted his name.

Hell, someone had probably deleted his ability to speak English too, because it was obvious he knew
it. He never had to think about or mentally translate what you said to him. You’d just bet they’d left
little traps behind in his coding, too, like a computer virus. A trojan horse.

Entirely awake and unable to sleep, you lay back on your bed and stared at the ceiling.

Could you do this? Could you teach a computer how to be a person again?

YA pomnyu svoje imya. I remember my name.

Dzheyms. James.

Well, that wasn’t really much of a question, now was it?

It wasn’t like you weren’t going to try.

Chapter End Notes

This one takes place in an AU of the Marvelverse, where a person might rarely Trigger
with powers during stressful situations, while most people don’t. Mostly me exploring
what this sort of ‘power’ might do to a person as they develop. And also the Winter
Soldier. Because I might be obsessed.
Chapter Summary

There was a man drinking tea in the target’s living room. The man drinking tea was staring at the Asset. Not with horror, as the Asset was accustomed to, or even with surprise—as the Asset expected. Rather, he seemed gently chiding, as if the man drinking tea had been sitting at that table for centuries, just waiting for the Asset to finally step over the threshold.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Winter Soldier

There was a man drinking tea in the target’s living room. The Asset froze in the shadows, black matte knife immediately gripped in the cold fingers of the Arm, as it processed this fact. There had not been a man drinking tea in the target’s living room three seconds ago, when the Asset had first picked the lock and stepped through the door. There was not supposed to be a man drinking tea in the target’s living room, because the target lived alone forty-eight kilometers from the nearest occupied settlement.

The man drinking tea was staring at the Asset. Not with horror, as the Asset was accustomed to, or even with surprise—as the Asset expected. Rather, he seemed gently chiding, as if the man drinking tea had been sitting at that table for centuries, just waiting for the Asset to finally step over the threshold.

The Asset was being unusually loquacious in its thoughts, it noted. Probable deterioration of programming logged.

“Have a seat,” the man drinking tea said.

The Asset found itself sitting in the chair before its mind caught up with the words. It did not find this unusually disturbing; it often found its body acting on the whims of its handlers before thought could catch up with training.

“Please, have some tea,” the man drinking tea said.

The Asset picked up the cup of tea that had not existed when it sat at the table. It stared at the cup. It could not drink through the mask it wore. Removing the mask was mission-noncompliant. Not drinking the tea seemed, to the Asset, an even more grievous error.

It brought the cup to its lips. Its mask was gone. The Asset made a note of the occurrence, but otherwise did not question it. The Asset had never had tea before. It had never been permitted tea. But this was not a gift. It wasn’t even an order. It simply was. The Asset would drink the tea because it was there, and because the man across the small table had provided it.

The man drinking tea smiled at the Asset. The Asset felt warm.
“One must always take one’s pleasures where one can,” the man informed the Asset with a conspiring grin.

The Asset burned that order into its core programming. It would not forget. It would take its pleasures where it could.

The man finished his tea. At the same time, the Asset’s own tea was suddenly gone. It did not remember drinking all of it, but that was not unusual. The man stood from the table, his form tall and thin and looming and there were shadows in his eyes like grasping teeth and knives and infinity spiraling down and down and down into an event horizon that spanned the universe—

—smiling kindly at the still-seated Asset. One skeletal hand reached out and patted the Asset on its metal shoulder. The Asset. Felt. The touch. The Asset did not have feeling in the Arm. The man’s fingers felt like ice, like the chamber, like the Chair. The Asset shuddered, unable to hold back the reaction as its programming flickered and cracked like fragile glass. It did not break, but it was very clearly damaged.

The man cooed at the shivering Asset, his touch warming on the Arm like a beam of sunlight on a balmy day. The Asset leaned helplessly into the first pressure the Arm had ever felt, suddenly yearning in a manner its handlers and technicians had tried ripping out of it with the Chair and the Tube.

One must always take one’s pleasure where one can, said the Asset’s core programming.

The Asset stood from the table and leaned into the tall form of the man, taking its pleasure where it could. Immediately, the spike of deathendingfrozenforever washed over its entire body before the soothing warmth safety rest there beneath my wings replaced it. The Asset did not want to ever leave. The Asset was not supposed to want. It wanted anyway.

Deterioration of programming acknowledged and logged.

“We will meet again,” said the man above the Asset’s head. It was not a promise, or a placation. It was an irrefutable statement of fact. The sky is blue. Gravity exists. We will meet again.

The Asset stepped away from the man. Its mask was back on its face. Oddity noted and logged. The man smiled at the Asset again, and his teeth were sharp like knives and fangs and broken glass and in his eyes was eternity and the end of all things draining like a sieve through the void between stars—

—kindness. The man was kind. The man was fair. The Asset felt this in its bones.

The man turned and strode from the room. The air felt a little warmer with his passing, the Asset noted. It did not track the man with its eyes as he left. They would meet again.

The Asset retrieved its blade from the holster it had vanished into and proceeded further into the house. It had a mission to complete.

There was a man standing beside the target. The Asset… glitched. It… craved tea? The man should have tea? Was there a man drinking tea? It shifted the scope of its Dragunov off the target and onto the man for a better view. Mission-noncompliant behavior. The Asset logged and ignored the protocol violation.
The man was tall and thin, the Asset idly noted. Roughly 198 centimeters. Dressed in black, with equally dark hair. The Asset knew the man. The Asset did not know anyone. The Asset was not permitted to remember. The Asset remembered anyway.

There was tea. Warmth. *One must always take one’s pleasures where one can.*

The man was kind. The man was fair.

The man was standing beside the target. The Asset moved the scope back onto the target and compensated for wind and distance. It could not afford to miss. It could not afford to injure the man. It pulled the trigger. The target’s head exploded in gore—*make it messy, Soldier*—but none of it touched the man standing thirty-six centimeters away.

The man turned and stared right at the Asset across a distance of two and half kilometers. His eyes were a poisonous, venomous green. The Asset did not remember that particular color, but that was not unusual. It had a feeling it would never forget that color again. The man smiled at the Asset, and the Asset felt warm.

The man reached down to help the Asset up off the ground, suddenly beside him. The Asset was not startled. This seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing for the man to do, even if no one treated the Asset like it was a thing worthy of being helped off the ground.

The man’s hand was *coldagonydeath* and then it was *comfortsafetyrest*, and the Asset melted into the man because *one must always take one’s pleasures where one can*. The man made soothing noises at the trembling Asset—deterioration of physical state noted and logged—and combed *icedeathheatwarmth* fingers through the Asset’s hair. It felt like dying. It felt like falling. It felt like inevitability. It felt like finally, *finally*, being able to rest. To sleep forever. To close its eyes and never wake up again.

The Asset *craved*.

“Not yet,” the man murmured to the Asset where its face was buried in his shoulder, attempting to fuse with his body through sheer force of will. The man did not make the Asset move away. The man is kind. The man is fair.

“Please,” rasped the Asset. The Asset did not speak. The Asset did not beg. The Asset was iron, was winter, was unyielding steel. The Asset fell to its knees and wrapped both arms around the man’s legs. The man could walk and the Asset would crawl after him if it had to.

“My sweet child,” said the man, tone pleased and warm and affectionate. “Such devotion you show me. Such longing.” Fingers that felt like *the cold heart of a dying star* benediction combed through the Asset’s hair again. “Most people fear me, you know. They spend their entire lives running from me. But you?” The Asset pried open its eyes—*when had it closed them*—and saw the man smiling down at it. His teeth were like blades.

“Please,” whispered the Asset. It did not know what it wanted. It was not allowed to want. It was not programmed to want. But it *wanted*. It wanted the calm warmth, the promise of rest. The Asset was so very tired. It was not allowed to be tired. The Asset was unending, untiring, inexhaustible. It felt the fatigue in its *bones*.

“Not yet,” the man repeated. Kindly. Gently. Firmly. *Not yet*. But someday. It was implacable. It *would* happen, the nebulous thing the Asset wanted but did not want but *wanted* and did not know. *Not yet.*
The Asset stood. It felt as if all of its muscles were liquid. Its bones were sand.

“We will meet again,” said the man.

The Asset believed him. It was not supposed to believe in things.

It believed anyway.

Codename: Barnes watched as its mission fluttered awkwardly around its seated form. Codename: Barnes was aware that its body used to belong to the mission’s friend, and was aware that the codename it had been assigned belonged to this friend. It did not care, or particularly mind. One codename was as good as any other, Codename: Barnes figured. It was a bit more of a mouthful to think or say, though, than Asset or Soldier. Not as efficient.

The mission had exhibited distress upon Codename: Barnes offering up this suggestion, however, so Codename: Barnes had understood that its function was not to offer suggestions or give advice—much like with Hydra. It would be silent, and it would wait for orders.

This, too, seemed to distress the mission. Codename: Barnes deduced that everything it did distressed the mission, that avoiding distress was impossible. Codename: Barnes had been taught at the hands of its handlers not to attempt impossible things, and so did not try to correct the issue.

The mission’s chosen technician—Stark, Anthony—Level 6 Priority Target—Do Not Engage—was ignoring the mission’s hovering as he worked on the Arm, which had become damaged during the mission’s appropriation of Codename: Barnes from its previous handlers. The technician talked constantly, at Codename: Barnes rather than to it, which was familiar and easy enough to tune out in favor of surveillance.

Codename: Barnes swept the lab room with its eyes again, gaze locking and freezing on the tall figure looming to one side which had definitely not been there before. It waited for its body to lock up, for its protocols to blare to life as they had not done since the mission had brought it here. Nothing happened. Cod… the Asset’s muscles were liquid. Coden… the Asset’s bones were sand.

The Asset found its body lurching out of the chair the technician had sat it on, disregarding the open panels on the Arm and the dismayed/alarmed/uneasy yelp of the technician and the loud voice of the mission. The Asset staggered towards the man which it did not know but knew but didn’t know but knew and all but fell onto him.

*One must always take one’s pleasures where one can,* said the Asset’s core programming, online for the first time since the failure of Project: INSIGHT.

The voices at its back went abruptly, utterly silent.

The man held its weight easily, as if the Asset were intangible, weighed as little as a feather. He was solid. Unyielding. Inevitable.

“We meet again,” said the man, his voice smiling somewhere above the Asset’s head. The Asset had pressed its face into the man’s shoulder, feeling its mind settling down and becoming quiet for the first time since its last time in the Chair.
“Yes,” said the Asset, voice rough and grating out of its throat like barbed wire. The mission sucked in an audible breath behind it. “Now?” asked the Asset—who was not programmed to ask questions—still not knowing what it wanted but feeling the surety of simply wanting.

The man’s hands settled on the Asset’s shoulders, flesh and metal both, and they felt like the Chair and like waking up from cryo and like the first, desperate, gasping breath after surfacing from the water.

“Not yet,” replied the man. *Not yet, but someday.* The Asset was content to wait. It would get what it wanted. Just not yet. “I have come with a mission, dear child.”

The Asset pulled back and straightened up, ignoring the loud voice of its previous mission behind it and the sound of the technician arming himself in his metal suit. Its focus narrowed to the man standing tall in front of it, eager and desperate and afraid and wanting.

“Готов подчиниться,” said the Asset, and it heard the mission sob out its codename behind it.

The man smiled, teeth like knives and glass, and one long-fingered hand settled on its temple. The Asset leaned into the touch, eyes threatening to slide closed despite trying so hard to be good for this man, who was kind, and was fair.

When he spoke again, his voice was the slick rasp of a man with lungs filled with blood, a quicksilver whisper like sand over scales.

“You are James Buchanan Barnes,” the man said through a grin that cracked his face in half like a jagged fissure through clay. The Asset felt the certainty of this man’s voice lock itself around *one must always take one’s pleasures where one can*, in the core programming no one but the Asset (and the man drinking tea in the target’s living room) itself could edit. “It’s time to come home, Soldier. You are relieved of duty.”

The Asset fell. Objectively, the distance between the Asset and the ground was not very far. In its mind, it fell forever and from a great height. It could hear wind whistling. There was… a train? It found its hand—the one that was not deactivated—grasping at the man’s knee as its mind broke and cracked and welded back together like a favored but rusted sword, forged anew.

It—he—the Asset—Codename: Barnes—James—the Soldier looked up at the man who was not a man at all. The man-that-was-not-a-man looked back, smiling kindly at the shattered, wild-eyed Soldier at his(?) feet. He(?) reached down a pale, skeletal hand and cupped the Soldier’s (James’s?) jaw. His(?) skin still felt like *sharpdeathagony* and then *calmwarmthrestnowchild*. The Soldier (the Asset?) leaned into the touch again, helpless and wanting but knowing, now, that it (he?) didn’t want whatever he longed for right at this moment.

As if he had heard the thought, the man’s grin widened.

“When next we meet, Soldier,” the man said, voice calm and low and human again, “it will be time.”

The Sol… he understood. He released the man’s leg and watched as the man stepped back and looked up with a wide, manic grin at the mis—Steve and the techn—Stark behind him. With a laugh that sounded like *the knell of bells in a graveyard* mocking joy, the man dissolved into ash and was gone.

The S… the As… he slowly crawled to his feet, leaning heavily on a nearby table as he caught his breath.

“…Bucky?” came Steve’s small voice, tentative and unsure.
Bucky Barnes lifted his head and smiled crookedly. “Hey, Stevie. What a day, huh?”

Chapter End Notes

Соприкосновения со смертью - Brushes With Death

Готов подчиниться - Ready to comply

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A sort of self-indulging AU of an AU where one of my characters from another story shows up in the Marvelverse for one reason or another, minus a few... glaring differences. Anyone who's read On a Pale Horse can probably pick out the biggest one.

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Thanks to Fox Scriber for the Russian help!
Chapter Summary

Alex Mercer was the most brilliant geneticist that Gentek had ever seen. A little thing like retrograde amnesia wasn’t going to change that.

He existed. This was both a profound and haunting discovery, for as far as he knew he had never existed before this moment, and yet he must have, because the people who had attempted to vivisect him—how did he know this word? For that matter, how did he know enough about himself to go through an existential crisis moments after awakening?—had given him a name and precious little information to go off of.

Mercer, Alex J. BLACKLIGHT. His “closest living relative,” Mercer, Dana A.

These words should have been meaningless, he knew. If he could not recall his own life, how did he have enough general knowledge to know what the words meant? Shouldn’t he have forgotten everything? Regressed to an infantile state? If he could not remember learning these things, then shouldn’t he—logically—have not remembered the things themselves? The fact that he was aware of himself enough to wonder this in the first place was food for thought.

He—Alex Mercer?—stood staring down at the two men in dark blue hazmat suits which he had, moments earlier, broken the necks of with a single panicked blow. He knew—somehow—that people weren’t supposed to be that strong. The knowledge should have frightened him. It should have sent him into a panicked run across the city—assuming he was in a city to begin with—as he attempted to rationalize what was wrong with him.

But it didn’t. Because he had come to the conclusion three and a half seconds ago, after reviewing everything he knew (and everything he shouldn’t have known but did), that he couldn’t possibly be human at all.

Fact. He had awoken on what he knew—somehow—was an operating table in a morgue. Humans did not wake up on morgue tables after having been, presumably, dead.

Fact. He had awoken on an operating table in a morgue fully clothed. Bodies in morgues do not wear jackets and sweatshirts, so he was forced to conclude that the clothes were either something that they couldn’t remove or were dangerous in some manner to human skin—radioactive, infected?—and thus had been left on his person.

Fact. He had lashed out instinctively upon being made aware that the two now-dead men had been about to cut into his chest with an eight-inch blade. He should have been weak and disoriented after, presumably, coming back from the dead. He should not have jumped from death to perfect awareness in less than a second. His attack should have been weak and uncoordinated. It was not. He had, in fact, caved in the facemask (along with the face itself) of the first man with his elbow, before snapping the neck of the second with the heel of his hand.

He picked at the sleeve of his jacket, idly noticing how unnaturally hot it was and—more importantly—how he had felt himself touching his sleeve as if he’d done it to bare skin instead.
Fact. Humans did not have clothing made out of themselves.

Sitting back on the table, he removed the jacket and held it in his hands, staring at it. He could feel where his fingers were gripping the leather as if it were his own flesh, and yet the leather felt like leather, not skin. He extended his arms and dropped the jacket.

The jacket-that-was-not dissolved into a writhing mass of dark red and black tendrils, which proceeded to latch onto his leg and crawl through his jeans as if they weren’t there and burrowed underneath his skin before vanishing. Half a second later, the jacket rematerialized on his person as if it had never left.

He sat quietly for a moment, attempting to rationalize what had just happened. There was no inherent knowledge in the known universe that could have made sense of a jacket that turned into tendrils before being absorbed into his leg and then recreating itself on his shoulders.

The fact that the jacket had turned into tendrils, which had then melded with his leg, merely reinforced his previous theory of his inhuman nature.

He bent and picked up the dropped scalpel that the men had meant to use on him, and pressed the blade to the sleeve of his newly remade jacket. He could feel the sharp edge as if it were against the skin of his arm, and while there was the knowledge that the blade was sharp and would be painful if it cut him, no such warning signals were being sent to his brain. He pressed harder, but the leather jacket didn’t so much as bend.

He relocated the scalpel to his hand and ran the blade across his palm in a small line. He felt the blade cut into him, but the pain was absent. So was the blood. The wound sealed itself as soon as the blade passed, which was also something humans couldn’t do. He pressed harder on the second pass, observing the reaction with clinical curiosity.

Instead of blood welling, he saw those tendrils that his jacket had been made of writhe across the wound and seal it shut once the blade was removed again.

Fact. Humans do not heal instantaneously from wounds. Humans do not have tendrils beneath their skin instead of muscle.

He wondered if the tendrils had utterly replaced everything inside his body. Encouraged by the previous lack of pain, he set the scalpel down and took one of his fingers in his free hand and bent it sharply backwards. There was a brief sensation of half-remembered discomfort, as if his body was aware that this should have hurt, but actually didn’t. There was also no telltale crack of breaking bone, or any sort of indication that his finger had any joints or bones at all.

Fact. Humans have a skeleton. He apparently does not.

How was he standing if he had no bones? How did his body hold itself together if there was no skeletal structure supporting it? Shouldn’t he have collapsed into a boneless pile of flesh without any bones to hold him in place? For that matter, if he had no muscles, how was he able to move his arms and legs and fingers with any sort of agility?

He stood, ignoring the knowledge buzzing through his mind that hissed how this shouldn’t be possible, and peered around the empty room. Surely there were cameras here—how did he know what a camera was—that would have watched him kill these two men? He very much intended to continue his exploration of his body, but he would prefer to do such somewhere with more privacy.

But he couldn’t just walk out the door. People would have seen him wheeled in here, and they
would recognize him for his clothing if nothing else. He stared at the suited men on the floor before bending down and beginning the arduous process of tugging the hazmat suit off the body whose facemask wasn’t caved in. He was careful with how hard he pulled on it, aware that if he had the strength (without muscle or bone behind it) to break a man’s neck with the heel of his hand, he was likely strong enough to tear this material without much trouble.

It wasn’t until he had the suit mostly off that he realized that he was actually a good deal taller than both men, and resisted the urge to break something in irritation. He needed a better idea, and he needed it five minutes ago.

He stared at the suits, and then back at his jacket. If the jacket was actually made of tendrils, and could reform itself, could he make it into other things? Almost as soon as this thought crossed his mind, his entire body writhed with tendrils for a disorienting moment. When they reformed, he realized that, no, his jacket had not turned into a suit. His actual body had. He was distinctly aware that beneath the mask he lacked a face now, and yet he could still see and hear as if he still had eyes and ears. Forcefully setting aside this unsettling revelation, he turned and headed for the door, easing out of it and closing it quietly behind him so no one would look inside and see the dead doctors on the ground.

Making his way out of the facility was easier than he’d thought it would be. No one gave him a second glance, and the second he was outside he quickly let his body reform itself into an actual body, jacket and hoodie included.

Surely someone, somewhere, had answers to the myriad questions he found himself with. It was merely a matter of finding them. And if they weren’t satisfactory… well. He did find himself curious as to what else this body of his could do.
The bloody snakes were back. Harry held back an exasperated sigh, not wanting to let his flatmate know that the pests Harry had sworn that ‘snake repellent’ had taken care of were back again. The blasted things were everywhere, and as Harry stood overlooking the tiny little slice of grass that masqueraded as their ‘front lawn’ he could count sixteen of the bloody things.

“All right, shoo you bloody pieces of—!” Harry bit back a curse as the snakes all turned their heads at him and started hissing at him in unison, sounding uneasily like a crowd of people all whispering at once. He reached out to his left to the broom he kept there for this exact purpose and began literally sweeping the blasted noodles off of his property.

The hisses turned aggravated—Harry steadfastly ignored the ones that sounded like they were insulting his mother—but the snakes finally got a bloody clue and buggered back off into the bushes where his flatmate wouldn’t spot them at a glance.

Heaving the sigh he’d held back until then, Harry put the broom back and let his head flop into his hands, raking fingers through the untidy mass that called itself his hair. No matter where he lived, how far he moved, or who he lived with, there were always snake infestations. He was just lucky the few times they’d gotten into the house no one had noticed them until he’d managed to shuffle them outside again.

It’s not like they were dangerous. They never bit him or postured aggressively even when he had to handle them with his bare hands, but they were becoming a bloody nuisance. He’d lost three flatmates—three!—to the blasted things, and he was not about to lose a bloody fourth.

Someone had obviously cursed him in a past life, Harry had long since decided. That would explain the snakes, and the bloody owls that kept showing up in the early hours of the morning pecking at his window. He never let them in, of course, because he’s not an idiot who lets wild animals into his flat, and they usually buggered off after an hour or so, but still. The owls and the snakes had been hounding him for years, almost a decade in fact, and Harry had the sinking suspicion they’d never really go away.

At least the ‘ghost’ who followed him from flat to flat had stopped breaking things when he got mad. He’d had some small amount of fame for a minute when a group of ghost hunters had camped out in his flat once and gotten some recordings of lamps randomly burning out or pictures violently wrenching themselves off the walls when he stubbed his toe on a stair. They’d paid him fifty pounds for the footage—which he’d bemusedly taken—and scrambled off with hoots and hollers about their ‘proof.’

He never did hear back from them, or saw that particular footage aired. Oh well.

Something slithered over his foot and Harry barely refrained from kicking out and sending the
bloody snake flying into the next yard. It hissed up at him something that sounded uncomplimentary and coiled up broodingly on his shoe.

Harry sighed again, deeply and heartfelt.

He bloody hated his life, sometimes.
Chapter Summary

It wasn’t as flashy as turning into a dragon or summoning fire. It wasn’t as blatantly superhuman as invulnerability or the power of flight. He couldn’t take scrap metal and build a suit of armor. He couldn’t see the future, or manipulate probability.

What he could do, was kill things from a distance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John peered through the scope of the McMillan TAC-50 as he watched Leviathan ravaging Brockton Bay. Technically, he should be inside one of the Endbringer shelters like a reasonably sane individual. Technically, he was no more durable or immune to collateral damage than an ordinary civilian.

Technically, as far as the PRT knew, he was just an ordinary civilian and had no place lurking on top of buildings watching a literal natural disaster through the scope of a sniper rifle he had no legal business owning.

Carefully, he adjusted his aim and watched the hyper-movement of Leviathan as it crashed into the line of heroes struggling to hold him back. He could just make out the blur of Alexandria as she cracked a fist into Leviathan’s face—to little effect but a brief respite in the fighting as the Endbringer staggered back. They were moving at speeds that, frankly, made his eyes ache just watching.

He wasn’t worried about missing his shot. He never missed, not when it counted.

________________________________________________________________________

John Triggered when he was sixteen, a gangly, awkward kid living mostly on the streets and subject to the whims of men twice his age and three times his weight. In retrospect, the firefight he found himself in the middle of wasn’t the worst thing to happen to him. Not by far. But it was the first time he’d looked death in the face and realized:

For me, there is an ending, and it is nigh.

In response, he’d pried a handgun from a nearby corpse and told death to go fuck itself.

________________________________________________________________________

Reaching for his power was as easy as breathing, now. A decade of its use had taught him all the ways it could be manifested, all the ways it utterly broke the way reality functioned.
It wasn’t as flashy as turning into a dragon or summoning fire. It wasn’t as blatantly superhuman as invulnerability or the power of flight. He couldn’t take scrap metal and build a suit of armor. He couldn’t see the future, or manipulate probability.

What he could do, was kill things from a distance.

His power, when it rose up to answer his call like an eager hound straining at its leash, was like ice water down his spine. With it came the cool certainty of purpose, the absence of distracting emotion. Leviathan was squarely in his scope, now. Not that that really mattered, but training will out.

*Leviathan’s core punctured and imploded. The bullet left its chamber. Leviathan, jumping like a startled hare, whipped its misshapen head in his direction. On the exhale, John pulled the trigger. A metal slug, no more intricate than any other mass-produced bullet in the world, sliced through layers of hyperdense flesh like butter. He took a deep, steady breath.*

Causality righted itself.

Leviathan stopped mid-lunge towards John's position. Then, slowly, it toppled to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. All motion halted in confusion as heroes cautiously approached, and John began packing up. It wouldn’t take long for them to realize where Leviathan had been heading, and come investigate. John planned to be long gone before then.

He’d hate to have to put a bullet through Alexandria’s head, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Supremely overpowered Worm CYOA attempt #1 (version 5)

Powers: Infinite Ammo (Breaker 1), Causality Reversal: second trigger (Breaker 11)

Because one reviewer brought up Worm in regards to my Tranquility plot bunny, and I had a poke around and found myself intrigued...
The entire mall was in chaos. A small useless task force of mall security was holed up behind some benches, trading gunfire with some riot-zombies (and losing) and generally doing very little to help the situation in any meaningful way. Everywhere she looked there were zombies tearing people apart or bits of people strewed around like macabre confetti, and she just knew that if she got out of this alive she’d be heaving up her internal organs into the nearest bush for hours.

I am going to die.

As she scrambled backwards away from a gaping maw and its accompanying outstretched limbs, Rachel had just enough time to think this—and additional unflattering, unhelpful thoughts—in between her hysterical mental screaming about “Holy shit zombies are a thing that exist!”

Because this was definitely, 100% a legit zombie. It had the grey skin, the milky eyes, the sharp teeth (unexpected, but worrying all the same), the moaning, the shuffling, lurching walk… oh, and she’d seen a few zombies in riot gear who were still carrying and using the firearms they died with, which was so far out of her comfort zone as to be almost rational.

That’s not to even mention the weirdo with the shark teeth she’d seen cackling like an idiot a few floors up, commanding the zombies like a conductor in an orchestra, complete with theatrical hand waving and megalomaniacal speeches about his grand power and how he was now your god, pathetic mortals, bow down and be spared!

Yeah, no. She wasn’t bowing to anyone who raised zombies from the dead and set them on an unsuspecting and generally innocent populous of mall-goers, shark teeth or not.

She kicked out at the zombie in the khakis—a tourist like herself, she supposed—and nailed it in the face, hearing its nose crunch beneath her trusty sneaker audibly enough to make her flinch in instinctive, unwarranted sympathy. Predictably, having a broken nose did not exactly deter the zombie, but it did shove it back a few steps which was all she’d really been aiming for in the first place. She took the opportunity with both hands and bolted past it, trying to block out the sounds of other people screaming over the noise of the zombies growling and moaning.

There were a lot more of them than she’d been expecting; surely this wasn’t the sort of force that shark-tooth guy could have snuck into the building with any sort of success? And then she watched as one of the other people who’d gotten bitten by a zombie pretty early on—and was now missing most of their neck—suddenly lurched upright and started staggering towards the nearest living person with a gap-toothed snarl.

Oh. That explained that, then.

So zombies really were contagious! This was excellent information to know, she thought. Not that she had planned on getting bitten beforehand, but now she was extra motivated to keep her extremities away from zombie teeth.
The entire mall was in chaos. A small useless task force of mall security was holed up behind some benches, trading gunfire with some riot-zombies (and losing) and generally doing very little to help the situation in any meaningful way. Everywhere she looked there were zombies tearing people apart or bits of people strewed around like macabre confetti, and she just knew that if she got out of this alive she’d be heaving up her internal organs into the nearest bush for hours.

But she didn’t have time to throw up or have a heart attack at the moment. Those could wait until she was safe. Now was the time to dredge up all her gaming and movie knowledge on surviving zombie apocalypses, as well as the time to retroactively wish she’d put far more effort into staying fit and in shape than she actually had.

This wasn’t like a video game, though. There weren’t any convenient gun stores in the mall, or crowbars lying around with which to avail herself. There was a sporting goods store up a level, though, and she was pretty confident that they had baseball bats there. Not her weapon of choice, and it put her a level closer to shark-tooth god-wannabe, but it was better than having no plan at all and simply running around weaponless.

There was no way she was risking the elevator in times like these, and the escalator was playing host to a coterie of zombies in floral-print shirts and shorts (which was far more horrifying than it had any right to be). The mall didn’t have plain stairs, because of course it didn’t, so she’d have to find some way past the flower zombies if she wanted access to the only melee weapon of any use in the entire building.

A zombie dressed in child’s overalls which barely came up to her hip (which she was very studiously not thinking about) lurched out of nowhere and tried to take a bite out of her calf. She kicked it in the head and tried even harder not to notice how very young its grey face was or how it was missing a few shark-teeth like they hadn’t really grown in yet.

Yes, she was definitely going to break down spectacularly once she was out of here.

She grabbed a serving platter from a nearby cookie store and brandished the extremely thin and lightweight circular tray with both hands like a shield. This wasn’t going to stop a determined teenager, much less a zombie, but she could keep it between her and zombie teeth at least.

The flower zombies were clustered on the up escalator (which was incongruously still running), stuck in a big pile somewhere near the middle by virtue of sheer mass. Comparatively, the down escalator only had a single overweight zombie in a tan tank-top on it, who kept trying to walk up it despite not ever getting anywhere.

Rachel planned to copy this strategy, with a great deal more success. She took the moving steps one at a time, not willing to risk tripping if she missed, tray-shield held to her right to block the cluster of flower zombies from reaching her. The fat zombie on her own side turned when it heard the enthusiastic moaning of its compatriots, just in time for her to slam the edge of her makeshift shield into its throat Captain America style.

This did not actually successfully decapitate the zombie—she would have been very surprised if it had—but it did stagger it and knock it down, whereupon she proceeded to trample shamelessly all over it as she bounded up the stairs and left it to roll towards the ground.

She might laugh about that later, after she was finished sobbing and retching into the bushes.

The upper level was far more devoid of zombies than the lower level had been, which she attributed to everyone having fled down and away at the first sight of shark-tooth god-wannabe, and she made quick work of sprinting into the sporting store and grabbing the first metal baseball bat she could find.
(which was, annoyingly, almost at the very back of the store, because of course it was).

She couldn’t wield the aluminum tray with only one hand due to its lack of handle, so she sacrificed it in favor of a much-more-potentially-helpful weapon. Now, armed with a metal baseball bat, she felt marginally more confident in her ability to survive.

“What’s this? Has a meatbag braved my ghouls and come to abase itself before its god?”

And then shark-tooth god-wannabe showed up in front of her with nightmarish swiftness, because of course he did. She tightened her already white-knuckled grip on the bat even further. Shark-tooth had shown up in less than a blink of an eye. If he could move that fast, there was absolutely no way she could hope to fend him off for any conceivable length of time. She had no training, average reflexes, and did not possess superhuman speed or the teeth of a piranha.

All things considered, she was not in a very good place. Shark-tooth might be a crazed idiot, but he was a supernatural crazed idiot. She didn’t know what the hell he was, but he definitely wasn’t human or operating on a functioning moral compass.

A stupid, arrogant person might have mouthed off to him. A reckless, pitiful excuse of a woman who had faith in knights in shining armor and justice might have tried to attack him with her bat.

Rachel was neither stupid nor reckless. She lowered the bat and sunk to a knee (it didn’t matter that she wouldn’t be able to run like this; she couldn’t have escaped him anyway), eyes wide with what she hoped looked like reverence.

“Forgive me, my lord,” she stammered (the stutter was more out of terror than awe, but hopefully shark-god wasn’t smart enough to catch that), “your… ghouls frightened me into arming myself.”

She guessed ‘ghoul’ was the shark-god word for ‘zombie.’ She decided to keep calling them zombies in her thoughts because she refused to pander further to shark-tooth than she had to in order to survive.

She watched as shark-tooth inflated, visibly pleased with her ‘subservience.’ God, she hoped he was as much of an idiot as she’d initially taken him for. It took all of her willpower not to cringe when he patted her head as if she were a dog who’d performed a particularly entertaining trick, and she hoped he’d take the instinctive flinch she couldn’t suppress as surprise at his generosity instead of sick horror.

“You are the first of you worthless meatbags to come to your senses,” shark-tooth told her, grinning and flashing the teeth she’d named him for. “Your god shall reward such faithfulness, be assured.”

She was not assured. She didn’t know what he would reward her with, but she highly doubted it was anything she’d ever want under any circumstances whatsoever.

This would be an excellent time for a miracle to happen, she thought desperately, unable to really see a way out of this that didn’t include throwing herself on shark-tooth’s mercy.

And then shark-tooth’s head exploded.

She barely noticed the way she was immediately drenched in blood and bone and brain in the way she’d so far avoided, too busy being completely and utterly deaf from what sounded like the roar of a cannon detonating inches from her left ear. She collapsed to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut, one hand slapping at her ear and feeling blood there that she wasn’t sure belonged to her or shark-tooth while the other steadfastly refused to drop her bat.
A hand fisted in the front of her shirt and hauled her upright, past upright, leaving her dangling almost two full feet off the ground. The world slowly resolved itself again and she found herself staring into yellow welding goggles set above a mouth of grinning fangs that erased any notion of ever considering the teeth on shark-tooth to be in any way impressive.

This was not exactly an improvement on her previous situation. If anything, it seemed to have degenerated, because this man in the red overcoat and fedora oozed menace and threat in such a way as to make shark-tooth look like a newborn kitten.

She didn’t even consider hitting him with her bat. She felt that would be even more useless than it would have been against shark-tooth, and she’d already been outclassed in every capacity there. Embarrassingly, it took her another three heartbeats to notice the barrel of the massive gun pressed to the underside of her jaw.

Strangely, the addition of the gun was reassuring in some way. It was such a human thing to be threatened with, that after all this madness with zombies and god-wannabe’s it was almost comforting. Not to say she was at all comfortable with this, but she’d take a bullet to the head over being ripped apart by zombies any day.

The man in red’s razor grin widened further, inhumanly wide, white fangs baring in a Glasgow smile. “Clever little kitten, aren’t you?” the man mused, voice deep and thick and other. If she’d had any doubts at all as to his inhumanity, that voice would have dispelled them. “Hiding your claws until the freak turned his back?”

She understood precisely none of that statement, but vaguely got the feeling she was being complimented in a backwards, insulting kind of way. Then the man pulled his gun back and dropped her unceremoniously to the ground, where she staggered in an attempt to remain standing.

A rasping moan from the door drew her attention, but before she could risk taking her eyes off the man in red to look, he’d lifted the massive gun and fired off a shot behind himself without even looking, making the groan immediately cut off into a wet gurgling sort of noise before it fell silent again.

The report was just as deafening as earlier, which reaffirmed her tentative thought that it had been the man in red to make shark-tooth’s head explode. She didn’t understand how he was able to use such a gun, though. She’d spent some time on the gun range, and knew that a gun that big would break the wrist of anyone trying to fire it one handed like that.

So she could add supernatural strength to the speed she’d seen shark-tooth use earlier. Excellent.

“Run and hide, little kitten,” the man bared his teeth again, a feral snarl that was more grin than threat but chilled her to the bone regardless. “There are things out there with far bigger claws than you.”

Bigger teeth, too, she thought but did not say. Those teeth leered at her in a deep laugh as if he’d heard it anyway, before he was whirling away into shadow and smoke and far too many slitted red eyes.

She forced herself into motion, holding her bat like a sword. She could properly freak out over having apparently met Cthulhu later. Now it was time to run and hide like a good little kitten, before the sabertooth she’d just met came back and took a bite out of her.
Rachel stared at the newspaper held in a shaking grip. They were passing off the zombie apocalypse as a terrorist attack, which, okay, she could sort of see that angle when she thought about shark-tooth and his desire to enslave the mall, but this was very much not okay. Not that she could really do anything about it. From what she understood, she was the only survivor of the “terrorist attack” who didn’t immediately find themselves “missing.”

This was probably because she’d had the good sense not to go out and start telling everyone about zombies and the man in red who’d apparently gone through the mall and systematically hunted down and destroyed every single zombie in such a thorough manner that there weren’t even corpses left as evidence that any of it had actually happened.

Even she, as socially inept as she was, knew better than to draw attention from the man in red by exposing him to the world. He hadn’t seemed like the kind of man who’d take that sort of thing in a peaceful manner.

She set down the newspaper and idly began fiddling with the aluminum bat that she’d technically stolen from the mall. The police—er, bobbies—hadn’t made her give it up, and neither had the people in armor with assault rifles which had swarmed the place shortly after. The bat rarely let her person nowadays, its potential use as a weapon low but the security it offered her comforting regardless.

She’d had far too much time to think about what happened in the mall. She could remember, in vivid detail, every single person she’d seen eviscerated, every piece of offal she’d seen removed from its original body, every torn throat and every cracked open torso. She could remember the smell of blood and something thicker, meatier, worse. She could remember the red gleam of shark-tooth’s eyes and the piranha-like teeth that had grinned at her helplessness as she kneeled in front of him.

But mostly, she remembered the man in red. She remembered how he’d lifted her effortlessly off of the ground and held her suspended one-handed. She remembered how he’d wielded that massive gun with unerring accuracy, how it had felt pressed to the underside of her jaw—the metal hot from previous shots fired but cold enough to chill. She remembered the yellow glasses hiding his eyes and the long, tapered fangs over-filling a mouth in a grin so wide it made her muscles ache thinking about it.

And she remembered his voice. Deep and low, with an accent she couldn’t place but sounded vaguely familiar for some reason. She knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she would never forget anything at all about the man in red until the day she died.

But she prayed, fervently and whole-heartedly, that the man in red promptly forgot everything about her. Because Rachel was realistic. She was an orphan living alone in a country she wasn’t born in, with no close friends to really notice if she were go to “missing,” and she attracted creeps and sociopaths by sheer virtue of her situation. Hell, she was practically tailor-made kidnapping or murdering material, especially with only an aluminum baseball bat for protection.

Maybe she should look into getting a gun… like, yesterday.
Chapter Summary

Reality… *glitched*.

I wasn’t spontaneously teleported to another place. Monsters didn’t start pouring out of holes in the fabric of time. No otherworldly voice spoke words of wisdom or warning in my ear. Had I… had I *hallucinated* that whole debacle? Did I just *imagine* the world shifting three degrees sideways and tilting diagonally backwards? No one *else* was reacting to what had happened, so I had to conclude with a sort of grim resignation that I was obviously losing my mind.

Resolved to pretend nothing had happened, I took a step towards the door.

Abruptly, I was somewhere else entirely.

Chapter Notes

Pure Self-Indulgence. I'm not even sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more *notes*.

Reality… *glitched*.

I had to pause mid-step in consternation as the walls, floors, hell even the *air* flickered like a TV with bad reception for about half a second. I peered around cautiously, pretty sure this had to be the start of a bad fanfiction novel or the onset of some sort of *adventure* that I resolutely wanted no part of. Reality didn’t tend to just glitch for no reason, after all.

But nothing happened. I wasn’t spontaneously teleported to another place. Monsters didn’t start pouring out of holes in the fabric of time. No otherworldly voice spoke words of wisdom or warning in my ear.

I was still standing in the bathroom at Walmart, hovering with one foot in the air and probably looking like a special kind of idiot to the two other women currently at the sinks. Generously, neither of them said anything about my sudden stillness or odd position. Of course, neither of them were saying anything *so blatantly* that they really couldn’t have been more judgmental if they’d turned to me and spat.

I put my foot down, now feeling foolish and more than a little alarmed. Had I… had I *hallucinated* that whole debacle? Did I just *imagine* the world shifting three degrees sideways and tilting diagonally backwards? No one *else* was reacting to what had happened, so I had to conclude with a sort of grim resignation that I was obviously losing my mind.

Or I was delirious with hunger. I hadn’t had a chance to drink my protein shake that morning, so maybe I just had low blood sugar or something.
Resolved to pretend nothing had happened, I took a step towards the door.

Abruptly, I was somewhere else entirely.

“Son of a butternut squash,” I bit out, peeved and more than a little spooked. It was still a Walmart bathroom, that much I could tell. The layout, though, was all wrong. Horizontal instead of vertical. There were two more stalls than there had been a second ago, and the sinks were sinks and not automatic sensor nightmares.

The two women at the sinks turned to stare at me, probably impressed by my amazing grasp of the English language and my creative interpretation of profanity. They, at least, were the same.

Neither of them reacted to suddenly being moved four feet to the left, or that the whole room was abruptly, suddenly different.

I hurried out the door without confronting them. Things were obviously very, very wrong. I stopped outside the bathroom door, a sense of vertigo washing over me. I wasn’t in the back of the store anymore, either. Now I was up front, overlooking the template-like format of the line of registers.

I could recognize some of the cashiers. Others were complete strangers who most definitely had not been there two minutes ago. I quickly looked down at myself. I still had my vest on. My nametag still had my name. I still had the tiny American flag pin on my right side.

Hysterically, my mind started running in circles like a hamster on a wheel.

Was I still on the clock? Was my shift the same? Should I go back to register three? No, wait, there was someone already over there. Who was that?

One of my managers was at the podium (which was in the wrong place), and I knew what I had to do. I was questioning reality. I wasn’t sure what store this was, or if I was in the same city. I was in no condition to be working. Taking the point for leaving early was worth it.

She seemed sympathetic enough to my stammered statement that I was sick and had to leave. Of course, it’s not like she was invested enough in my life to question if I was being truthful or not. It wasn’t any skin off her back if one of her cashiers wanted to bug out for the day.

I wasted no time clocking out at the closest terminal (which was thankfully still in mostly the same place) and hurrying to the back where my stuff was. Used to be. Was hopefully still there.

Navigating the backroom was a nightmare and a half since nothing was the same, but the combination on my locker was so that, at least, hadn’t gone wrong. Someone I didn’t recognize passed by and greeted me by name. A generic, strangled-sounding ‘hey’ was enough to placate them as they walked down the hall.

Was I forgetting entire people now, in addition to losing my mind?

The parking lot presented an entirely new and exciting problem.

Was my car? Did I still drive a Volvo? Would my keys work?

I dug through my purse. The key fob looked the same, at least. Nothing new had been added since the world had twisted itself like a pretzel, and I didn’t think anything was missing. If I was at least moderately still sane, I would be parked in the back near the—

—gas station that wasn’t there anymore. I stood near the entrance and stared out at the wide, empty
expanse where the interstate should be. Where several small restaurants should be. Where the city of Alabaster should be.

I scoured for my phone. And stared. It wasn’t an iPhone anymore. It was a sleek, black thing, all angles and smooth curves roughly the same size and shape it should have been (which might explain why I hadn’t noticed the difference before). At the top, in very conspicuous font, it proclaimed itself to be a Starkphone.

What.

Ignoring that for now, I tried to find some sort of home button. Instead, it lit up at the slightest brush to its screen and acknowledged my name (Welcome back, Elizabeth) and presented me with a row of icons I absolutely did not recognize at all.

I abruptly recalled that I was standing in the middle of a Walmart entrance, and scurried out into the parking lot—thankfully devoid of a lot of cars—and spotted the silver Volvo which was (hopefully) mine. The key unlocked it, so I locked myself inside and set about figuring out how to open a map of some kind on my… Starkphone?

The icons were pretty self-explanatory. One of them was shaped like a smartphone, another like a text bubble, and a few were what I guessed were games. None of them looked like a map.

“I just need a freaking map,” I complained to the phone, which made the screen flip sideways with absolutely no input from myself and what was obviously a map faded upwards into view. I stared at it. “Are you voice activated?” I demanded of the phone, mostly rhetorically, before pressing at the map without waiting for a response.

I considered what the map was telling me in consternation. That wasn’t Alabaster. It wasn’t even Alabama. Gillette? Wasn’t that a kind of razor?

“Where do I live?” I tentatively asked the apparently voice-activated phone. I’d keep the questions easy, since phone AIs weren’t always that smart. The map moved on its own (down and to the right), and a blue icon popped up in a place called Sleepy Hollow. I most definitely did not live in a place called Sleepy Hollow. I would have avoided a place like that on sheer principle. “And where… where is Sleepy Hollow?”

The phone zoomed outwards (with no buffering time at all). Wyoming? What the holy living hell was I doing in Wyoming? I’d never even been to Wyoming. Why would my psychotic break have put me there?

Then the map dimmed and text started scrolling across the screen.

User Elizabeth, your heartrate has increased by 34%. Do you require medical assistance?

It only just occurred to me that I was hyperventilating and that, indeed, my heartrate had kicked it up a notch. More importantly though, the phone could apparently sense my heartbeat and was smart enough to ask if it should call 911.

“No,” I gasped aloud. “I’m fine, phone. Just give me a sec.”

The text faded away and the map came back into full visibility as the phone apparently accepted that at face value. I wondered half-hysterically if it had simply accepted my ‘no’ or if it had actually understood everything I had just told it.

Eventually I managed to wrestle my breathing back under control, my previous years dealing with
anxiety attacks serving me in good stead. I took a shuddering breath and turned my attention back to the device which put the smart in smartphone, trying to figure out how to get back to the main screen when there weren’t any buttons. Swiping around just moved the map, and tapping just brought up information.

“Home screen? Please?” I asked the phone hesitantly, wondering if that was pushing it a little. Not even Siri was that smart. But my faith was rewarded when the map flicked away and the original screen revealed itself. “Contacts?” I asked it. A new screen unrolled (this time from the bottom up). Half of the names I didn’t recognize. But none of them were important except the one that I couldn’t find.

“Where’s my mom?” I asked the phone desperately, still scrolling rapidly through the surprisingly large number of contacts.

The list dimmed out as the phone responded to my query.

*No contact for “mom” is listed. Would you like to perform a search?*

I blinked wetly. I would have had her number in the phone if she’d been there. *Dad* was in there, but this was not the sort of conversation I could afford to have with him. “Yes,” I belatedly told the phone, giving it her name and the place I was pretty sure she still lived, even if I myself apparently jumped states.

*Searching…*

I watched raptly as the text didn’t change except for the typical movement of the ellipsis points that most machines used to indicate an active search.

*No results found, User Elizabeth. Would you like to widen parameters?*

“Yes, please,” I replied with no hesitation, gripping the phone tight enough that if I hadn’t been a scrawny thing with twigs for arms I might have worried about damaging it. “As wide as you can go.”

*Searching…*

I refrained from biting my nails. It was a habit I was trying to break, and even if this was a situation that warranted it I tried to stay firm.

2,351 results found, the phone informed me briskly.

“Blond hair, around fifty years old,” I informed the phone, hoping it was smart enough to narrow down search options from my disjointed stammering.

*Narrowing parameters. 872 results found.*

“Born in Alabama.”

*Narrowing parameters. 34 results found.*

“Two sisters,” I told it desperately, groping for things to use that could narrow a search engine.

*Narrowing parameters. 3 results found.*

“One daughter, two nephews,” I whispered hoarsely.
“Show me. Please,” I gasped at the phone.

The text flicked away and what looked like a google search engine opened up to a particular page. I prayed to God that it wouldn’t be a mortuary.

It wasn’t, but it wasn’t exactly good news either.

A woman who looked exactly like a younger version of my mother, with her maiden name and the names of her sisters, had apparently gone missing twenty-four years ago. There was no evidence of foul play, as she’d apparently vanished while walking between rooms in the house she’d shared with her husband (who did not share the name of my father). It was very, very suspicious that the day she’d disappeared was the day of my birth, to the year.

My mind whirled with conspiracy theories. Maybe my mother was originally from this world, and she’d been teleported to my world on the day of my birth? But that was ridiculous. There were pictures, videos, evidence that she’d been born in my world and grown up there. Gotten married there. Given birth there.

So… she didn’t exist here, but she existed there? Had my presence here retroactively moved her backwards in time to another world? Thinking about it made my head hurt. I decided to accept that she was alive, but she wasn’t in a place I could feasibly contact her. I’d think of it like I was in a foreign country without access to the internet or phone service, despite holding evidence to the contrary in my hand.

Speaking of evidence.

“…thanks, phone,” I rasped to it. “For looking that up for me.”

You are welcome, User Elizabeth. Do you require further assistance?

“Yes actually. Call me Elizabeth, please. You don’t have to call me User all the time.”

As I was wondering if this was what would stretch the phone’s AI to the limit, the text responded without missing a beat.

Very well, Elizabeth. Do you require further assistance?

Whoever made these phones was a genius, I decided. “I… I’ll need help getting home. I don’t know the way.”

Without replying, the phone shifted back to the map screen and a route highlighted itself. When it started displaying directions in text, I realized a slight problem.

“I can’t read and drive at the same time,” I told the phone slightly confused. Was there a fix for that? Did it have a speech function like Siri?

“My apologies, Elizabeth,” came a smooth, British voice from the speakers on my phone. I squeaked in slight alarm. “Will this simplify matters?”

No it bloody well does not. My phone sounded like a human, not like a synthesized voice cobbled together by an actor reading a series of lines. If I didn’t know better, I’d think my phone had an actual person on the other end fielding all my questions.
“Thanks,” I squeaked out, putting the phone down in the cupholder as if it were a live grenade as I turned the car on. It groaned and snarled like it usually did, so at least the me in this reality had the same trouble with their brakes and engine as myself.

As I listened to my phone give very detailed directions (down to the foot of distance on turns) to where I apparently lived, I couldn’t help but be incredibly nervous about what I’d find there.

Dietrich Court was not what I had envisioned, at all. At least three houses had RVs out front, and the buildings looked simultaneously like somewhere my grandparents would live as well as being drastically out of my price range.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” I asked my phone nervously. The house it had led me to had little in the way of personality out front, as well as a strange pale-yellow paint job that made me slightly nauseous just looking at it.

“This is the address registered under your contact information,” the phone ruthlessly confirmed. “Do you require further assistance?”

“That’s… that’s all for now. Thanks,” I told it.

“Signing you off, Elizabeth.”

And with that, the phone faded to black. I stared at it for a long, slow moment before I began shuffling through the car for an opener to the garage on the front of my house holy Christ.

I had a house. How had I afforded a house? On a cashier’s salary, no less?

The inside offered me no answers.

I had furniture, but only the bare bones of it. A couch, a desk, a few chairs here and there. The bed, at least, was the one I was familiar with from my apartment. There was a microwave in the kitchen, and a stovetop covered in dust. Some of my paintings and drawings from school were on the walls, like a sad attempt to give the rooms some personality. Some of them I didn’t recognize, but could see my handiwork in the way the lines curved, in the way I’d painted in blocks of color like a pop art impressionist. They were things I could have conceivably drawn or made, even though I had no memory of drawing or making them.

An investigation of the computer revealed that Windows was apparently still my OS of choice, even though the icons on my desktop were different. Photoshop was still there, so I might still be a graphic designer, but a lot of my games weren’t which was slightly more alarming. What kind of life did I lead with no Blizzard games? With no Sims?

My bank account information was apparently still the same, since I could log in with no problems, but the balance had to be a mistake. I’d never even seen a number that high, not in relation to myself. As the only one with all the answers, I pulled out my hyper-intelligent phone without pause and touched the screen to wake it up.

“How do you have access to my bank account?” I asked it without preamble, somehow feeling confident that it would both comprehend my question and have a suitable answer.

“Yes, Elizabeth,” it replied aloud, apparently still on the speech setting from the drive over. “Do you require help managing your portfolio?”

It was adorable how the phone thought I had a portfolio, or knew what a portfolio even was. “I don’t
I admitted frankly. “It’s… well it’s way too high.”

“I can find no irregularities in your accounts, Elizabeth. What seems to be the issue?”

“Accounts? As in plural?” I sighed. “Wait, never mind. So you’re saying this number is accurate?”

“As of seven minutes ago, this information was accurate, yes.”

“Well, fudge.” I put my chin in my hand and considered this. I could live off the number listed there. For lifetimes. Without working, even. “How’d it get that high?” I was mostly just asking myself aloud, but my phone apparently had an answer even to my rhetorical questions.

“There is a large lump sum registered as a bequeathal entered into the account on the day of your birth. The bank associated with the bequeathal deposits a modest sum into your primary account on the first of each month.”

What. “A bequeathal? Whose?” I asked somewhat desperately. Who did I know that could have died and left a big enough fortune behind to be giving me monthly deposits over twenty years later? Also, apparently, this bank account had existed since I was born, and yet the log-in information remained the same?

“The deposits are anonymous,” the phone admitted, sounding apologetic. I’d worry about my phone having emotions later.

“I’m sorry to say I lack the processing power to determine their origin.”

“That’s all right,” I replied absently, still only half-present mentally as I tried to wrap my mind around the funds apparently available to me. I had that in my bank and I was living in a house in Wyoming with IKEA furniture? I guess it wasn’t too far out of my expectations of myself that I’d live simple like this, but… but to not spend seemingly any of it? Not even on a paint job to cover up that awful yellow siding?

Why was I even working at Walmart if I had this available to me? Why not go freelance with my design work? Why not go back to college and finish my minor? Why stay in Wyoming, of all places?

Not that there’s anything wrong with Wyoming, I’m sure it’s a beautiful place, but… but whenever I thought about moving, Wyoming just never came up.

I was obviously dreaming. Or delirious. My mind was coming up with some sort of perfect fantasy world in which I worked for the sake of working, and where my bank account had more zeroes than I knew what to do with. But. But why would my delirium dream up a world without my mom in it?

I took a bracing breath and put the computer back to sleep, not wanting to stare at that ridiculous number anymore. If I had really, truly lost my mind… which reality was the real one?

My old reality, where I made exactly enough to make ends meet but had a best friend in the greatest mom in the universe? Or this one, where I apparently moonlight as a billionaire and spend my spare time working for the hell of it, but where my mom does not even exist?

I trudged into the bedroom (not my bedroom, not yet) and collapsed on the familiar bed with its
unfamiliar surroundings. I let the phone stay on and set it on the nightstand, too mentally exhausted to worry about how to turn it off.

Maybe everything would make sense in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Because I love to put myself into impossible situations and see how I’d react to things, trying to stay true to my character. And while I’m at it, why not lump a bunch of cliche tropes into a SI fic and laugh at the self-indulging chaos?
Simon Says, Part 2 (Marvel SI AU)

Chapter Summary

I didn’t feel crazy. But sane people don’t hallucinate the world breaking and reshaping around them. Sane people don’t dream up an entire parallel life, and then insert themselves there. Maybe I was in a coma somewhere, dying? Maybe this was a really intense fever dream.

With a rush of adrenaline, I realized that if I really was in a coma living a drug-induced hallucinogenic dream life, I probably shouldn’t be spending it in this sad travesty of a house working at Walmart.

Things did not make sense in the morning. Disoriented at my alien surroundings, it took me several minutes of internal panic to remember what had happened the day before. I was still in bizarro-world where nothing made sense, and my phone was still turned on with the screen dim, but illuminated. Its battery level had not noticeably decreased overnight, which in itself just cemented how different this reality was.

“I’ve lost my mind,” I announced to the phone and to the world at large. “Absolutely bonkers.”

“Would you like to schedule an appointment with a psychiatrist, Elizabeth?” came the almost cheeky, sarcastic response from the phone on my nightstand.

“No thank you,” I informed it as I crawled out of bed. I considered the question it had asked me and the implications behind it. What did I want to do? If I had really lost my mind, was there anything I could really do about it?

I didn’t feel crazy. But sane people don’t hallucinate the world breaking and reshaping around them. Sane people don’t dream up an entire parallel life, and then insert themselves there. Maybe I was in a coma somewhere, dying? Maybe this was a really intense fever dream.

With a rush of adrenaline, I realized that if I really was in a coma living a drug-induced hallucinogenic dream life, I probably shouldn’t be spending it in this sad travesty of a house working at Walmart. Not when I had that monster hiding in my bank account.

“How would you like to go on a road trip?” I asked the phone as I snatched it up and stumbled into what I figured might be a closet.

“A road trip, Elizabeth?” the phone sounded almost confused. “Where to, might I ask?”

“Anywhere we want,” I decided firmly. The phone was practically a human as far as I was concerned. A human that couldn’t escape, I internally cackled to myself. “If I’ve lost my marbles, I might as well go looking for them somewhere more fun than Wyoming.”

“I’ll just settle up your affairs then, shall I?” the phone said resignedly, seeming to almost sigh.

“Thanks phone,” I told it happily. I had no idea what it meant by that or what it was going to do, but the phone was the only thing I could talk to and so I trusted it by default. What was it going to do, plot against me?
"I live to serve."

Ignoring that slightly sarcastic response, I found the familiar purple luggage set in the back of the closet and began shoving things into it. Some of the clothes didn’t look like something I’d be caught dead wearing, but the familiar comfortable things got stuffed into the bags. Worn-in jeans, soft T-shirts, a few jackets, and enough underthings and socks to clothe a small army.

A bit of searching found what I guessed was the power cord to my phone and a car adapter for it, so that went in my purse for ease of access. Recklessly, I packed like a whirlwind and was in the car in under an hour. I didn’t know enough about the house to know if I was leaving anything essential behind, but I’d confirmed with a bemused phone that the card I had was the one to the account with all the money in it so I figured I was set.

I took a few moments to fiddle with the stand velcro’d to the dashboard so the phone had one camera facing the windshield and the other facing me. I figured it’d be like a regular smartphone with a rear and front-facing camera, and if it was intelligent enough to have emotions maybe it could use the cameras like eyes?

It didn’t say anything about where I’d put it, and I didn’t enlighten it just in case I was being ridiculous and over-personifying a piece of technology.

"Let’s head to New York," I decided spontaneously. "The scenic route if you please."

The phone seemed to heave a sigh, but the map did fade into view and a blue route was plotted. 29 hours, huh? I tightened my grip on the steering wheel, determined to have a good time if it killed me.

"Thanks phone. You have any good mood music in there?"

Without a word, the phone started playing *On The Road Again*. Cheeky little thing.

With a manic sort of smile, I backed out of the driveway and headed off towards adventure.

The phone was surprisingly good company. It was willing to hold long conversations about just about anything, and was very nonjudgmental about my supposed insanity. It constantly adjusted the route whenever I got distracted by an interesting-sounding city name or tourist trap without complaint. It was a better driving buddy than any of my friends or family, that was for sure.

At this point I was pretty sure the AI in this little phone was smart enough to qualify as a human being, which made its presence in a presumably mass-produced piece of technology more than a little baffling. I didn’t see or hear anyone else talking aloud to their phones (and quite a few people had the same model I did), which made me wonder if hyperintelligent AIs were so commonplace here that no one even utilized them.

Oh well. It was their loss.

In lieu of my decision to treat the phone like a person trapped inside a machine, I decided it needed a name. The phone demurred when I asked if it had one, which left it up to me to give it a name that wasn’t totally awful.

"I’ll call you Simon," I decided, being totally stereotypical and naming the British-sounding voice *Simon*. If Simon minded, he didn’t mention it.

"As you wish, Elizabeth," Simon said, sounding aggrieved.
Heh. Simon said.

As if he could hear my train of thought derailing, Simon sighed, loud and heartfelt.

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I ran into the hitchhiker in Wisconsin. I almost didn’t even see him, since he was wearing black on the side of a road with no streetlights in the middle of the night, but my wonky headlights illuminated him enough so I at least didn’t hit him.

Pre-delusional Elizabeth would have kept driving, knowing better than to pull over for potentially-dangerous strangers on dark streets at night. Post-delusional Elizabeth was half convinced she was in a coma and therefore had nothing to worry about.

So I pulled over, despite Simon’s silent disapproval ringing louder than a death knell. I didn’t unlock the door, but I did roll down the window as I waited for him to pass me where I’d pulled over down the road a ways. When he appeared in the window, it took everything I had not to react.

He looked awful. Covered in dirt and (was that dried blood?!) dust, his face was lined in fatigue even through the curtain of stringy hair hiding his features. He had on some kind of ski mask covering his nose and mouth, and was dressed in black leather under a hoody that was three sizes too big for his frame. The gloves, after everything else, hardly registered.

“Where you headed?” I asked as cheerfully as I could manage under the scrutiny of a pair of chillingly pale eyes. In the silence after this question, the Volvo hiccupped and thrummed under its own brakes and I pretended to hear nothing. Amazingly, the sound of my car being an idiot seemed to make him relax for some reason. I decided not to question it.


“What an amazing coincidence,” I said loudly and to no one in particular. “So am I.” My coma theory was only getting stronger. What were the chances I’d run into a hitchhiker in a state I’d never been in, going to the same city I’d decided to visit on an adrenaline-fueled whim? “You want a ride?”

Simon was great and all, but he was still just a phone. I kind of needed some human interaction, even if this guy looked at me like he was afraid I’d go for his throat every time I opened my mouth.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Simon started disapprovingly, making the hitchhiker jerk backwards as one hand vanished into the hoody’s pockets. He probably had a weapon in there, I acknowledged, but since he didn’t pull it or shoot me with it I figured it was probably ok. “I must protest—”

“It’s cool, Simon,” I told the phone, aiming my attention towards it so the twitchy dude with the mask would know what had spoken. Cold blue eyes stared at the phone in its little stand very intensely. From the way his posture had tensed and loosened up simultaneously, I thought he might be a veteran of some kind. That would account for the hyperparanoia and even, sadly enough, the state of his clothing and general self. “He just needs a lift, and I could honestly use someone to talk to who has a face.”

Simon fell silent, but I could practically sense the disapproval pouring off of him. I turned back to the guy at the window in victory, politely ignoring the hand still in his pocket.

“So, you want a ride? I promise I don’t bite.”
Hoody guy seemed to mull over this offer very seriously for a long moment before nodding once, jerkily. I unlocked the doors and watched him slide in, suddenly realizing how huge he was. He made my Volvo look like a tiny little smart car.

And—this was a very, very strange thing for me to be noticing—he smelled amazing. Considering his general state of disheveled-ness I had expected him to smell kind of like a homeless person. Instead, he smelled like woodsmoke and gunpowder. Not the sort of combination I would have ever considered to be good smelling prior to this point, but now that I noticed it it was all I could think about. In short order, my little vanilla air freshener hanging from the mirror was completely overpowered and I was absolutely not complaining. I sincerely hoped this amazing smell stuck around longer than I suspected the man himself would, because damn.

It somewhat belatedly occurred to me that I had never actively smelled a person before, and that this might be further evidence that I had gone entirely mad. I resolved to enjoy the smell in silence and pretend to have noticed nothing.

Also (I noticed the second I pulled my head out of the gutter), he was staring at Simon suspiciously and looking tense enough to strain something.

Oh well, I thought as I pulled back onto the road and let Simon fix my course again. Company would be nice while it lasted at least.

So the hitchhiker has a metal arm.

He probably didn’t want me to know that, but it’s kind of hard to hide something like an entire limb made out of metal when you’re sharing a car for several hours. A headache throbbed behind my right eye as several previously unnoteworthy things started connecting in my head, like my phone being a Stark phone, and my masked hitchhiker who looks like every stereotype of a serial killer slash assassin combined having a metal arm.

But this was a dream world, after all. It would make sense that the dream world was fictional.

I didn’t have any really strong feelings about having innocently offered the Winter Soldier a lift to New York. He hadn’t horribly murdered me yet, and I sincerely doubt the Asset would have accepted a lift from a civilian. In light of this revelation, I was carefully not thinking about the reasons why my hitchhiker might smell like gunpowder, and also carefully not thinking about how much I resolutely did not care about those reasons in lieu of how good he still smelled. Nose blindness was, apparently, not going to be an issue here.

In retrospect, it also seemed to have been a terrible oversight to not have checked what year it was.

“Simon, what year is it?” I asked abruptly. The Winter Soldier tilted his head towards me as I spoke, face still hidden behind his mask (muzzle?) but muscles a bit looser now that he’d been here for a few hours and I’d yet to show myself as a Hydra plant.

“It is currently December 20th, 2015.”

2015? I’d gone backwards in time two years? And if it was literally five days until Christmas, that would explain why it was so dang cold outside. Certainly a drastic change from the balmy summer I’d been in a week ago. More importantly though, I was pretty sure the events of Winter Soldier took place in 2014, and Civil War in 2016. So the Winter Soldier sharing a car with me wasn’t the Asset, but he wasn’t Bucky Barnes either.
Didn’t Ultron happen in 2015? Maybe New York wasn’t the smartest move ever, but this was my coma dream darn it.

“Thanks Simon,” I replied belatedly, still reeling over the timeline my scattered brain had presented me. I eyeballed the night sky outside and figured it might be a good time to find a place to stop for the night. “Gotta find a hotel,” I mumbled under my breath, aiming it more towards the Soldier than Simon. “Any preferences?”

“No cities,” came the rasping reply, cold blue eyes all but daring me to take him to a major hotel chain.

“Motel it is then!” I said cheerfully, entirely ignoring the silent threat I was being given. “This is so exciting, Simon. I wonder if I can find a really ratty deathtrap motel? Like the kind people get murdered in?”

Simon sighed, very audibly. Even the Soldier was giving me more side-eye than usual, which was really saying something since his attention rarely left me in the first place.

“Dare I ask why this excites you?”

“Because I’ve never been to one before,” I replied easily, already scanning the horizon for signs. “Plus our guest here is built like a tank and speaks in a Russian accent. I figure the murderers will take one look at him and back off.”

I was being completely honest. Disregarding my dubiously intelligent decision to stop at all, the Soldier all but radiated potential violence. I had the feeling he could turn into a nightmare at the slightest hint of hostile action, which was why I had gone out of my way to be happy and cheerful the entire drive thus far and not question who he was or what he was doing.

Coma dream or not, I didn’t really want to get shanked in the kidney.

A very interesting expression crossed the Soldier’s face out of the corner of my eye just then, mostly hidden by his hair and his mask. But he didn’t exactly refute my statement, so I considered it a small win.

“I should have guessed,” Simon replied, exasperated. “I’ll just find us a place then, shall I?”

“Make it really decrepit and run-down,” I instructed, still feeling like this was something everyone should experience at least once. “Like, on the border of condemned.”

“I’ll ensure there are extra rats and vermin, just for you.”

“You’re a gem, Simon,” I told the phone sarcastically, secretly hoping he was joking. I wanted murderers, not roaches. On the off chance he was being serious, I tilted my head towards the Soldier so he’d know my next words were for him, whispering under my breath. “If there are roaches, I sincerely hope you’ll be a gentleman and take care of them for me.”

The Winter Soldier stared at the side of my head for a very long moment and didn’t reply. But maybe he’d get his act together when I scream aloud at the first sign of bugs and scare a year off his life.

A girl could dream.
“Simon,” I said into the silence, proud of how even my voice was when all my head was filled with was hysterical screaming, “what the fuck.”

Normally, I hated cursing. Normally, I wasn’t confronted with a scene straight out of an ABO fanfiction novel. God could forgive me just this once.

The place Simon found wasn’t exactly a deathtrap, but it was definitely the kind of place shady drug deals happened under blinking streetlights. The rooms were dirt cheap, too, and I happily enough paid for the Soldier to have his own. No way was I risking him waking up after a nightmare and attacking me on reflex. I’d read too much fanfiction to think that would turn out well.

He gave me another strange look when I handed him his own room key. What, did he think I was going to force him to stay with me? If he was gone in the morning (which was likely) it wasn’t really my problem. I’d be sad, because the Winter Soldier was absolutely my favorite Marvel character and because he absolutely smelled delicious enough to tempt me to give premarital sex a try, but he was a grown man dealing with decades of torture and brainwashing and deserved to make his own choices about things.

Also, the very fact that I got to meet him at all was incredible and something I’d probably be thrilled about for a long time to come.

As I stood akimbo in my ratty motel room, I was pleased to not see any obvious signs of rats, despite Simon’s joking intentions.

“This is great,” I told Simon honestly enough. “Thanks, Simon.”

Simon sounded reluctantly fond when he finally replied. “I live to serve, Elizabeth.”

The Winter Soldier was not gone in the morning, to my everlasting surprise. He had also ditched the leather armor at some point for some more discreet jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. The hoody was magically washed as well. I’d bet all the zeroes in my bank account that he still had an armory’s worth of weapons on his person, but he looked slightly less like a serial killer now.

The mask was also gone, and yep, that was the face of Sebastian Stan.

“Hey Simon,” I asked as I unlocked the car without commenting on the Soldier’s new duffle bag full of mystery items. “Does an actor named Sebastian Stan exist?”

“One moment,” Simon replied dutifully, by now used to my strange off-the-cuff questions. The Soldier seemed nonplussed but put the bag in the floorboard of the back and got stiffly into the passenger seat. “No one by that name has played in any noteworthy films within the past decade.”

“Thanks Simon.” So that meant the other ‘actors’ were really superheroes then. Without further ado, I backed out of the ratty motel and got back on the route Simon helpfully displayed for me.
“Of course, mum.”

Something about how he said that tickled my coma-brain, but I ignored it. It probably wasn’t important. Maybe a Codsworth reference from Fallout? Had that game been made yet?

“So did you sleep well?” I asked the Soldier absently, pretty sure the answer was a resounding no but feeling obligated to make small talk. “No rats in yours? I found a couple spiders, but nothing that made me need to come bother you for help.”

I was actually pretty proud of myself for taking care of those spiders. Killing them was one thing; it was picking up their tiny dead bodies afterwards that made me squicked out. But I absolutely would have gone and bothered the Soldier if there had been rats, ex-assassin of dubious sanity or no.

“No,” was the hoarse one-word reply I got in exchange. He could have meant that in a thousand different ways, but I chose to interpret it as no I did not sleep well, no there were not any rats, and no I would not have helped if you had come and asked.

“Aw, you would have helped,” I insisted with a grin, resisting the urge to elbow him in the (metal) arm as I drove. No need to tempt fate any more than I already was, just on the off chance this was actually happening and not a comatose fever dream. “I can tell that beneath the resting murder face you’re secretly a gentleman.”

“No,” the Soldier said again, that time with the faintest hint of amusement buried under the wariness and rough texture.

“It’s all right,” I allowed magnanimously, “your secret is safe with me. I won’t tell anyone that you’re really a rather nice guy under the gruff exterior.”

He didn’t say anything in reply to that, but his eyes crinkled a little at the corners even though the rest of his expression didn’t change. I counted that as a win.


*Here* was the incredibly baffling—and somewhat disturbing—sight of two grown men growling and snarling at each other after one of them had bumped into the other by accident. I had left the Soldier in the car to keep an eye on the gas meter (and his Duffle Bag of Mystery) while I went in to scavenge up some snacks and sugar to keep myself awake on the drive.

I’d noticed the guy who bumped into the other guy when I walked in, because he was shaved bald and had facial tattoos—stereotypical and judgmental of me or not, I tended to keep an eye on those types—and had also (completely against my will) noticed he smelled kind of like formaldehyde.

That may have been a large part of the reason I’d given him such a wide berth.

Bald and Smelly had given me a once-over, visibly sniffed in my direction (was he on drugs, maybe?) sort of sneezed-snorted and then looked away. Drugs, definitely. And then he hadn’t been looking where he’d been going, and bumped into Short but Angry at the register who was apparently suffering from a very severe case of Chihuahua Syndrome.

Short but Angry was brown-haired and dressed in a suit that was probably meant to look a great deal more expensive than it actually was, and it looked absurdly comical when he whirled around, took one sniff of Bald and Smelly, and honest-to-God *snarled like a dog.*

Bald and Smelly had bristled like an agitated rooster and growled back, sounding kind of like an
angry hyena, and now both of them were posturing and snarling at each other while the terrified cashier huddled behind his counter and talked in a panicked voice to someone on the phone.

So I stood a bit behind them, utterly bemused, and consulted my Ticket to Knowledge.

“It appears to be two alphas posturing for dominance,” came Simon’s entirely baffling and illogical reply. “I recommend retreating to a safe distance in the event their altercation becomes physical.”

Obligingly, I took several large steps away from the scene. I had about a million and three questions about what Simon had just told me, but I knew this was definitely Not the Place to be asking them. Even I, with my literal outsider’s perspective, knew this was shaping up to be a very hostile interaction between two complete strangers who seemed to hate each other on sight.

Very slowly, as if I were sharing breathing space with two fighting dogs, I began edging towards the door. Snacks and a coke were not worth this.

I’d only moved maybe three inches when Bald and Smelly whipped his head in my direction and barked.

My joints all locked simultaneously—entirely against my will—as the sound of that ridiculous noise literally froze me to the spot. My thoughts raced. Did Bald and Smelly have some kind of noise-based superpower? Maybe they both did. Maybe ALL men in this weird world could control people using animal noises!

Apparently satisfied with my state of nonmovement, Bald and Smelly turned his attention back to Short but Angry who had—rather unwisely—not capitalized on his opponent’s momentary distraction.

I was briefly considering screaming for help—the Soldier might come rescue me, he might not—when air moved to my right and suddenly my hitchhiker was just there. He hadn’t even triggered the bell over the door.

He didn’t say a word, but something about the way he was standing, the way his shoulders were stiff and his posture was coiled like a stalking panther, made him seem about a thousand percent more dangerous than he ever had before. He smelled a lot more like gunpowder than he usually did, and it seems I wasn’t the only one who noticed.

Both Bald and Smelly and Short but Angry whipped their heads towards him as if he’d announced himself in some way despite being utterly, entirely silent. The Soldier didn’t so much as twitch a finger, but something shivered over his posture like the rising hackles on a wolf—something I felt more than saw—and both quarreling men immediately backstepped and cringed into themselves with an apologetic whine.

A metal hand hidden by a glove hooked around my waist and bodily moved me towards the door as he stepped away, still not saying anything or changing expression from his usual resting murder-face, and neither of the men by the counter so much as lifted their heads to watch as the Soldier deftly maneuvered the both of us to the car without once removing his hand.

It was kind of good he didn’t, because I was still having problems getting my joints to unlock after being barked at for Pete’s sake and the Soldier seemed to know that somehow.

He got us both into the car and only when I was safely sitting down with the doors locked did he remove his hand, remaining silent but no longer emanating utter threat. Slowly, the smell of gunpowder receded a little and the woodsmoke returned as if nothing strange had happened at all.
“Simon,” I said into the silence, proud of how even my voice was when all my head was filled with was hysterical screaming, “what the fuck.”

Normally, I hated cursing. Normally, I wasn’t confronted with a scene straight out of an ABO fanfiction novel. God could forgive me just this once.

Simon wasted little time in replying from where I still had him clutched in a death-grip in my right hand. “There are three secondary genders,” he began promptly, apparently sensing my utter lack of apparently crucial background information, “alphas, who make up approximately 10% of the population; betas, who make up approximately 85%; and omegas, who make up the remaining 5%. Statistically, most alphas are male and most omegas are female, although female alphas and male omegas do exist. Betas are rather evenly divided between sexes, although the population in America is slanted towards females.”

I took a careful breath, keeping a stranglehold on the budding panic I could feel creeping at the edges of my vision. “And that little kerfuffle back there…?”

“Alphas generally have little tolerance for each other outside of family members or close pack-bonds, and are highly aggressive in response to perceived wrongdoings. Generally alphas can control the urge to prove dominance over lesser rivals, but when startled or agitated fights do occasionally break out.”

I considered this very, very carefully. I was less certain that I was having an elaborate coma dream, now; my brain couldn’t have dreamed up a world like this with such ironclad, set rules already in place. I had no frame of reference for it. So while part of me was freaking out over this apparently being real, the other part was circling desperately around the idea that I’d been dropped into an actual ABO world.

“What am I, then?” I asked, morbidly curious even as my voice sounded weak and reedy to my own ears. The Soldier, still remaining calm and motionless, cocked his head towards me at this question with an almost sarcastically-raised brow. It was the most emotion I’d gotten out of him yet, and I wasn’t even in the right mindset to appreciate it.

“You are listed as an omega in your medical ID,” Simon offered helpfully, and I saw the screen move out of the corner of my eye as he apparently pulled up said medical ID.

I took a deep breath, mind snapping to the thick woodsmoke scent in the air that suddenly had an entirely new level to it. It was pretty obvious what ‘secondary gender’ the Soldier was—considering how he’d utterly schooled those two alphas(?) earlier with a single glance—which meant the reason I could smell him so well wasn’t because he just smelled good, but because I (as an omega) had a super-nose. I wondered what I smelled like, but chickened out of asking.

“I need to know everything about what to expect as an omega,” I told Simon seriously. If I had just spontaneously become something other than a run-of-the-mill human, I needed to know everything. I did not want to be blindsided by any of the myriad problems omegas tended to get heaped with in the fanfictions I would never admit to reading, like heats or mating cycles or anything.

The Soldier actually turned his head all the way to face me at that, expression not really changing but somehow radiating an aura of perplexed confusion regardless.

“Of course, Elizabeth,” Simon replied agreeably, sounding much calmer about this than I was. “Shall I cover the topics while you drive?”

Abruptly, I recalled that I was still at a gas station with two cowed alphas in it, and that I should
probably leave before something else went wrong. “Yeah. Sure. Let’s do that,” I said somewhat disjointedly. As I pulled out of the parking lot, I surely imagined the way the Soldier was taking deeper breaths than usual.

Yep. Definitely my imagination.
Chapter Summary

I woke up in the morning feeling simultaneously like a pile of crap and like a shining beacon of energy. I wanted to stay in bed forever, and also wanted to get up and run laps around the motel parking lot. These conflicting signals resulted in a more moderate response of waking up normally and getting dressed, irritated with the way my previously-soft shirts felt like sandpaper on my skin.

I sat on my motel bed, hands steepled and braced on my knees as I thought. Simon had been very informative about my new situation (orientation), and had not once questioned me about why I didn’t already know all of this. One or two facts even seemed to be news to the Soldier, if his slightly wider eyes at a few things was any indication.

There were a few things about my new status as an omega that I found to be vastly more important than others.

The first was that, as an omega, I did have a heat cycle. Thankfully Simon had an app that was tracking mine, as the me of this world seemed to be using it kind of like I did for periods. And that was another thing: omegas didn’t have periods. They just had heat cycles once every three months whereupon they were fertile—apparently omegas were not fertile at any point other than their heat cycles, which understandably made sex a lot more common (I’d been blushing through that entire, dry description after my squeaked-out question) and pregnancy a lot less. Betas, on the other hand, functioned more like the regular humans I was used to, with a menstrual cycle and general permanent state of fertility. In fact, there wasn’t really anything different about betas from regular people except the ability to form pack-bonds and the instinctual knowledge to react to various sounds and postures.

The second thing that worried me about being an omega was the instincts. In alphas and omegas, instinctual reactions and actions were far, far harder to control. I likened it to being a cross between a dog and a person, with the animal instincts handling social interactions and the human brain handling everything else. That was why when the alpha had barked at me—a command to stop moving, apparently—my body had reacted even while my mind was busy wondering about noise-based superpowers. Unmated omegas were vulnerable to that kind of thing from all alphas, while mated omegas only had to worry about that from their alpha.

And that brought up the third thing. Mates. Which were apparently a legitimate thing here. The most baffling of all—and, inversely, the thing that made me the most excited—was the existence of what the world commonly referred to as True Mates, but which functioned a lot like the mythical ‘soulmate’ trope from a lot of fiction. True Mates didn’t have to form a mating bond (a few stayed platonic, but not many), nor would they be magnetically drawn to mate with each other immediately upon making eye contact or anything, but they would be pulled to stay around each other and trust each other instinctually. The only way to really tell if someone was your True Mate was to actually mate with them; if you were, both of your eye colors would shift to match each other (generally as some metallic shade like copper or silver). If not, nothing would happen.

Now that I was mostly alone in my motel room with the Soldier safely ensconced in his own, I had felt it safe to ask Simon a few more probing questions. And hoo boy.
Omegas were, as a general rule, very tactile. This was pretty much par for the course for me even in my old world, but omegas kicked it up a notch by actually becoming literally depressed if they went without touch for too long. It could be with anybody—alpha, beta, or omega—but solitary confinement was actually illegal to use on omegas because it could get bad enough to constitute as torture. Alphas were also tactile, but to a lesser degree than omegas. They would not accept touch from other alphas except from pack and family, and didn’t get much out of beta interactions. They wouldn’t go mad like omegas would if no one touched them, but it definitely set them into a more feral mindset that wasn’t really good for anyone involved.

Betas, the lucky bastards, didn’t have to worry about any of that.

Also, ruts were apparently a thing. Simon had explained in very dry, factual tones how alphas had ruts twice a year that lasted three days and were exceptionally fertile during those times. They didn’t ‘go feral’ or anything, but they were more tactile and docile around mates and less likely to start fights (except with other alphas, who would be attacked on sight). Alphas on rut were usually housebound, because it was dangerous for them to be out and about in case they killed a rival for a slight they would normally overlook altogether. And, yes, alphas did have knots, but only during ruts.

In converse, omegas during heats were aggressive. They’d pick fights with anyone who wasn’t pack or family, even alphas (who usually smelled it on them and backed off rather than respond), and—for lack of a better term—aggressively cuddle with any and all packmates or trusted alphas they could get their grubby paws on. Their sex drives shot through the roof, but only in regards to mates so they were generally safe enough to wander around in public if someone was there to keep them from picking fights. Unmated omegas usually stayed home or out of public places during heats, while mated ones could count on their alphas to curtail bad behavior and keep them in line.

I found it somewhat hilarious that the stereotype for ruts and heats seemed to be reversed here, with ruts being something to pity alphas for and heats being something to fear.

None of that helped with the fact that, according to Simon, I was due for a heat any day now. Now that I had been disabused of the fictional notion that my heat was some kind of signal flare for alphas looking for sex, I wasn’t quite as worried about it. I wouldn’t be bedridden, and depending how out of control I got could probably still drive us to New York.

I just wasn’t sure how the Soldier would react.

Hopefully I wouldn’t try and pick a fight with him, because that would be the absolute last thing I ever did.

I woke up in the morning feeling simultaneously like a pile of crap and like a shining beacon of energy. I wanted to stay in bed forever, and also wanted to get up and run laps around the motel parking lot. These conflicting signals resulted in a more moderate response of waking up normally and getting dressed, irritated with the way my previously-soft shirts felt like sandpaper on my skin.

Packing up made me irrationally angry when I misplaced a sock (under the bed), but I also found inexplicable joy in arranging my belongings in a Tetris-like manner to ensure everything fit properly.

It was as I was stepping outside (aggravated by the way my bra felt and giddy with the feeling that my hair looked amazing) that I realized this was like if all the emotional upheaval of my period were happening all at once.

Looks like my heat had started, then. Great.
I smelled the Soldier before I saw him—all woodsmoke with only a faint bite of gunpowder—and turned on my heel to face him. He was looking down at me somewhat bemusedly, visibly breathing deeper, and I wondered if he could smell the crazy on me. He probably could, because he tilted forward a bit as if he were going to get into my personal space before he caught himself and stepped back again.

Ignoring his body language and things like boundaries, I beamed at him—suddenly irrationally happy—and wrapped my arms around his muscled torso and squeezed him tight. Immediately, I felt amazing. Touching him felt like being injected with liquid joy, and I only peripherally registered that he hadn’t tensed up or negatively reacted to me suddenly glomping him.

Instead, he shifted a hair closer and leaned subtly in. I wondered how long he’d gone without touch before my mind jumped tracks and realized we should probably get on the road soon.

“You ready to rage?” I asked the Soldier giddily, all but vibrating with a sudden surge of energy. I felt like I could run a marathon and then go on to bench-press several children. Without waiting for a reply, I squeezed the Soldier again and then let go, hurrying towards the car as if it would leave without us.

He smelled even more amazing in the enclosed space of the car, and I made no bones about letting him know it. Simon, from his place on the dashboard, seemed embarrassed for me. I couldn’t muster the energy to care about how inappropriate my comments were, too busy making sure the Soldier was perfectly aware that he smelled delicious.

For the rest of the drive until we stopped for lunch, there wasn’t a hint of gunpowder anywhere in the vehicle.

When the crash hit—approximately two minutes after I parked us in the parking lot of a small nondescript diner—it hit like a ton of bricks. I slumped against the Soldier, who obliged my liquid bones by wrapping the metal arm around my waist again to hold me up, and clutched at him with a very sad sounding whine.

I instinctively looked for the miserable puppy who had to have made that sound, before realizing it was probably me that did it.

“I’m a very sad puppy,” I informed the Soldier sorrowfully, as if I’d just told him that my entire family had died in a fire. The Soldier actually snorted above my head. “It’s not a laughing matter,” I reprimanded, still sounding sad and miserable. “I actually whined.”

He didn’t reply, instead moving us towards the diner and easily carrying my dead weight like an Elizabeth-shaped ragdoll. Several eyes turned towards us—or, more specifically, me—when we entered, but the looming, massive shape of the Soldier seemed to deter them from commenting.

He sat us at a booth where I proceeded to shamelessly melt all over his side, clutching at his shoulders and making a general nuisance of myself. With the sort of stoic patience I imagine was burned into him over his seventy-year stint as an assassin, he bore my actions without so much as a twitch.

I didn’t really rouse from my dazed, lackadaisical haze until the waitress approached, smelling like hot asphalt and cinnamon and threat.

I bolted upright in time to tune in to her blatantly flirtatious greeting to the Soldier (whose expression did not change) and my head snapped towards her on a frankly inhuman swivel. Immediately, I was
How dare this interloper try and poach my alpha from me? I bared my teeth on a snarl and outright growled at the waitress, irrationally angry and ready to go for her throat at the slightest provocation. She froze like a startled hare, still leaning over to display cleavage to the Soldier who hadn’t even acknowledged her yet. Several nearby patrons turned to look at the scene I was making, but I didn’t even care. This… this trollop had dared to flirt with my Soldier?

A metal hand landed on the back of my neck and squeezed.

The fight drained out of me as if he’d pushed an off switch. My attention redirected towards the Soldier like a stop-motion glitch, and I melted back into his side, blatantly snuggling under the arm still wrapped around my neck and casting lazy glares at the waitress who—belatedly—I realized was a beta.

A waitress serving a table nearby (who smelled like oranges and something that felt like omega) started laughing her ass off. “You asked for it, Nancy, poaching on the alpha of an omega in heat like that.” A few patrons nearby nodded their heads in sage agreement, eyeing ‘Nancy’ in disapproval.

‘Nancy’ grimaced, straightening up and taking a very obvious step back. “I’m so sorry,” she stammered, more to the Soldier than to me—which was probably smart, since if she’d talked to me I might have growled again. “I didn’t realize—”

“You nose-blind, honey?” an older gentleman one table over asked incredulously. “She ain’t bein’ exactly subtle.”

Nancy stammered a bit before flouncing away with a hurried excuse. The moment she was gone my hackles—which I hadn’t realized were raised—relaxed again. I frowned as rationality briefly returned.

So these were omega instincts in action, huh.

“I don’t like this,” I informed the Soldier matter-of-factly. The hand still on my neck squeezed again briefly (making my muscles feel like jelly) before he let me go. The arm stayed around my shoulders, though, which made what I was beginning to consider my inner-omega squeal like a fangirl.

The male beta server who returned to take our orders did nothing to step on my hair-trigger temper, thank goodness. He seemed very amused about it all and kept casting teasing glances at where Nancy was serving some tables on the other end of the room.

I kept one eye on her the entire time we were there—much to the obvious amusement of everyone else who noticed—and bared my teeth once when she got too close. The way she retreated to the sounds of the other patrons’ sniggering went a long way to calming me down again.

That night, I categorically refused to give the Soldier his own room. Or, to be more accurate, I bought us both rooms but then stubbornly followed the Soldier into his and curled into a sad ball on his bed. He more or less ignored me as he went about securing the room, checking for bugs or whatever, and then he laid down on the bed beside my ball-self without a single comment.

I rolled over and squirmed over him until I was plastered to his chest, trying to get as much skin contact as possible despite his still wearing jeans and a shirt and myself still in nightclothes. He tolerated this with enviable patience, not really moving to dislodge me when I elbowed him in the
side or kneed him somewhere fragile on accident.

When I finally flumped down, happy with what I had accomplished, both his arms lifted up and rested lazily on my lower back as if whatever was making me act like a touch-starved psycho had also momentarily erased his paranoia.

Without thought, I lifted my head and rubbed the underside of my jaw all over his closest shoulder—which happened to be the metal one, ouch—like a cat staking a claim. This was, beyond a doubt, the weirdest bit of omega instincts to hit me yet. And I’d just spent an hour glaring death at a waitress.

My heart almost stopped when I felt his head dip down and his own jaw rub itself across the top of my head in return, that blasted inner-omega kicking up a storm by purring and generally being useless.

This meant something, I was sure of it, but it hadn’t been covered in Simon’s Guide to Being an Omega and my instincts (which I was trying to pay attention to) just seemed happy about it without any sort of qualifying remarks.

Oh well, I thought pessimistically. I’m sure it’ll come back and bite me later. I’ll figure it out then.

It was the best night’s sleep I’ve ever had.
They were an odd couple, Matt mused as he watched the alpha-omega pair wander into the store. The omega was a tiny little thing, maybe an inch or two over five feet, who barely came up to the collarbone of the massive alpha stalking after her like a bipedal shadow.

He’d been working here for years and in that time had seen all manner of packs wander through on their way to far-off destinations. He’d seen alpha-alpha packs (and whoa boy did he not want to think about the dynamics of those), beta-beta packs, omega-omega packs, beta-alpha packs, all manner of triads, and—of course—alpha-omega pairs like this one. But none of them, none of them, had made him this nervous.

I woke up with what I could only assume was a truly memorable hangover. Having never really gotten a taste for alcohol, I could only speculate that this huge migraine and ingrained ache in my bones was comparable.

“Is it over?” I croaked, half-delirious and half-hopeful. Simon, from where I’d dropped him the night before, spoke up in the general vicinity of the floor to my left.

“Typical heat cycles for unmated omegas do generally last 24 hours, yes,” Simon confirmed. “Mated omegas, however, often have cycles upwards of three days.”

The Soldier, currently wide awake and serving as a full-body pillow, tilted his head towards the sound of Simon’s voice but otherwise did not react. I waited for the embarrassment, the mortification, the shame of how I’d acted yesterday (and last night! I’d used him like a bloody pillow) to crop up.

But it didn’t. I couldn’t work up any sort of emotional reaction to my previous behavior other than indifference.

I wondered if that was the inner-omega at work? It wouldn’t have found anything wrong with what I’d done, so maybe my rational self wouldn’t either? None of that really explained why the Soldier hadn’t rolled me off in the middle of the night, though. Even now, with me being ‘sober’ and aware again, he was still lounging on the bed like a lion at rest and not really reacting to my presence in his personal space.

Old Me would have been flipping out about sleeping literally on top of a man I’d just met. New Me, Omega Me, took one whiff of the solid woodsbrace scent in the air and found nothing to be concerned about. The Soldier wasn’t bothered, obviously, so why should I be?

I set aside these unsettling revelations as to my own mental state to unpack later, when I was no longer sprawled indecently overttop of the alpha I’d met all of two days ago.

Talk about moving fast.

It was as I was preparing to move—off, away, something—that I became aware that the Soldier still had both hands resting on my back. This was brought to my attention when metal fingertips—feeling sharper than usual—pressed in warningly, the plates on the arm I still hadn’t seen all of whirring and
shifting under the sleeve of his shirt. I aborted my efforts to move and the unexpectedly sharp fingertips retracted again.

Okay. So it looks like I’m not going anywhere.

I took this moment of relative inaction to dig around in my feelings to try and ferret out what Omega Me was thinking. It wasn’t like I had a second brain or anything, or a voice in my head, but the instincts were so sharp, so dissonant from what I’d spent the past twenty-four years living with that they were very easy to differentiate from my ‘usual’ self. I was pretty sure someone who’d actually grown up as an omega would have a harder time doing this, because for them the instincts would be background noise rather than the air-raid siren they were for me.

Alpha, purred my instincts. How unhelpful. I prodded at this thought, trying to make sense of it. My alpha, my instincts clarified.

All right. So Omega Me had, at some point, decided—without any input from me at all—that the Soldier was my alpha now. That seemed like the kind of thing that was a two-way street; surely Omega Me couldn’t just arbitrarily decide something like that without his input?

Almost in response, a snapshot of the night before when I’d gone all cat and rubbed my chin on his shoulder played out behind my eyelids. And then the unmistakable feeling of the Soldier’s jaw brushing over the top of my head in return.

Was that really all it took? A little jaw-brushing?

Or was this that ‘scent-marking’ thing Simon had briefly touched on before I’d gotten distracted by the idea of mating being an actual thing? If it was, that would make a lot more sense than Omega Me just declaring that it was so.

What did this mean for us now, I wondered. I’d—obviously—never had an alpha before. What was going to change? Would anything? I mean, apparently the touch-barrier was gone now (which was nice, I had to admit), but what else was different?

Simon had been pretty insistent that omegas with alphas and omegas mated to alphas were two entirely different things. One of them was a guardian type relationship, and the other was more of a partnership. Two guesses as to which was which, and the second doesn’t count. Omega-alpha pack bonds—like the one I was 99% sure we had initiated in my heat-haze the night before—often transformed into mate bonds later, but it wasn’t a sure thing.

What were my thoughts on that? I’d gone from a lonely but fulfilling life as a regular human to randomly being relocated to an ABO world in which nothing was the same and forming a magical pack bond (that hadn’t existed for me a week ago) with a fictional character that I’d known for two days.

I seriously thought about what my future was shaping up to be. Obviously, the Soldier was going to be sticking around. The pack bond would compel him to keep me close, if nothing else. Any ideas I had for a potential future now had to include the Soldier, and all the mess that comes with him. Like SHIELD and Steve Rogers and Hydra.

Hydra.

“Mother Russia,” I bit out between clenched teeth, tensing all over. Beneath me, the Soldier flipped into high alert at the sound of my stress and—probably—the stress in my scent. He abruptly rolled, startling me slightly out of my fugue, until he had me caged underneath him with his metal arm
planted between my head and the door, every muscle locked tight in alarm.

He was still dead-silent, but I could almost imagine lips peeled back over fangs that he most definitely didn’t have, claws flexing against an unseen threat.

I reached up and looped my arms around his shoulders and tugged him down—which he let me do; I wasn’t moving this guy anywhere against his will—trying to convey with body language and soothing noises that everything was fine and there wasn’t any danger. Eventually the tense line of his shoulders uncoiled and he settled down again, bracing most of his weight on his knees to keep from crushing me (thankfully) and sent me a very flat, unimpressed sort of deadpan stare.

“My bad,” I apologized sheepishly, to which he actually rolled his eyes before he shifted and stood from the bed, pacing around the room as I caught my breath from that little bit of excitement.

“Simon,” I said abruptly, rolling and groping around the ground with my fingertips for my phone. “Tell me everything you know about Hydra.”

Metal fingers clamped around the back of my neck in a heartbeat, not tight enough to break vertebrae but most definitely a warning that he was willing and able to do so. Unlike last time, my bones did not turn into jelly. Instead, all the hair all over my body stood on end and ice crawled down my spine as I felt the razor-focus of his regard on the back of my head.

The air smelled of nothing but sharp, acrid gunpowder.

In retrospect, I probably could have been a bit more discreet about that particular line of questioning.

Simon, oblivious to the sudden tension in the room, answered my question from two inches to the right of my hand. Right next to a combat boot that I hadn’t noticed until I’d erred so spectacularly.

“The organization known as Hydra is currently in the process of being dismantled by the Avengers, led by Captain Rogers. Public information puts the number of remaining Hydra strongholds as between two and six, located in Europe and Asia. All American Hydra branches have been located and destroyed, as indicated in the file dump released in 2014.”

The fingers gripping the back of my neck slackened slightly, but I didn’t dare take that as a signal that I could move. I remained frozen belly-down on the bed, with the world’s most dangerous assassin crouched over my unmoving form.

“That’s a relief,” I told Simon as evenly as I could manage with a metal hand threatening to break my spine. “So we shouldn’t run into any in New York then?”

“If any Hydra operatives remain in the United States, they will have larger problems than interrupting your impromptu road trip, Elizabeth,” Simon replied dryly.

Yes, like tracking down the Winter Soldier who’d just formed a pack bond with me.

I was thankful, however, that this meant that in this universe at least we probably wouldn’t have Hydra crawling out of the woodwork to reclaim their Asset. And with Steve Rogers (backed likely by Tony Stark’s money) actively hunting them down like rats the ones across the pond shouldn’t last too much longer either.

“Right,” I belatedly replied to Simon, mind still reeling with the implications of both Hydra’s non-presence in America and trying to find a way to convince the highly-suspicious assassin at my back to let me up. “Thanks, Simon.”

“Of course, mum.”
There was silence for a long, tense minute. I barely breathed, trying not to tense up under his hand and thinking calm thoughts. Incrementally the fingers slowly loosened their grip on my neck, still heavy and pressing me more or less face-first into the mattress but no longer threatening to snap my neck like a twig.

I didn’t hear any sign of movement—not the creak of leather or swish of cloth, or even a protesting bedspring from where one of his knees was braced by my hip—but suddenly there was breath on my ear that didn’t belong to me.

And then the Soldier rumbled.

It was a deep, bass thrum that vibrated through his chest and was felt more than heard. A quiet, intense noise that I wouldn’t have heard at all if he hadn’t been literally on top of me in an utterly silent room. Kissing-cousin to a growl, it was a threat and a chastisement and forgiveness all at once. Omega Me went boneless at the sound of it, relieved and repentant and very very sorry.

The hand on my neck lifted up and before I knew what I was doing, I felt myself roll over and latch onto him where he was still braced close above me, locking arms and legs around him as if he would vanish if I didn’t hold on tight enough.

My heart was racing like a jackrabbit. Adrenaline flowed belatedly through veins that lit up like fireworks, my previous hangover-like headache washed away in the flood of it. I became aware, slowly, that I was whimpering, incessantly, like a kicked puppy begging for a friendly touch. Objectively, I could rationalize that the pack-bond was new and therefore my newfound instincts were desperate to keep it. Emotionally, I was a train wreck made of other train wrecks, feelings colliding with each other and bouncing off each other like strobe lights.

The Soldier didn’t make any sort of sound in reply, but he did sit back on his heels and let me cling to him without pushing me off. That was, apparently, enough acceptance for Omega Me to calm the fudge down and stop flipping out.

Slowly, I felt him lean down and rub the underside of his jaw over my trembling head. A spike of woodsmoke broke through the cloud of gunpowder.

Resolve crystalized like diamond in my chest. I would keep this. I would keep this, and I—pacifistic, nonconfrontational Elizabeth—would rip the throats out of anyone who tried to take it from me.

They were an odd couple, Matt mused as he watched the alpha-omega pair wander into the store. The omega was a tiny little thing, maybe an inch or two over five feet, who barely came up to the collarbone of the massive alpha stalking after her like a bipedal shadow.

He’d been working here for years and in that time had seen all manner of packs wander through on their way to far-off destinations. He’d seen alpha-alpha packs (and whoa boy did he not want to think about the dynamics of those), beta-beta packs, omega-omega packs, beta-alpha packs, all manner of triads, and—of course—alpha-omega pairs like this one. But none of them, none of them, had made him this nervous.

As a middle-aged beta, Matt generally slipped under the radar when alphas walked into the store. He was unthreatening, had a bit of a beer gut, and his balding head didn’t really inspire feelings of lust into any unmated omegas or other betas who might happen to be accompanying them.

The little omega had smiled easily enough at him when she came in, beelining for the candy aisle,
but the alpha following her…

Matt felt like a rabbit staring at a wolf.

The alpha wasn’t posturing—not like some of the younger alphas who came by with little omega packmates—and he wasn’t baring teeth and outright threatening him. But the sheer presence of the man! The alpha stood tall and broad, shoulders square with a mantle of absolute authority. This man wasn’t just an alpha. He was the alpha. The alpha of alphas, even.

Matt actually had to bite back the instinctual reaction to tip his head back and bare his throat in submission, and the alpha had yet to actually look at him. He had no idea how the little omega handled being the focus of that kind of attention, honestly.

She seemed entirely oblivious to the way the huge alpha had his focus arrowed in on her at all times, the way he breathed menace and the potential for violence, the way the loose cast of his body displayed his hair-trigger temper should anyone get too near.

Had that been Matt, he would have been afraid to breathe wrong.

But the little omega had no fear in her for the man. She reached out for him often, mostly absently—just little brushes of hands to the sleeve of his jacket, or to briefly curl small fingers around the muscled bicep that was probably as big as Matt’s head. And the alpha let her. He didn’t snap at her, or brush her off like some other alphas did when they wanted to be ‘macho.’ His expression was never friendly, but his body language expressed that she was welcome for anyone who looked closely enough.

Honestly, Matt wasn’t sure what their relationship was. They were obviously packmates, and they smelled enough like each other that they might have been mates as well, but the alpha also let the little omega tug him around and followed her lead—which alphas just don’t do with their omegas.

He carefully discarded such idle speculation as the omega and her alpha shadow approached the counter with a handful of bags and a bottle of cola. The alpha was watching him now, and those pale blue eyes were as cold as the arctic. Matt moved with robotic precision as he scanned the omega’s items and took her card, not daring to even contemplate making accidental skin contact with her. He had the feeling that’d be the last thing he ever did, counter or no.

He replied to the omega’s polite small talk on autopilot, his years of customer service serving him in good stead. When they were finally leaving, he briefly let out a sigh of relief.

The alpha tilted his head towards him at the practically inaudible noise, soundless footsteps never faltering, and Matt held his breath until the man was finally out the door.

He let his arms rest on the counter and let his head drop onto them.

He really needed a beer.
Chapter Summary

Some of the flaws on the Worm CYOAs can really screw up a person’s day when put into practice. Popping up in the middle of a firefight with Leviathan is only the beginning.

Chapter Notes

Because I had to take an enormous number of flaws and drawbacks to get all the powers I wanted, and when I was finished I was left looking at what I’d created and thinking Well shit. This would be a terrible series of events to find oneself in with absolutely no memories and no metaknowledge to help you out.

I haven’t actually read Worm (it’s 1,680,000 words long), so all my knowledge comes from fanfiction and the wiki.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two entities spiral through the void, shedding shards of light and thought that plummet to the unsuspecting worlds below. One entity falls, caught in the well of gravity and Fate that they had thus far ignored, even as a third lurked in the space between stars. This third entity pulsed with PURPOSE, and let a fragment of itself fall in the wake of its brethren—

I… am.

TRAJECTORY.

DIRECTION.

DETERMINATION.

I came to life on a scream. Water rushed into aching lungs as I heaved and clawed for breath, blood boiling in my veins as my bones cracked—

A monstrous, inhuman face with too many eyes appeared in my line of sight, arrowing in on my position as if drawn by my screaming—

The monster charged with unsettling silence, the shriek of lights impacting its hide and glancing off harmlessly even as I choked on the ocean—

DESTINATION.
I... we... are.

I came to life on a scream, double-toned and deep and **low** in a way that made my fragmented awareness cower alone in the dark. The monstrous face appeared in front of me, terrible and **wrong**, and this time—instead of bones cracking and muscles shuddering into alien configurations—**this time** I reacted.

A paw the size of the monster’s head lashed out as a shriek built in my throat, high and feminine and two-toned, with claws that glowed like stars. The twisted talon (a hand? **My** hand?!) scored deep and hooked on an eye, jerking it free as the monster whipped back and **away**, changing trajectory within the space of a heartbeat—

My screaming gained an echo, as part of my mind unfurled and **doubled** as I gained an abrupt awareness of everything within twenty-five meters of my screaming body. The echo doubled, tripled, **quadrupled**, and then I was no longer the only one screaming.

We all stopped and considered each other, and I did not recoil from them because they were **we** and I was **us**.

I bit down sharply, fangs clacking against fur and bone as my scream tapered to a stifled whine, as my other selves(?) stared at me(?) in equal horror. I was(we were)… monstrous.

Twisted antlers like branches arched out of a long lupine skull, and a gaping ribcage expanded on breaths we did not take above the black leathery hide and white fur replacing my skin. One arm (the one with talons like stars) was a huge mass of shuddering vines and white tendons, three times the size of my other and twice as wide. Claws flexed as I bent, bracing weight on the knuckles of my huge left arm, digitigrade hind legs shifting in anxious movement. A long tail made of vines and tendrils and matted fur clamped down against a taloned leg as I ducked my heavy, crowned head with a rattling sob.

What was I? A flash of a terrible face with multiple eyes flickered across my thoughts and—

**Pain.**

I was sent rolling across the ruined ground as a beam of light impacted against the exposed ribs of my torso, searing away flesh and bone and punching a hole directly through me, leaving black organs to glisten wetly in open air. My paw whipped out and hooked on a piece of debris and righted me mid-motion even as my jaw unhinged and I screamed.

The others leapt with me, dodging the incoming beams using the complete awareness that had escaped me in my distraction, regrouping around me like a ten-foot wall of slavering jaws and talons.

The wound had started knitting the instant it was made, organs regrowing and shifting back into place in milliseconds, and by the time I found my footing again it didn’t even ache. I spotted a flying, blue figure firing light beams at the other monster, and knew I had found my attacker.

I hissed like steam on metal, a rattling, dangerous noise, and all of us opened fanged maws and screamed a challenge in chorus.

The monster with too many eyes was forgotten. It was obvious who my true enemies were.
Our eyes tracked the colorful figures attacking the monster and I snarled an order in a guttural voice that utterly failed to sound human.

“Attack.”

We leapt.

The closest colorful figure was a giant woman in armor with wings on her helmet. My teeth clamped shut around her throat even as glowing claws bisected her at the waist. The taste of blood was—

An enraged shout pulled my attention as an identical figure tried to attack from the side, but I bent at an unnatural angle without looking at her and twisted. My body shifted seamlessly from monster to falcon as I winged up and away out of reach, only to swivel around and shift back with my left paw already mid-swing. I caught her across the face, sending half of her head to impact the closest building and her body to collapse lifelessly near her twin.

In my field of awareness I saw my others running down the closest colorful figures, ripping out throats and disemboweling those that got within range. Some swiveled up into the air on the wings of birds and even others fell to all fours and charged like animals.

A young male in a white bodysuit leapt in front of some other colorful figures and a blue sphere sprouted around them. I clashed against this dome with slavering fury, glowing claws raking great rips in the shield that closed up immediately. I screamed, high and angry, and some of my others converged on my location and joined in the attack.

The male grimaced and sunk to his knees as we assaulted his dome, the blue figure with the light beams swinging round to fire upon us again. The wounds were less severe the second time, and by the fifth they weren’t even scoring my hide.

Then the monster reappeared.

Moving nightmarishly fast, it appeared within my field of awareness and crossed the distance to us in a heartbeat. It slammed into the male’s dome and cracked it, some sort of afterimage crashing immediately in its wake, and immediately it was the target of the entire offensive. The twisted head turned to stare at me (at me, and not at any of my others) and I met its eyes with my own (how many did I have? Too many) before a light hit the back of my head and rocked me forward into the shield.

I had bigger priorities than the other monster.

I whirled around and screamed, lashing out at the fast-moving female in the cape that had materialized in my space. Claws ripped through her shoulder, spraying blood through the air even as she slammed into my chest and sent us flying back to crash through several buildings. She lost control of her trajectory as the hooked claws on my hind legs kicked out and scored furrows in her thigh, and we both slammed into the ground and dug a deep trench in the wet concrete.

My pulverized bones repaired themselves in the time it took me to land, and I was on my feet and screaming as I charged even while the female in the cape was staggering upright, smelling of shock (I could smell shock now?)—

A male in a green outfit appeared between us and—

Reality jerked sideways as I was yanked backwards and out into the air, crashing through walls and broken machinery to come to a rolling stop several miles away. I stood, injuries already healed, and considered where I had landed.
There were no colorful figures. I could see them in the distance attacking the monster, and spotted a small flock of crows approaching that felt like my others. They had probably abandoned the battle when the one in the cape had knocked me away and the one in green had flung me out of the city entirely.

I crouched down on my haunches, not feeling winded or even aching from the fast-paced exertion of earlier, and braced my weight on my left knuckles.

I watched the distant battle, ignoring as my others (seven of them) landed upon my resting figure to roost. Massive tidal waves were crashing through lines of colorful figures and the monster itself moved almost too fast to see. The one in the black cape was seen smashing the monster with its fists, moving noticeably slower than before, and the one in green seemed to be controlling the battlefield.

I growled low, unhappy and confused and terrified, and turned on my heels to lope away, my others clinging to my antlers and the fur of my shoulders. I didn’t know what had happened to me or why, but at least I knew who my enemies were.

I wished the monster luck with its fight and retreated into the wilderness.

I stared at my reflection in the small pond, the other-crows fluffing feathers and peering down at themselves from my antlers. I was truly hideous, a twisted abomination right out of a nightmare. I whined through gritted fangs, the other-crows rattling with hisses as an echo.

My mind was a blank abyss before the attack in that city, my first memory waking up only to drown. Then there were those… entities I’d seen. The source of my powers, if I was interpreting them correctly. Likely the source of the powers of the colorful figures as well. But why did they look human, while I looked like… like a monster? Was it because my powers had come from that other entity? The one hiding in the dark spaces between stars?

And that other monster, with too many eyes. Was it like me? Terrified and lashing out at the humans attacking it?

I looked down at my claws, currently not glowing, and licked over a fang with a shivering tongue. Was I human? Before? I couldn’t remember. I vaguely recalled choking on water, and I had felt mostly human-shaped at that point, but—obviously—I hadn’t stayed that way for very long.

With a dismissive snort, I stood from my crouch and started lumbering through the trees again, the other-crows fluttering up into the air before landing in different places on my antlers. At least I was not alone, I thought as I peered up at the other-crows with a wolfish grin. They looked back down at me and croaked affectionately.

I stopped in place, the other-crows lifting up to roost in nearby branches, as I stared at them. The colorful figures would be hunting for me, most likely. I had killed at least four personally, and there was no way to know how many my others had taken down before I was thrown from the city. But they would be hunting for a monster. Not for a crow.

I shifted seamlessly mid-step, already winging up to join the other-crows in the trees. I was indistinguishable from them in every way. Without further thought, I took wing and led my small flock of others into the air and away from the earth. I would find somewhere safe to practice these new skills, and when the colorful figures reappeared, I would be ready.
I based my character's Case 53 appearance on the Cleric Beast from Bloodborne. In lieu of that, I am not terribly surprised that she was attacked on sight.

CYOA v5, Drop-In, Gestation, Foreign Element

Perks: Second Trigger (x4), Noctis Cape, Blindspot, Plot Convenience, Power Slot (x2)
Flaws: Case 53 (x3), Worst Day Ever (x3), Numbed Emotions, Memory Death, Slaughterhouse 9, Endbringer Target, Humble Beginnings, Kill Order

Powers: Regeneration (Second Trigger) - Your wounds heal faster than people can make them using conventional means. You no longer age. You no longer need to eat, drink or breathe.

Powers: Animorph (Second Trigger) - You can transform into any living thing that is not a microorganism. You don’t need to turn human to switch forms and will retain your other powers in these forms; can return to normal at will.

Powers: Replication (Second Trigger) - You can create permanent clones of yourself which will follow your verbal commands. Clones have all of your powers, but cannot replicate themselves. Not limited in the total amount of clones you can create.

Powers: Razor Hand (Second Trigger) - Your claws are now able to cut things at the molecular level, allowing you to affect any material.

Powers: Presence - You will be instinctively aware of any significant action that occurs within a radius of 25 meters from you.
It was only two days until this reality’s Christmas, and even though I had zero idea who my friends and family were (if they existed here, which I tried not to think about), I did have an alpha now that I should probably buy something for. With him being the world’s greatest assassin as well as following literally at my heels it would be impossible to get him something on the sly, but surely it was the thought that counted?

“So Simon,” I began during a lull in my one-sided conversation with my shiny new alpha, “what can you tell me about the Avengers?”

Color me curious, but I wondered how accurate the movies and the fanfiction had been about that eclectic group of weirdos.

“Currently, the Avengers roster is listed as Captain America, Iron Man, Hawkeye, The Hulk, Black Widow, and Thor. Public files are available for viewing on each Avenger except for The Hulk. Speculation is that those files have been obscured by Iron Man in his capacity as Tony Stark for the protection of The Hulk’s civilian identity.”

Aw, so the science bromance rages strong in this world. But… public files on Black Widow and Hawkeye? Weren’t they SHIELD agents? Wouldn’t having their civilian identities be public knowledge be sort of a bad thing?

Guess the outing of Hydra had kind of screwed them over a bit where that was concerned. The Black Widow was generally portrayed as some kind of master of disguise in fanfiction, so she was probably all right, but Hawkeye usually came across as some kind of goofy, clumsy, and hypercompetent master archer. I wonder how accurate that was.

“Thanks, Simon,” I replied absently, wondering if this version of Hawkeye was deaf. If so, that was a massive handicap for an assassin to overcome in order to be as good as he was. “Hey, are there any stores nearby where I can pick up some Christmas presents?”

It was only two days until this reality’s Christmas, and even though I had zero idea who my friends and family were (if they existed here, which I tried not to think about), I did have an alpha now that I should probably buy something for. With him being the world’s greatest assassin as well as following literally at my heels it would be impossible to get him something on the sly, but surely it was the thought that counted?

“Take the next exit and turn left,” Simon said without really answering my question. Obligingly though, I followed his instructions. He’d yet to steer me wrong.

“Presents?” came the hoarse voice of my alpha, startling me slightly. He was the very definition of a man of few words, after all.

“Yeah,” I smiled, not taking my eyes off the road but knowing he’d see it. “I mean, it won’t really be a surprise, but you definitely deserve a present.”
He was very quiet after that, and I could see him watching me thoughtfully out of the corner of my eye.

He smelled like woodsmoke for the rest of the drive.

Christmas arrived swiftly, and I made sure we had a nicer-than-usual motel room for the occasion. We were maybe a day’s drive from New York now (thanks to my tendency to go wandering off at every interesting-sounding tourist trap and landmark, which both Simon and my alpha indulged without comment), and I was looking forward to playing the part of clueless tourist before I got bored and decided to go somewhere else. It’s not like I had to worry about running out of money.

The present I’d gotten for the Soldier was in a gift bag rather than wrapped, because wrapping a present on the road was extremely difficult, but I thought I did a pretty good job for picking it up on such short notice. I’d gotten him some fake metal bullets that you were supposed to freeze and use like ice-cubes that wouldn’t melt, presumably for whiskey. He wouldn’t have a use for them, but I thought he’d get a kick out of it.

I sat on the bed of our shared motel room (the Soldier had actually growled when I suggested bunking separately, which had literally had my knees give out as I face-planted spectacularly on the ground in shocked repentance), considering my contact list thoughtfully. In my old world, I’d usually sent out texts to family and close friends wishing them a happy holiday on all the major ones. In this world, I didn’t recognize a single name.

None of them had contacted me since I left Wyoming and, presumably, my entire life behind which gave me no clues as to who they were.

Except “Dad.” Who had no address listed, no email listed, no contact photo, and his phone number was literally the sunglasses emoji. I hadn’t thought it was possible to have an emoji as a phone number in a contact. Could I even send a text to an emoji? Simon had assured me the ‘number’ was accurate, which made me wonder if there was an actual number on file but I wasn’t allowed to see it for whatever reason.

Ignoring my reservations about trying to text an emoji, I quickly tapped out a message and tried not to think too hard about not having any texts at all on file for this ‘number.’

_Merry Christmas!_ I added a tree emoji and a present one for flavor, but kept it otherwise impersonal. It could have been sent by anyone who was even remotely connected to him, just in case this wasn’t actually my dad and he wouldn’t know who I was.

The reply came within seconds, far too fast for an actual person to have written it unless they’d literally had their phone open to the message app. _Read 6:27 AM._ It actually said “Read 6:27 AM.” As in, that was the message. I blinked very slowly.

That was… vastly more sarcastic than I had been expecting. Especially from my father, who was generally a very serious person even over text. It only made me more suspicious that “Dad” might not actually be my literal father, or that I had a different father in this reality than my last one. Which made sense, since my mother had apparently jumped ship the second I was born.

“Simon, did the sunglasses emoji just sass me over text?” I asked blankly, still trying to comprehend why someone would reply to a Christmas greeting with a typed-out read receipt unless they were deliberately being a huge jerkhole.

Simon actually sounded embarrassed when he replied. “I… I believe so, Elizabeth. My most sincere
apologies.”

Why Simon was apologizing for the actions of some jerkhole with an emoji for a number I’d never understand. I considered deleting the contact altogether, but decided against it. For all that “Dad” was apparently a jerk in this reality, he was probably still related to me in some way and I really didn’t want to cut that thread unless I had to.

“Whatever,” I decided aloud, closing out the message app without fanfare. I didn’t have any emotional ties to whoever Dad was, and he obviously had no patience for Christmas greetings, so I just wouldn’t bother him.

I heard the bathroom door open behind me and turned with a smile, “Dad” forgotten. The Soldier was fully dressed (part of me lamented the potential loss of such a view), but his hair was still a little damp and the mirror behind him was visibly fogged over.

“Merry Christmas!” I all but shouted at my alpha, beaming in delight as I thrust the gift bag towards him. He paused, blinking once—his version of surprise, I guess—before he took the closest handle of the bag and stared at it.

I had actually been pretty sneaky getting this by him during my whirlwind crusade to find a present; he knew I’d bought something, but some judicious hiding of things in my shirt and some sneaky help from an amused beta cashier had hopefully kept its exact qualities a mystery.

“Merry Christmas,” he parroted back in his rough, still slightly-accented voice. He’d lost most of the accent over the past few days, which made me think he’d thickened it purposefully until he knew I wasn’t going to try and kill him.

And then, as if the surprise of receiving a greeting in return wasn’t enough, he actually reached into his Duffle Bag of Mystery and produced a box. An actual present, wrapped with a bow and everything. Where? What? When did he have the time to wrap an actual present?! He’d never been out of my line of sight for more than five minutes at a time!

As I studied the box he handed me in dumbfounded shock, I absently saw him pulling tissue paper out of the bag and pulling out the little box the fake bullets were in. He read the description written on the back lightning-quick, and the corner of his lips tilted up in a sideways sort of half-smirk. Even if he never opened the box, it had been worth it just to get some sort of amused reaction out of him for it.

My own present had a small sketchpad and some graphite pencils in it, which was a surprise—I’d never let on that I used to draw a lot—but that was touching all the same. I set the box down and wrapped him in a big hug (I’d never get over the fact that I had someone to actually hug).

“Thank you,” I said into his chest. His flesh hand came up and squeezed the back of my neck in reply, which made my useless muscles turn to liquid. “Not fair,” I protested as I stubbornly clung to him with my functional limbs.

He just snorted over my head in reply, but that was all right.

This was turning out to be a great Christmas, and it had only just gotten started.
“Where do I park?” I wailed pathetically at Simon, seeing nothing but a solid line of cars for several blocks. “There’s no parking! How does anyone in this city get anything done!”

“I hope you’re up for a bit of a walk,” Simon replied almost gleefully. “I’ve located an empty space four blocks from your destination. It will require you to parallel park.”

“I maybe didn’t think this through,” I admitted aloud as I tensed, white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel as I tried to navigate New York City traffic. There were one-way streets everywhere, kamikaze taxi drivers whipping out from around corners and bullying into the roads, and pedestrians blatantly jaywalking at every turn.

It was a nightmare, basically, especially after a life of relatively peaceful small-town traffic with lanes wider than a single car.

“In two hundred feet, turn right,” came Simon’s unsympathetic, deadpan response to my panic. “Your destination will be on your left.” He was definitely mocking me now.

“You can drive next time,” I told the Soldier shakily as a white sedan all but materialized in my blind spot and muscled in front of me when I hit the brakes.

“Affirmative,” the Soldier replied stoically, his eyes tight with shared tension. My panic was doing nothing to calm him down, and the crowds of post-Christmas revelry going on wasn’t helping matters. The center console was already partially crushed by the literally iron grip he had on it.

“Where do I park?” I wailed pathetically at Simon, seeing nothing but a solid line of cars for several blocks. “There’s no parking! How does anyone in this city get anything done!”

“I hope you’re up for a bit of a walk,” Simon replied almost gleefully. “I’ve located an empty space four blocks from your destination. It will require you to parallel park.”

I just vocalized wordlessly in misery even as I obediently followed all his directions to the letter. I hadn’t parallel parked in years. This was just awful.

Over the sound of my own wailing, I could hear my alpha laughing under his breath.

The traitor.

I shoved my key at the Soldier as soon as it was over, all but forcing it into his hand. He took it as if it were a live grenade.

“There,” I nearly snarled. Parallel parking had been hard enough on its own. Doing so in the middle of rush hour traffic in New York City? I wanted to just start screaming and never stop. “Now it’s your problem.”
I stalked away down the street, following Simon’s laughing directions, and tried to ignore the smirk on my alpha’s face as he trailed me. I didn’t really succeed.

“New York pizza is weird,” I announced halfway through gnawing on the absolutely massive slice I’d been given. “Good, but weird.” It was actually pretty great, but I was still in a foul mood from having to parallel park earlier and this was as good an outlet as any.

The Soldier gave me a spectacular *Look* from across the table, where he’d already put away five huge pieces before I’d finished half of mine. I got the impression that he was despairing at my intelligence, which was a not uncommon sensation lately.

“The crust is too thin,” I protested to the look on his face. The Soldier cocked an eyebrow at me disdainfully, letting me know in no uncertain terms that I was being an idiot and that I should just shut up and enjoy the pizza. “You shut up,” I grumbled into the pizza, ignoring my alpha’s smirk.

I kind of miss the days when he had all the facial expressions of a brick wall. He sassed me much less. The Soldier just shook his head and folded his last piece in half like a taco and ate it that way. Heathen.

‘Hey, I just met you~’

I stopped and stared down at Simon as if he had sprouted wings and tried to take flight. The Soldier came to a halt at my side and raised a brow at me, as if it were my fault someone was calling me and had that particular ringtone. Well, actually, I guess it might be my actual fault if other-me had been the one to assign ringtones, but surely we had enough in common to have more sense than that?

‘~and this is crazy~’

I lifted the phone to eye level and stared at it. The sunglasses emoji smirked back.

‘~but I’m your daddy~’

My eyelid ticked.

‘~so answer maybe?~’

Full of irritation, morbid curiosity, and slight resentment over my rebuffed Christmas wish, I swiped to answer the call and lifted it to my ear.

“So Imaybe did kind of a bad thing,” the male voice on the other end said immediately, not even bothering to pretend with trivial things like greetings or polite conversation.

Well, this was one question answered. That was not my dad’s voice. I began to have a very bad feeling about why I might have someone in my phone under an emoji who wants to be called ‘daddy.’ Was… was other-me into some… kinky stuff?

“Oh?” I replied calmly. I wouldn’t give ‘daddy’ an inch until I knew exactly what kind of weirdo relationship other-me had with him. “Was it when you sassed me over a Christmas greeting, or when you called me out of nowhere and didn’t even say hello first?”

There was a slight pause. “Both?” the voice asked, trailing up at the end questioningly. “Both,” he reasserted more firmly a second later.
The Soldier was frowning at Simon where he was pressed to my ear, and I belatedly realized he could probably hear both sides of this conversation, what with his super-hearing. Hopefully ‘daddy’ kept it PG.

“I was… busy when you texted and I might have, sorta, answered on auto-pilot?”


“I was busy! You know, kind of have an important job to do? Saving the world? Ending world hunger? Ringing any bells?”

It was obvious this relationship wouldn’t last very long if this was the sort of commitment ‘daddy’ could offer me. No wonder other-me didn’t have any texts on file for him. “All right. Next time? Why don’t you just not answer, instead, and text me back when you’re not busy. Sound good, ‘daddy’?”

“…It’s the ringtone, isn’t it?” the man replied, sounding amused and chagrined. “Too much?”

“Too much,” I agreed placidly, aware of the Soldier looming out of the corner of my eye. So ‘daddy’ had been responsible for that patchwork abomination of a ringtone, then? Somehow I wasn’t surprised. “Have a Happy New Year,” I said firmly before hanging up. No point in giving him a chance to sass me over yet another holiday, after all.

I silenced Simon regretfully (hopefully he’d still be able to talk) and put him in my purse so I could refocus on what we had been doing before ‘daddy’ called.

“I sincerely hope he’s my biological father and not a failed attempt at a kinky relationship,” I admitted in low tones to the Soldier with a frown. The Soldier frowned back and a low, displeased rumble built in his chest. Automatically I stepped into his side and let him wrap the metal arm around my waist, still frowning.

I suppose if anyone understood not being sure who someone was, it would be my alpha. I smiled as I let myself snuggle into his side as we walked, ‘daddy’ forgotten. He wasn’t nearly important enough to worry about.
Displaced (Diablo III x Dragon Age: Origins)

Chapter Summary

As he stood, hands on his hips, surveying the empty stone room in which he suddenly found himself, Aroul couldn’t help but be slightly surprised that he hadn’t been greeted by a huge wave of demons upon arrival. That was generally the welcome he received when unexpected things happened to him; to be greeted with *nothing* only made him *more* suspicious.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aroul was used to strange and unusual things happening around—and to—him. Sometimes he regretted his impulsive decision to investigate the falling star in Tristram. Only sometimes, though, because he would never have learned as much or grown as strong as he had otherwise. Who all could honestly say they’d battled countless waves of demons, or brought low the Lords of Hell? Who could say they had set foot in the High Heavens alongside the mortal form of the Archangel Tyrael? Who else could claim to have stormed Pandemonium and struck down Malthael, the Angel of Death, upon his throne of ill-gotten souls?

So Aroul was used to incredible things happening by this point. A waypoint stone malfunctioning and sending him careening into what he can only assume is an alternate reality is really not that big of a deal. As he stood, hands on his hips, surveying the empty stone room in which he suddenly found himself, Aroul couldn’t help but be slightly surprised that he hadn’t been greeted by a huge wave of demons upon arrival. That was generally the welcome he received when unexpected things happened to him; to be greeted with *nothing* only made him *more* suspicious.

There were no doors visible, which paradoxically set him more at ease (at least *something* had gone wrong), so Aroul set about the task of making himself an exit. His Disintegrate punched through the stone as if it were made of wet paper, which was oddly disquieting. In his experience, most buildings and support structures were reinforced and enchanted in order to *stop* pyromaniacs like himself from simply blasting their way out of places.

“This is truly a pitiful trap,” he mused aloud to himself. Treasure goblins had more ingenuity than this, and they walked around carrying leaking sacks of gold. With a huff, he stepped out of his newly-made door and contemplated the greenery he found himself surrounded with.

It had truly been a while since he’d last seen so much flora. Most of the landscapes he found himself traversing were deserts or blighted lands deadened by the passages and inhabitance of hellspawn. He half-expected some sort of plant monstrosity to come lumbering out towards him, just to liven things up a bit.

Alas, nothing leapt out at him in an attempt to tear his face off. How dull.

And then, as if to be contrary, an arrow came speeding out from somewhere to his left. It bounced harmlessly off the Galvanizing Ward which sprung up around him, and there was a tense moment of silence from the surrounding trees as the projectile fell to the ground with a quiet *tink*. 
Aroul, reflexes having been honed in a tremendously hostile environment where a single second’s delay could mean the difference between life and a very painful death, reacted to this attack with the sort of extreme prejudice that had made him infamous on the Killing Fields. Within the space of two heartbeats, a massive Slow Time sphere sprouted to life around him as a Mammoth Hydra burst up from the grass in a blaze of flame and sulfur. As the hydra was already turning and breathing a river of fire at some unseen foe, Aroul turned on his heel and with a sharp gesture called a black hole into life in the middle of the trees, which promptly ignited and began rapidly pulling in everything surrounding it. With his other hand, he called up his Arcanot Familiar which proceeded to pelt the surrounding forest with bolts of arcane energy.

The startled screeches of several humanoid creatures that were instantly being pulled into his hovering ball of flaming anti-gravity was all the confirmation he needed that he wasn’t just needlessly assaulting the local plant life.

His Disintegrate lanced out in twin beams of pure fire, following the trail his hydra had carved for him out of flames and impacting the black hole just as it collapsed on itself and exploded outwards. The dark things immediately stopped shrieking, dropping to the ground in several well-cooked pieces.

Aroul hovered on the edge of battle-readiness, eyeing the surroundings dubiously. Surely that wasn’t all of them? He had counted maybe six in total; hunting parties generally had dozens of individual groups, and never had he put any demons down as fast as those malformed ones had gone. He hadn’t even had time to sling some Magic Missiles their way, or had a chance to throw up another Slow Time over them once the threat of projectiles had been eliminated.

But his hydra wasn’t turning to face new threats, nor was it producing more rivers of fire. His familiar was hovering placidly behind and above his left shoulder. The trees and grass smoldered quietly.

Aroul blinked as his initial Slow Time bubble collapsed, and watched as his hydra dissipated with a sizzling sound. With a mental shrug, Aroul approached the remains of the things which had attacked him, disgruntled to find they hadn’t even left any gold or gear behind when they’d fallen.

Not that he strictly *needed* any gold or gear at this point, but it would have been nice.

He didn’t recognize the species of demon these must be. They were remarkably humanoid, with large fangs filling up wide deathshead grins, and they were rather misshapen. All of them were armed with unenchanted, regular swords and crossbows, and their armor looked absolutely pitiful. The shambling undead outside Tristram had given him more of a fight than these things.

More than a little disappointed—and equally bewildered—Aroul decided that sticking around to wait out the inevitable ambush that was sure to follow was the height of folly. Who’s to say these weaklings weren’t just there to make would-be adventurers let down their guards before the *real* threats showed up? That was perhaps accrediting too much intelligence to mere hellspawn whose tactics generally consisted of *rush the incredibly dangerous wizard all at once*, but there could be a lieutenant or a general watching in the wings. If there was one thing Sanctuary had taught him, it was that there was *always* someone—or something—more powerful than you.

There was no need to tempt fate by hanging around to find it.

With another glance at the smoldering remains of the grey-skinned demons, Aroul headed off into the trees in search of answers.
So, Aroul mused to himself as he studied the village before him from the safety of the trees, *I am in an alternate universe.*

The conclusion wasn’t difficult to reach. For one thing, this was certainly *not* Sanctuary. Aroul knew its various regions like the back of his hand by now, and would have recognized this place had he come across it in his readings or on his travels. For another, covert observation had revealed multiple other races of being that existed alongside humanity here. There were the slightly-shorter, skinny ones with the pointed ears. Then there were the really short, burly ones with the long beards. And then there was that one really big grey one with the horns that he’d almost mistaken for a demon before he saw it conversing curtly with a shopkeeper.

He wasn’t terribly worried. Sanctuary played host to a slew of incredibly powerful beings who all had a vested interest in the only remaining Nephalem sticking around; they’d find him eventually and bring him back home. For now, however, it was up to him to stay alive long enough for one of them to realize he’d been slung across the cosmos by a malfunctioning waypoint.

His armor and robes drew some odd stares, but none so much as the ones coming from those men in silver armor fixed on him as if he were wearing nothing but his smalls. One of them moved its hand in a motion towards him as if he were casting some sort of spell, only there were no visible effects that he could discern beyond a slight waver in the air. Some kind of detection ability?

The men in silver armor seemed equally appeased and baffled when nothing noteworthy occurred, and went back to standing vigil in front of the large church-like building while eying him warily.

Nothing new there. People tended to stare at him no matter where he went for one reason or another, but usually he’d actually *done* something first. He hadn’t even ridden the countryside of some arcane threat, or put down some rogue hellfiend that was causing trouble!

He listened to the people gossiping as he passed, something about an army and a ‘darkspawn’ (now there was the name of a demon if he’d ever heard one) and a bounty out on the heads of some survivors of some sort of mass conflict that had gone on. Nothing noteworthy or that stood out as a *quest.*

Well, he supposed he could go hunt down some more of those ‘darkspawn’ things, since they seemed to be giving people trouble and generally being a nuisance. And maybe he’d find out who’d pulled him across realities in the meantime?

Because if there’s one thing he’d learned through hard, *hard* experience, it was that accidents? They very rarely were.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Because dropping a character who routinely does damage in the multiple-millions per second into a world where things are, comparatively, *extremely* squishy sounded like a barrel of laughs.
Rule 48 (Marvel AU)

Chapter Summary

“I will treat any beast which I control through magic or technology with respect and kindness. Thus if the control is ever broken, it will not immediately come after me for revenge.”

Rule 48. It was a lesson these asshats swarming around the Asset’s cryochamber really should have learned by now.

Chapter Notes

This one, were it rated, would likely be an M for language and references to attempted/past rape. Just fyi.

Also, for those of you who might be interested, Simon Says is now its own little story and any further chapters will be posted there and not here.

We now return to your regularly scheduled program.

“Could you repeat that, sir?” I asked in somewhat of a daze.

Alexander Pierce smiled indulgently. It was an expression I’d grown up instinctively wary of, because nothing good ever came of Father smiling. “Congratulations. You’ve been promoted.”

That’s what I thought he’d said.

Level 8... I’d been Level 5 for years now, a middle-management sort of grey area where I had superiors to report to, but didn’t have too many strenous responsibilities outside of assigning missions. I was an administrator, basically. I was in no way at all prepared for the sudden, uncalled-for promotion to Level 8.

Because Level 8 was the assignment of the Asset’s Primary Handler, and I’d never so much as clapped eyes on the guy in my life. The only reason I even knew he existed was because people tended to have loose lips around me, as if they could somehow improve their standing in Father’s eyes via daughter-osmosis.

“Sir, I’m only Level 5,” I pointed out tentatively. I was sure Father knew this, but perhaps he’d forgotten somehow? Or gotten his agents mixed up somewhere and thought I was someone vastly more competent than I actually was? “I don’t have the experience to be the Asset’s Primary Handler.”

I didn’t even have the experience necessary to be the Asset’s barber.

“You have six years of experience managing agents and handling in-house issues,” Father replied easily. “I don’t need someone who can be in the field with it, I need someone to stay here and keep a
hold of its leash when it’s off-duty.” Father smiled again. I was too disciplined to shudder, but I’m pretty sure one of my fingers twitched where they were clasped behind my back.

“What about Commander Jameson?” I asked, confused. As far as I was aware, Jameson had been in control of the Asset for almost as long as I had been alive. You would have to pry the position of Primary Handler from his cold, dead hands, and even then he might still fight you for it.

“Commander Jameson is no longer with us,” was the calm, easy reply. That was a pretty nice way of saying he was very much dead indeed. Then again, Level 8 was a ‘lifetime commitment.’ I shouldn’t have been so surprised that the only way for a spot to open up was for the previous holder to die. “We cannot reactivate the Asset without a Primary Handler in a position to take control of it. You are the only one who does not harbor any sort of conflicting personal reason for desiring the position. So, congratulations on your promotion.”

There would be no more arguing about this. It was done. I was the only agent in the entire North American branch that Father apparently trusted enough not to abuse the position somehow, or go running off into the sunset with Hydra’s most lethal superweapon.

“Yes, sir,” I told the air above Father’s left shoulder. I didn’t bother thanking him for the promotion, because Father could sniff out a lie faster than a dog smelled bacon.

I turned on my heel at his nod of dismissal and strode out of the room as calmly as I could manage. Inside, I was a gibbering, nervous wreck. Hopefully none of that showed on my face, because what an impression that would make on my new charge.

“I will treat any beast which I control through magic or technology with respect and kindness. Thus if the control is ever broken, it will not immediately come after me for revenge.”

Rule 48. It was a lesson these asshats swarming around the Asset’s cryochamber really should have learned by now. They’d recently strapped the defrosting, shuddering Asset to a chair and were injecting him with things and generally just treating him like he was some sort of misbehaving, stupid animal rather than a frightfully dangerous living being. I stood somewhat cattycorner to the action, watching with a sort of horrified fascination as ‘Hydra’s finest’ proceeded to act like idiotic morons.

Could they not see the sharp bite of intelligence in those icy eyes? Did they not notice how the Asset was simultaneously tracking all of them at once even though he had literally been frozen solid three minutes before?

Maybe they had just… overlooked the way the Asset had palmed a scalpel when he stumbled and was even now concealing it underneath the metal forearm?

How had these people lived this long when they were so monumentally incompetent? No wonder Father was short on options for a primary handler if this was supposed to be the crème of the crop.

There had been a long procedure I was supposed to follow. A series of steps that the technicians were supposed to go through before I was meant to be introduced to the Asset. If I was reading the situation correctly, not only had the Asset already clocked my presence within the first six seconds of consciousness, but the technicians were going way off script.

“Stop,” I barked at the technician who had just blatantly put his hand on the Asset’s crotch with a
somewhat ridiculously overdone leer. It was under the guise of ‘checking the Asset’s functionality’ (which actually was on my List of Steps), but like hell was I going to just stand here while these morons molested the Asset. “Back away from him, now.”

The technician gave me the sort of look someone might give a toddler who’d just drawn on the walls in crayon. “It’s standard operating procedure to check that the Asset’s extremities are intact.” Which, all right, sure, but you didn’t have to put your hands in his fucking pants to do that now did you?

“If you don’t step the fuck away from him right now, I’m going to order him to plant that scalpel through your fucking throat.”

None of the technicians had any idea what I was talking about with that threat, but I did notice the Asset smoothly reposition his purloined weapon under his wrist for easier access. I wasn’t technically his handler yet, but I was about 98% sure he’d go for the throat the second I gave the word anyway.

I could probably even spin it as self-defense. Father’d take my word over these jackasses any day.

The technician rolled his eyes, but obligingly stepped away from the Asset. It was obvious from his face that he was just humoring me, but I kept sharp eyes on all of them regardless. One more step out of line, one more minor deviation, and I’d be putting the Asset through his paces a few hours early. I didn’t know how Jameson had handled this sort of thing, but it was obviously vastly different from how I planned to.

One of them muttered, as if I wasn’t able to hear them, “…this is why we don’t let women be in charge of the Asset. Too emotional.”

I memorized his face and made a note to look up his file later. He could do with a nice reassignment somewhere remote. Like Antarctica. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Asset doing the same.

I all but loomed over them (not a mean feat considering each of them individually had at least two inches on me) as they finished up the rest of the procedure, barking at them when they tried to deviate or made motions as if they were going to ‘break the Asset in’ (like I was an idiot who couldn’t read between the lines). Fuck, was this routine to these people? Did they make a habit of sexually assaulting an incredibly dangerous, unstable super assassin? I should have the Asset kill them on principle. It’d be a favor to the gene pool.

Finally, I was fed up with them. One last dude trying to trick me into leaving so they could ‘do a more thorough cavity search’ (as if the Asset could have hidden something up his asshole while in cryostasis) was the final straw.

I shoved them aside and stood by the chair, unstrapping the Asset’s arms with jerky, agitated motions. I was pretty much breaking all the protocols here by displaying such emotion and unstrapping the Asset before the imprinting, but fuck it. If these tools wanted to rape the Asset so badly they could try their hand when he was able to fight back.

The Asset was up and out of the chair the second the clamp on the metal arm was free. The technicians recoiled away with terrified squeals as if he’d sprouted tentacles or something, but the Asset just lurked inches away from me as he stared at the men who’d spent the past hour trying to find some way to disguise a rape as a medical procedure.

“Dobroye utro, Soldat,” I spoke in the midst of the surround-sound squeals. My Russian wasn’t that great, but the Asset was supposed to be fluent in like thirty languages or something so I really only needed it for the imprinting phase. The Asset’s razor sharp attention locked onto my face and whoa okay somehow I’d missed how fucking massive this guy was. He was almost hilariously taller than
me (and this was with me in my heeled boots), and had to be three times as wide as me at the shoulders. My nose barely came up to his sternum.

I offered the Asset my hand, knowing skin contact was required. The Asset stared at my appendage in blank incomprehension, and I wondered how many suicidal handlers prior to me had just laid hands on him without his consent. Eventually the Asset shifted and his huge flesh hand fell to grasp around my wrist. He could snap my bones like twigs if he put any pressure at all on my joint, but he held my hand as if I were made of spun glass.

The imprinting phrases rattled off my tongue sort of awkwardly, but it was enough to make the icy consideration in the Asset’s stare ratchet down to flat obedience. Instantly his attention redirected to the others in the room and he shifted sideways to lurk at my shoulder, waiting for orders. I considered what I’d read in Jameson’s personal files about ‘standard operating procedure’ once the Asset was bound to him, and took in the anticipatory leers on the technicians’ faces. One or two them even had visible erections. They really should put more women in charge, I mused. We were far less likely to be controlled by our dicks.

“Asset,” I said crisply into the waiting silence. I felt the Asset’s attention fall on me like a physical thing. The faces of the technicians grew even more anticipatory. Had they… had they not noticed the way I’d just cockblocked them for several hours? “No one is permitted to touch you other than myself without my express permission. You are allowed to defend yourself from unwanted and unauthorized advances. Parameters: non-fatal injuries only.”

“Acknowledged,” came the deep, rasping purr of the Asset from my shoulder.

The technicians’ pallor could collectively be compared to curdled milk.

Good. I smiled at them, the smile I’d inherited from Father, and watched them flinch backwards. They were learning.

Jameson’s files had indicated that the next step was to hose down the Asset in the adjoining room. As that was a useless waste of blatant ego-pandering, I elected to modify it slightly. Instead of leading the Asset to the next room to be gawked at by the scientists who were salivating at the thought of jamming their tiny cocks into him, I took him through the base—still dripping cryofluid and wearing only a pair of loose hospital pants—to my quarters.

Originally, I’d lived in an apartment off base. That was before I realized that this was kind of a fulltime commitment, and if I wanted to live past twenty I’d have to pander to Father’s expectations and hail Hydra myself into the afterlife. So now I was one of the few agents who lived on base and had my own personal quarters with a biometric lock that only I and Father could access.

The showers in my bathroom weren’t anything amazing, but there was a distinct lack of leering technicians in it so I was willing to count it as a win.

“Do you know how to bathe yourself?” I asked the Asset as we stood in the tiny bathroom. I had the shower running at a pretty warm temperature that was a bit too cool for me, but I’d been informed multiple times that scalding hot showers were not everyone’s cup of tea.

“Affirmative,” the Asset rumbled, still staring at the side of my head.
“Clean yourself thoroughly and come out when you’re done. I’ll have more appropriate attire prepared for you.” With that, I turned and… well, I had to squeeze by him to get out of the tiny bathroom so that was kind of awkward, but he didn’t seem to have any sort of reservations about personal space and didn’t react to the inevitable brushing against him that went on.

While the Asset proved he was an actual human being with the ability to wash his own damn self Jameson you prick, I set out his ‘on base’ uniform and stared at it. It was… pretty much identical to the one he wore on missions, only without the face mask or the multiple weapon holsters.

They had not provided him any underwear. Or socks, for that matter.

I let my head tip back to stare at the ceiling, aggrieved. I was going to have to go buy the man some fucking underwear because I wasn’t a complete monster, damn it. Those leather tac pants had to chafe something fierce.

The shower turned off. Twelve seconds later, I felt the Asset materialize at my side, utterly silent. I turned to look at him, carefully keeping my expression placid because this was a lot of naked male I didn’t really want to be looking at this early in the morning, but it was my own fault for not thinking this through enough so I would grin and bear it.

He was dripping wet, hair lank but no longer blue with disgusting cryofluid.

Obviously ‘cleaning himself’ did not include toweling off afterwards. Wordlessly I brushed past him and took one of the cleaner towels from my bathroom and proceeded to vigorously rub it across his chest and hair. He endured this sudden attack stoically and without twitching. I ran the towel down both arms (noting the way the metal plates on the left arm lifted up and reconfigured themselves in a shivering sort of wave as I passed over them) and did a perfunctory brush down of his legs and thighs. His dick could just deal with being a little damp because I wasn’t touching that with a ten-foot pole.

When he was dry enough to not make wearing clothing more of a nightmare than it had to be, I let the towel drop onto a nearby chair.

“Next time you finish washing yourself, dry off with a towel afterwards,” I instructed him.

“Acknowledged.”

That was going to get old real fast.

I put in a requisition for some male boxer briefs, not specifying who they were for. Anyone with three working brain cells could put two and two together and know they were for the Asset, but I had very low expectations for Hydra’s collective intelligence these days.

When they were delivered, two of them were neon colors and another three were covered in emojis. One of them was shaped like an elephant, with ears and a trunk where his dick presumably went.

I stared at the offerings with the world’s deadliest assassin lurking over my shoulder. We considered what Hydra thought of as ‘suitable undergarment attire’ with almost identical faces of blank despair. One of them was a dark grey with a subtle pattern of black spiderwebs. I handed him those and told him to go put them on in the bathroom.
(I’d learned that the Asset did not know the meaning of body shy, and would strip naked with very little prompting from me. It was distressing.)

Most of the rest went into a drawer for emergencies. I resolved to wash the Asset’s clothing often and thoroughly so they would not be needed. The elephant one went into the trash.

Jameson’s file made note that the Asset was to kneel at my feet anytime we ate. I was to put the Asset’s food in a bowl on the floor like a dog.

The caloric requirements listed afterwards were almost an afterthought.

I made the Asset eat at the table in the mess with me, using silverware and a plate like a real boy. All the other agents watched the silver knife in the Asset’s metal hand warily. Two of them tried to tell me that it was dangerous to give ‘it’ a weapon and that it might ‘become unstable’ and ‘try to attack.’

I took a sip of water and ignored them. The Asset speared a carrot on the knife and held eye contact with the closest protester as he bit down on it with a sharp crack. I’d never seen the act of eating a vegetable be so incredibly threatening.

I saw the Asset slip the knife up his sleeve when we left. He saw me notice. Neither of us said anything.

When we reached my quarters, I taught the Asset how to shave.

Rowlins delivered the Asset’s first mission debrief to my desk later that evening (they really weren’t wasting any time, were they?), keeping a wary eye on the figure sprawled with casual ease in a chair in a corner. He was right to be wary. ‘Standard operating procedure’ insisted the Asset not be allowed to carry weaponry inside the base. So far the Asset had the scalpel, three knives, and a length of wire squirreled about his person. It hadn’t even been a day. He’d watched me notice him lift all of them from unsuspecting owners, and his eyes grew a little less chilly each time I refrained from taking them from him.

I felt better knowing he was armed, anyway. He was, essentially, my bodyguard as long as we were on base and he was off-mission. He was lethal with his bare hands, but from watching him train in my living room (because there were leering agents with cocks bigger than their brains in the gym who had expectations of my Asset) I knew he was otherworldly with a blade.

I perused the mission file. I was not a field agent, and would not be able to accompany him on his trip. This, privately, I felt was an attempt by the higher-ups (Father included) to make my command of the Asset flimsy and weak. They’d probably try to instate some sort of ‘stand-in’ handler for field work once he was out of my line of sight, who would inevitably feel justified in putting his dick where it doesn’t belong the second I wasn’t there to bark at them about it.

“Soldier,” I said into the silence. He appeared at my elbow soundlessly. “This is your mission debrief.” I handed him the file, which he immediately began to read at a rate that was frankly
astounding. “You will do whatever is necessary to complete this mission in a timely manner. You will not obey any orders from any other agents while in the field that do not coincide with completing this mission. You will not allow any other agents to lay hands on you for any reason that is not critical for your continued survival. An agent attempting to perform sexual activities with you while off-base is to be considered as an attempt to sabotage the mission. You are to give one vocal warning to the offending agent; if the agent persists, you are permitted to disable him non-lethally.”

The Asset’s eyes were like glaciers. “Do you understand?”

“Affirmative,” the Asset replied. His voice was smooth and deep, like the rolling purr of a great panther. His shoulders were loose, the cant of his body angled towards me in a way that would have seemed sexual to anyone who didn’t know better.

I chose to interpret it as gratitude.

“Report back to me upon mission completion,” I told the Asset. “Do not report to medical unless you are critically injured until I have debriefed you.”

“Acknowledged.”

I smiled wryly, tilting my head up to stare at intense grey eyes. “Good luck, Soldier.”

He blinked in reply, and then he was gone.

The Asset sat in the back of the quinjet, sharpening his knives. His eyes never left those of the team accompanying him, especially the one who had proclaimed himself to be his ‘field handler’ the moment the Asset arrived in the hanger.

The Asset had no handlers beyond the primary handler. The primary handler had given the Asset orders, and he would follow them to the letter.

When they were in the air and en route, the ‘field handler’ turned a familiar look upon the Asset. “On your knees, and hands behind your back,” the ‘field handler’ told him with a wide grin. Around him, the others shuffled impatiently in place. The Asset continued sharpening his knives. The Asset did not get on his knees. The ‘field handler’ grew agitated. “Soldat!” he barked. “On your knees! Now!”

“You will not obey any orders from any other agents while in the field,” said the voice of the Asset’s primary handler. The Asset continued sharpening his knives.

“Maybe that last shock shorted it out,” one of the others offered casually. Another laughed and approached the Asset, clapping a hand on the flesh shoulder and applying pressure, as if to force the Asset to the ground.

“You will not allow any other agents to lay hands on you,” said the voice of the Asset’s primary handler. “You are allowed to defend yourself from unwanted and unauthorized advances.”

Parameters: non-fatal.

The Asset flipped a knife into a reverse grip and jammed it into the agent’s elbow joint. The man recoiled with a howl of agony, and the Asset ripped the blade out and down in a way that ensured he would be permanently crippled if aid was not applied immediately.
“Soldat! Stand down!” the ‘field handler’ shouted, surging to his feet.

“The Asset is not to follow commands by any but its primary handler,” the Asset replied blankly. “The Asset is not to allow unauthorized hands upon its person. The Asset will complete the mission in a timely manner.”

“The Asset is going to get on its fucking knees and suck my fucking cock if I have to shoot out its kneecaps to put it there,” the ‘field handler’ seethed, glaring at the Asset with rage-filled eyes. It was pointing a gun at the Asset. The safety was off.

“An agent attempting to perform sexual activities with you while off-base is to be considered as an attempt to sabotage the mission. You are to give one vocal warning to the offending agent; if the agent persists, you are permitted to disable him non-lethally,” said the voice of the Asset’s primary handler.

The Asset could do a great deal within such loose parameters. He continued sharpening his knives.

“Persisting will be considered as an attempt to sabotage the mission,” the Asset purred, voice velvet-covered steel. The scrape of blades on the whetstone was loud in the sudden silence. His muscles were tense with anticipation. “Will you persist?”

“Fuck yes I will persist—!”

The Asset flicked a knife with the metal hand. The agent collapsed, screaming voice lifted up four octaves, hands clapped over the hilt of the knife protruding from his groin, as the others lurched out of their seats and reached for stun batons with cries of alarm.

Castration was non-lethal, after all.

Behind the protective eyewear, the Asset’s eyes gleamed. He continued sharpening his knives. The agents crowded around, batons lifted to strike.

“You will do whatever is necessary to complete this mission,” said the voice of the Asset’s primary handler.

The Asset would comply.

The pilot stared agape as the Asset stalked out of the quinjet, fully armed and armored, sliding a gleaming blade into a holster on its thigh. Behind it, the rest of the STRIKE team were laid out and disabled in various ways. The most notable was the way Matthews was hunched over his groin with a growing puddle of blood under him.

The Asset turned to consider the frozen pilot, slinging a long rifle over its back. It dipped its head once, then vanished into the surrounding trees.

The pilot stared at the unconscious and wounded agents, and wondered how he was supposed to report this.
I stood straight-backed in front of Father, struggling to keep a straight face at the sight of Agent Matthews screaming and clutching his crotch while doctors tried to strap him down for treatment. At my shoulder and slightly behind me, the Soldier loomed like an avenging angel. I could almost pretend the glint of sterile medical-room light off his eyes was satisfaction.

“He really shouldn’t be giving my Asset orders in the first place,” I told Father blandly. He, too, was suppressing a smile. Father had never cared what happened to his agents as long as they could still go out and wage war against personal freedom, and he had a sense of humor black enough to shame an oil slick. “If he wanted his cock sucked so badly he could have bought a fleshlight or something.”

Father smiled easily, ignoring the high-pitching squealing going on a few feet away with enviable composure. This was one of his rare amused smiles, and I knew I wasn’t going to be punished for what the Asset had done on mission.

“…creative interpretation aside, the Asset did follow your orders to the letter. It very rarely puts forth such… effort to be obedient for its handler. Keep up the good work.” Father’s smile widened as Agent Matthews’s voice—impossibly—rose several octaves as the doctors started trying to (ahem) save what they could.

Father clapped a hand on my shoulder as he strolled out, humming under his breath in time with the loud yelling and profanities coming from medical.

I didn’t bother sticking around to watch them futilely attempt to stick the guy’s dick back on or whatever it was they were doing. Matthews wasn’t enhanced. No matter what the doctors did he’d never be sustaining an erection again, or able to put that dick where it didn’t belong.

The walk back to my quarters was, predictably, silent.

“Excellent work, Soldier,” I muttered under my breath as we approached my door. “I approve.”

The Asset blinked slowly in reply, tension unwinding from his shoulders.

I figured I should try to encourage this sort of behavior—the more assholes the Asset ‘sterilized,’ the lower the chance of one of them acting on their frequent threats towards me as well. There weren’t many women in Hydra’s ranks, and this was pretty much why. I’d lost count of the number of times some bigshot agent had tried to ‘put me in my place,’ only the threat of Father’s displeasure holding them back.

I wasn’t useless in a fight, but there was no way I was holding my own against a single one of Father’s more highly-trained agents, of which there were many. Interestingly, every single one of them above Level 6 had threatened to bend me over and fuck me whether I liked it or not. Also interestingly, not a single one of those high-ranked agents had so much as breathed in my general direction since I’d come into possession of the Asset.

I could put two and two together.

Jameson’s files had indicated that the Asset was partial to oranges (only so much as to brag about how he’d taunted the Asset with them without ever letting him actually have one). I produced an orange from my kitchen and handed it to the Asset.

“Peel this and eat it at a rate promoting maximum enjoyment,” I told the Asset, who materialized one of the numerous blades sheathed all over him (which I had not removed and didn’t really plan to) and had the rind of the orange corkscrewing off in one long peel.
I didn’t watch him as he ate his orange. The Asset was smart. He’d know this was a reward for what he’d done to Matthews, and if he connected castrating smart-mouthed uppity agents with receiving an orange?

Well. That was surely a coincidence.
Mommy Loves You (Prototype AU)

Chapter Summary

Mommy loves you, sweetling.

You don't need to look like a monster to be monstrous. Elizabeth Greene learned that lesson well.

Chapter Notes

**Warning:** Unrealistic depictions of unexpected childbirth. They're not exactly anatomically accurate, nor being experienced by anyone sane, but they're there if that squicks you.

Mind the tags.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She came awake with a rattling gasp, choking on fluid and clawing at the ground. It squished unpleasantly between her fingers, and brought attention to the fact that she could feel it on her back and thighs as well.

She was naked?

She lay still, shuddering and heaving for breath, wild-eyed and confused. What was going on? Where was she? *Who* was she? Something contracted in her midsection, like an iron vice wrapped around her organs, and she threw her head back on a scream. Her voice, it--! It was *wrong*! Dual-toned and echoing; it was not the voice she should have had. Should she? She couldn’t remember!

The pain came again, whiting out her vision. Her shoulders pressed against the yielding ground as she arched, still screaming. What was going on! Something was very wrong with her! Eyes wild, she flicked around the area to try and get a grasp on what was happening to her. Was something *eating* her? Was something *tearing her apart*?

White walls, rusting metal, crumbing concrete, a metal table. Sterile. Hospital? She was in a hospital? She screamed again as the pain clamped down on her nerves like barbed wire. Well *that* made sense! Of course she was in a hospital! You went to hospitals when you were in pain, right?

Right?

She dug her fingers into the material spread across the ground like bloody moss, dragging her heaving form towards the table. It was a hospital. That was an exam table! You laid on it and doctors made you better. She wanted to be better. She wanted the pain to stop! She wrapped her fingers around the feet of the table and tried to pull herself up, crying out when she couldn’t muster the strength.
She *needed* to be on that table!

Something gripped her arm, making her scream again—in panic that time—and inhumanly strong muscles yanked her gracelessly up and onto the table. She screamed louder when the pain returned, twice as powerful for the sudden movement, and her eyes blearily focused on the… the thing that had gotten her onto the table.

It was… it was ugly. That was the kindest word she could think of for it. Its face was a rotting, monstrous mess of tumors and weeping sores, eyes filmy and unfocused. Its jaw hung loose on its face, exposing surprisingly sharp teeth, and it seemed to wheeze for breath as it stood staring at her.

She felt no fear from it, now that she could see it. It was… it was kind of cute, actually. The tuft of hair remaining on its head looked soft—if greasy—and it had helped her onto the table. Now a doctor could come make her better! She shakily reached out a hand towards it, and its head lowered to let her pat it like a dog. Its skin felt scaly and damp, sweaty almost. Her fingers stuck to part of its skull, which lifted free when she pulled back. The brain underneath was grey and pulsating.

A spike of pain distracted her from her new pet, and she *shrieked*. Something *moved* inside of her, pressure building sharply between her hips, and for the first time she angled her head down to look at herself.

Naked flesh, grey and pale. Thin, long limbs. And a very protruding stomach that heaved when she looked at it. She was *pregnant*. She was *giving birth*.

She screamed, loud and long, terrified and horrified and confused and a million other adjectives. *What was happening to her?* Where was the doctor? She couldn’t give birth *on her own!* The ugly thing that had helped her earlier was not an adequate substitute for competent medical professionals!

Her stomach heaved again, and she realized it didn’t matter that there wasn’t a doctor. She was giving birth *now*, with only the ugly thing to help her, and no one was going to come. No one was going to answer her screams for help, no one was going to come give her medicine to make the pain go away. She was giving birth on this table, right now, doctors be damned.

A sharp pain hit again—a *contraction*!—and she knew she had to push, now. Instinct was all she had to help with this, and instinct told her to *push*.

She *yowled*, screaming her new dual-toned voice hoarse as her flailing hand reached out and snapped around the ugly thing’s wrist. She clamped down, feeling bone crack and shatter under her fingertips. The ugly thing didn’t make a sound, simply wheezing as she pulverized its arm in her agony.

Abruptly, she *hated* the ugly thing. Why couldn’t it have been more useful to her? Why couldn’t it be a doctor with medicine and calming words? Why did it have to be all she had? She screamed in anger that time, hating the ugly thing and everything about it, and it made a mournful, confused noise in return that cut through her anger like a hot knife.

She cooed at it even as she shuddered and forced herself to *push*, to *push* this invading lifeform out of her body, patting the ruined wrist in forgiveness. It wasn’t its fault that it was so ugly and useless. She didn’t hate it. Mommy wasn’t mad. *Mommy isn’t mad, sweetling.* The thing groaned again, sounding grateful and loving and she loved the ugly thing. The ugly thing had helped her onto the table, had taken her hand when no one else was there. The ugly thing was *loved*.

“M-mommy lo-o-ves you,” she gasped, muscles aching as she screamed again, pushing and pushing and *pushing* and screaming until she could hear nothing but her own agony, voiced aloud for her
audience of one, and then—

—relief. She collapsed onto the bed, boneless with exhaustion, hair plastered to her face with sweat and whatever had been on the ground earlier. But… it was too quiet. Shouldn’t there be crying? Why wasn’t the baby crying? *The baby should be crying!* How did doctors make babies cry? Did they spank them? Was that it?

The ugly thing moved, still groaning, and its entire forearm broke off in her grip. It kept walking towards her trembling thighs, disregarding the piece of arm she had taken with her as it moved, and it reached down. A clammy hand brushed naked thighs and she shivered, disgusted and relieved and confused and hopeful and—

—and the ugly thing was holding a baby. A bloody, healthy baby that wasn’t like her own grey skin or the ugly thing’s mottled pustules. It was still connected to her by an umbilical cord. That needed to be cut. The ugly thing leaned down and bit through it, even as she was shuddering through afterbirth.

The baby still wasn’t crying. *The baby should be crying.*

The ugly thing groaned and moved its only remaining hand to smack at the baby’s back. The baby hiccupped and spat blood and phlegm, coughed, then started wailing.

She felt herself crying. The baby was alive. That mattered, somehow. The ugly thing had saved her baby. She loved the ugly thing. The ugly thing was loved. The ugly thing groaned its pleasure.

The door to the hospital room kicked open, and there was suddenly a man. A man in clothes, with a large gun. A *man.* And she was on a table, *naked.* She *screamed,* angry and afraid and mortified and the man was seeing her naked he was not allowed to see her naked make him stop!

Ugly things poured into the room, screeching and waving bladed arms and nails like talons. The ugly thing holding her baby screeched with them, but remained by her bed holding her baby. It did not drop the baby. The ugly thing was loved.

The man shot at the ugly things, it took several bullets to kill them as they did not notice crippling wounds, until the man was by the bed and staring down at her with a disgusted grimace. More men in clothes came in, and saw her naked. She kept screaming at them, arching on the bed and still shuddering in agony, but no more ugly things came to help her. The ugly thing holding her baby growled and screeched at them, but the men in clothes did not back away.

“The subject and the infant are property of Blackwatch!” one of the men in clothes shouted, the one closest to the bed. “Take them into custody!”

Men in clothes moved forwards and attacked the ugly thing. The ugly thing dropped the baby into her arms and tried to fight back, but it only had one hand and was quickly shot down. She screamed, mourning it. She had loved the ugly thing! They’d killed her ugly thing! But she’d *loved it and they killed what she loved!*

The man closest to her reached out and put a hand around her baby. They’d already killed her ugly things, and now they wanted her baby too?! She snarled, a guttural, double-toned sound and lurched forwards, burying her teeth in his arm. It was the only weapon she had. They would not take her baby!

*They would not take him!*

The man cursed, jerking back, and quickly pulled out a blade and hacked and sawed off his own arm. There. Now he matched the ugly thing.
“Tranq her!” the man shouted, hoarse with his own screaming, and one of the other men shot something at her that hit her in the neck. She screamed in shock, because the thing they hit her with hurt! It burned like ice in her veins, and she felt herself slowing, slowing, slooowwwwiiinnng…

The world was hazy. She felt someone taking her baby, but couldn’t move her arms to hold it. People were talking. She couldn’t make out the words. Hands were on her naked skin, moving her. They were touching places they shouldn’t be touching. She could not stop them. She cried, but her face could not move. She screamed, but her throat did not work.

She begged, but no one could hear her.

She was alone again, for all that she was carried in a crowd.

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It had been many decades. She sat on her cot, arms wrapped around her legs, numb. They kept shooting her with things, injecting her with things to see how she adapted, taking blood and bone and flesh and ignoring her screams and her pleas and her whimpers. They were cruel to her. They touched her when she could not fight back, laughed at her when she could from behind thick glass.

She did not know what had happened to her baby. None of the men would tell her when she asked.

She had not seen an ugly thing since she’d given birth and been captured by these monsters. She missed the ugly things. She knew, somehow, that she could make more ugly things if she got her hands on the monsters who held her here. They knew that too, and made sure she was never able to move when they were close to her.

She heard gunfire, but did not lift her head. Maybe they were coming to shoot her with bullets again to see how she healed? She would look them in the face, she decided. She would remember their faces and their bodies.

She blinked. The room was… red. Full of pustules and red vines? When? What? She could not feel anything beyond her glass prison, but that was a new development. How long had she been lost in her own mind? What was going on?

The door to her prison hissed open. She gasped, inhaling deeply as she suddenly felt again. She could feel the pustules and the vines as if they were her veins and arteries. She couldn’t move them, but she undeniably knew they were there and what they were doing. She felt stronger already, as if the mere act of being exposed to them gave her energy.

There was a man standing there, a man in clothes, but… she stood shakily to her feet. He felt. He felt. He felt like her. Like an ugly thing, but not. Stronger. Healthier. He felt like a part of her she’d been missing, and she took in a lungful of toxic air as her eyes came alive for the first time in forty years.

“Elizabeth Greene?” asked the man in the door. She staggered towards him, reaching out and grasping his shoulders. He tensed, face anxious, and she collapsed into his chest, pressing her face into his sternum. Her face was wet, she realized. She was… crying?

“Is it over?” she whispered into his jacket, fingers gripping his coat with force that should have torn the fabric like paper. It didn’t so much as budge. She felt him hesitate, and then an arm awkwardly went around her shoulders and patted her twice on the back, jerkily and uncertain.

“…not yet,” he admitted lowly, seeming uncomfortable. “There, there?” he tried. She could hear the grimace in his voice.
She made herself pull back, trying to compose herself. She was acting like a loony, crying all over this poor man. This wonderful, beautiful man who wasn’t hurting her, or shooting her, or killing her ugly things.

“Where is my son?” she asked him, desperate, gripping tighter to his arms. His expression immediately became horrified and dismayed, as he grimaced again.

“I… I don’t know.”

She took a shuddering breath. “They, they took him,” she gasped, trying to force the words out. Maybe he would help her! He was strong, and good, and not hurting her. Maybe he would help her like the ugly thing had helped her? “The man—the man I bit. The man who cut off his arm. He took it! My baby! Mine!” She snarled now, angry, but did not make the mistake she’d made with the ugly thing. She did not let her anger, her hatred, touch the man. She did not hate him. She would not touch him with her anger.

“Randall,” the man growled, arms rippling with vines and chitin as swords sprouted from fingers. She blinked in surprise, running her fingertips over the sharp edges and thorny spines. She could not do that, she didn’t think. The ugly things, though. The ugly things had had swords for arms, sometimes. The blades for fingers curved around her back and shoulders like a cage of knives.

“You will find him?” she asked, desperate and hopeful and eager. “The Randall? The Randall took my baby. The Randall will know.”

*She had to find her baby. The Randall knew where her baby was. The Randall must be made to tell.*

Something shivered over the man’s body, as his eyes widened and locked onto her. He looked… spooked. Startled. And… hungry? She was feeling things from him in the way she didn’t from the ugly things. He felt alarmed, and perpetually ravenous, and wary of her.

She didn’t want that. She loved him. He was good, and didn’t hurt her, and knew of the one who’d taken her baby. He could help! He could help like the ugly things, only better because he could talk and his arm probably wouldn’t snap off if she gripped it too hard. She impressed that on him, shared her love of him with him, because that wouldn’t hurt like her anger would.

*She loves him. He is good, and kind, and does not hurt her like the monsters.*

Tension bled out of him as he slumped, almost dropping his full weight on her surprised body. She locked her joints to hold him up—he was heavy!—and hugged him. She’d never had a hug before! This was good. She liked this. Hugs were good. *She liked hugs.*

He trembled, shivering, as his body crawled with vines in a confused mess of emotion. She couldn’t get a grasp on what he was feeling; he felt too much for her to understand. She didn’t experience emotion like that; maybe that was just how he was? Tendrils and vines of black and crimson wrapped around her arms and shoulders like a very tight hug, sharp barbed points hooking into her skin and the suit she wore but not digging further.

Aw, she realized. He didn’t want to let go of the hug! This was like a *super hug*. She couldn’t make her body do that, but she could share her love of the super hug with him, and so she did.

*She loves him! Loves loves loves! Mommy loves you, sweetling. Mommy loves! Hugs are good. Hugs are wonderful. She loves the super hug. He is good. He is kind. He is loved.*

He slid to his knees, his weight pulling her down too, and she kept holding onto him as he shuddered and tried to hold onto a solid shape.
Something tentative brushed across her thoughts, across the void where the ugly things had been.

I… am loved?

*Oh how he is loved,* she cooed back, combing fingers through his hair under the hood he was wearing. *She was so alone, and now she is not, and he is good, and kind, and wonderful.*

I am… good.

*So good!* she sang, crooning in her odd two-toned voice.

You were… alone?

*So alone,* she cried, mournful, memories of screaming alone in a hospital room as she gave birth, alone save the ugly thing that she’d hated but also loved. He shuddered harder in sympathy. Such a good boy! *So good to mother.*

I am alone.

*They were together now!* *He was loved and they were together. She wasn’t alone anymore and she loved him for it.*

We are alike?

*They were so alike!* *She felt him in her thoughts, in her heart, in her very soul! Mommy loves you, sweetling.*

I… am not a monster?

She snarled aloud, clutching him tighter to her breast. Her anger burned like a livewire, lancing over and around their odd connection without touching it. She wouldn’t dare hurt him, because she loved him and because he was good. *They were the monsters!* The men in clothes with guns who’d come in and cut her open and taken out pieces of her to watch her cry and scream and tremble. The ones who’d gunned down her ugly things and stolen her baby from her while he was still bloody and crying! *Those* were monsters!

He was growling, a low, rumbling noise that vibrated her entire body. They had hunted him. They had been about to cut him open, too, on that morgue table. They riddled him with assault rounds and tried to break him open, chasing him down like a rat with helicopters and tanks. They attacked him without provocation, for a reason he didn’t know, didn’t understand. He didn’t *remember* anything before the morgue, and these people were trying to *kill* him!

She rubbed her cheek over his head, crooning in sympathy. She hadn’t remembered, either. She’d woken up and came alive and then given birth. Then they’d stolen her baby. The Randall had taken her baby. Killed her ugly things. Locked her up, made her sick over and over and over again to watch her get better, until she stopped getting sick at all. Cut her open until the wounds started healing too fast, so they held her open while she screamed on the inside and felt *everything.*

Claws wrapped around her entire head like a hand, deadly steel and metal, a helmet and a cage and a steady pressure forcing her closer until her forehead met the space between his neck and shoulder. He was still growling.

*They are monsters.*

*They hunted him, hurt her, stole her baby. The Randall was important to them. Gave them orders.*
The Randall had answers, knew where her baby was!

**Randall knows what happened to me. Why I’m like this. Who I am.**

She cooed, humming deeply as she hugged him as tight as she could manage. This amount of force had powdered human bones. He didn’t twitch. *There were a lot of monsters, and only two of them. She was not strong. He was strong, but he would get hurt hunting the monsters alone. She didn’t want him hurt. She loved him. Loved loved loved! Mommy loves you, sweetling.*

He shuddered again, claws scraping against each other around her back and head, tendrils tightening all over her and pulling her infinitesimally closer. **Mother loves me.** His head lifted and gasping breaths passed over her ear as he shuddered in her arms. **I am loved.**

*So loved,* she murmured, pressing her cheek to his. His skin was hot like a fire. **Mommy wants to keep you safe. Mommy loves you. Loves loves loves. She isn’t strong. But she can help!**

**Help.** He took in a deep, steadying breath, still trembling. **The creatures?**

*The ugly things were strong, like he was strong. The ugly things were easy to make. The ugly things could kill the monsters. The ugly things were replaceable. The ugly things were renewable. Every dead monster made a new ugly thing!* She shivered in glee. **She could help!**

He rumbled as he thought, claws flexing around her. **They could kill the soldiers? Infect them?**

**Infect!** She rejoiced. That was the word she’d been looking for! *He was so smart! So good! She loved him! Loved loved loved loved him! Her smart, good boy. Her smart, handsome boy!* She sang, wordless, tuneless, a melody in two voices overlapping. He growled again, sounding pleased, and claws melted into human hands. Fingers dug into her scalp and her hip, pressing her against his now-solid body in another super hug.

**You can control them?**

*She could! She could help. Help help help her handsome, good boy! The ugly things were hers. She could drive them. Command them. Make them.*

Resolve crystallized in his mind, she could feel it. It was sharp and dangerous and filled their connection almost entirely. She felt subsumed by it, by this strength of will. She’d never felt that strongly about anything other than finding her baby. But, suddenly, she felt. She wanted to kill the monsters in a way she never had before. She wanted to hunt them down and rip them open and eat them alive, swallow them down and consume them whole. Suddenly, it wasn’t enough to just find out where her baby was. She wanted revenge as well. Revenge for every bullet, for every cut, for every incision, for every ambush they’d performed on him as he tried to find himself.

**Hunt them down!** She crowed. **Rip them open! Feast on them! Rip tear kill eat!** Her vision was awash with red. The pustules in the room burst, and things had been gestating inside. They were massive, four-legged and eyeless. They felt like ugly things, and were twice as ugly. She loved them immediately. **Hunt! Kill! Consume!**

The new ugly things roared in chorus, leaping through a damaged wall and triggering panicked screams from outside.

Alarms sounded from the hallway outside the ruined elevator. She lifted her head and panted, exhausted suddenly. It felt like the new ugly things had pulled energy right out of her when they hatched. It wasn’t safe here. They had to leave!
He stood, pulling her up with him as if she weighed nothing. He knew a safe place. He would take her there, where they could rest, and he could help her learn to do what he could do. He was confident she could do all he could do, and maybe more.

She cooed, holding tight to his shoulders as he picked her off the ground, cradling her carefully. She loved him. *He was loved.*

He rumbled in reply, turning towards the hole her new ugly things had made. *I am loved.*

She kept her eyes wide open as he leapt out of the building, freefalling dozens of stories towards the nearest roof. She loved this! Loved him! This was good, and did not hurt, and got her away from the monsters. She thrummed with happiness.

*Mommy loves you, sweetling.*

From under his hood, she saw his lip curl into a smile.

Chapter End Notes

This started out as an attempt to SI as Elizabeth Greene, maybe as The Gamer, and quickly devolved into something else entirely. My headcanon always scowls at the fact that Greene basically dropkicks Alex at first sight rather than, I don't know, taking advantage of the fact that they're actually pretty similar? A smarter (or luckier) Greene could have done a lot of mental or emotional damage to Alex on that first meeting, back when he was still pretty fragile and still trying to figure out what had happened to him and what the hell was going on.

I figure someone like Alex who has literally no memories of anything except being attacked, or snapshots of things his victims have lived through, would be bowled over by suddenly experiencing unconditional love for the first time out of the blue, at least this early on before he really develops a solid sense of self. Elizabeth Greene should be no one's emotional anchor, Alex honey.

This basically screws canon over utterly, what with Greene and Alex being mostly on the same page goal wise. The Hive Mind Greene is in control of isn't going to do either of them any favors, at least not in regards to Alex keeping any humanity at all if Dana's not up to the task of keeping him in check. Don't know if I can really take this anywhere, but it was fun to write anyway!
Nightmare Mode, Part 1 (Avengers AU)

Chapter Summary

I didn’t have time to look down at myself before the text box flashed green and resolved into bright white words.

[Character Creation Complete]
[Starting New Game+]

And with that, the world twitched and slid sideways like a bad powerpoint animation. When I managed to squint my eyes back open, I was staring up at a bland grey ceiling and huddled in a pile of other crying children. There were bars on the door and there were no windows.

I took a moment to sift through what this meant, before catching sight of a guard walking by outside with a familiar red skull-octopus on their shoulder.

Well… fuck.

Chapter Notes

This here's a long one. Buckle up, kiddos. Mind the tags.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I had always expected death to be more… concrete. As I blinked slowly at the abyssal expanse of black which had seeped outwards from my currently nonexistent feet in all directions like ink, I tried to wrap my mind around the sheer illogicality of what I was looking at.

[You have died. New Game+?]

[ ] Yes
[ ] No

It was a text box. An actual text box, with actual literal text inside of it. It was also implying I had managed to die somehow without noticing, but that was actually the least of my worries at this point. And wasn’t that a trip? That my death was the least of my concerns.

I ‘walked’ in a circle around the text box. It was two-dimensional in a way I just… wasn’t used to seeing in real life. No matter what angle I looked at it from, it was always facing me head-on without
actually seeming to rotate. I stopped to really consider what the implications of this text box invading my afterlife were.

First, it was suggesting that my entire life up until this point had been a game playing itself on autopilot. That was not a particularly fun thought to have. Secondly, it was implying the ability to start a new game. A New Game Plus for that matter, which implied I’d likely keep my memories and at least some of my skills if it was following any sort of game logic.

With literally nothing to lose and driven by sheer morbid curiosity, I reached out and touched the box next to Yes. The text scrolled across the box like a rolodex, each letter clicking into place out of sync with each other which made for a somewhat confusing scene until they all fell still and resolved into understandable words.

[Character Creation]

[ ] Import Character

[ ] New Character

I’d read enough stories about characters suffering from body dysphoria when they found themselves dumped into other worlds to know better than to pick new character. I reached out and touched the import feature.

Suddenly my standing form had weight and substance to it, where before I’d been mostly just a formless sort of presence capable of movement. I looked down and saw myself, just as I had been before I apparently died, dressed in casual clothing of jeans and a nondescript t-shirt. I reached up to my face and, yep, I was still wearing glasses.

[World State Selection]

I looked up again as the text changed. World State Selection? Was this… was I going to be able to customize the world? The options it presented me hinted that, yes, I was actually going to be customizing the world. That was… very, very far outside of my comfort zone. Who was I to have the authority to, what, change the fundamental laws of reality? What right did I have to decide how the world operates?

Taking a steadying breath, I made myself consider the choices carefully. I was here, and if I wasn’t hallucinating then it was likely that all of my actions had consequences. I’d have to do my best to mitigate them so I could sleep at night.

[ ] Apocalypse Now

You wake up during an apocalyptic event. The world has ended, and the remnants of humanity are struggling to survive in their new reality. What happened to the world is up to you, but be aware that life as you know it has ceased to exist.

If I felt like condemning potentially billions of people to death for the sake of adventure, that would be the option to pick. From what it was suggesting, I would have some sort of control over what kind of apocalypse happened, which meant I’d have an actual literal hand in the end of the world. Be it zombies, alien invasions, or fucking Fallout. No thank you; I didn’t need that much death on my conscience.

[ ] Parallel
You awaken in a world disarmingly similar to your own, only with a few very solid differences. The choices are yours, from an entire world of genderswapped humans to having dogs be the dominant species on Earth. Perhaps America lost the Cold War, or the Industrial Revolution was postponed for a century. Whatever the case, nothing will be the way you remember it.

While an interesting premise, I did not like the thought of having to make a decision like that. Genderswapping the entire world? That was… probably not as huge an impact as it might seem, but who knew what kind of effect that would have on innovation and politics? If all male politicians were women and therefore discriminated against in reverse… or would they still be in charge, but it would make the world a female-dominant society? I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

[ ] Stranger Than Fiction

You find yourself transported to a fictional world, with all the dangers and excitement therein. The world is chosen at random, but it will be one that you are at least passably familiar with. As recompense, you will be awarded an additional Talent Point.

…an additional what? Never mind; this is, so far, the most promising option and the only one that doesn’t involve fundamentally changing or destroying civilization as I know it. I’d be sure and keep it in mind, while shelving the concept of Talent Points for later.

[ ] The Gamer

Your life is a video game, and you can treat it as such. Awards [Gamer’s Mind] and [Gamer’s Body] Status Effects. The world you find yourself in is chosen at random, and it may not be one you are familiar with.

Is that… not what this is already? I guess that one means the more common ‘quests and HUDs and leveling up’ sort of experience, rather than this weird afterlife hijacking. I didn’t like the thought of it dropping me somewhere completely unknown, though. Knowing my luck I’d wind up in the setting of Until Dawn or one of those jump-scare horror games taking place in an abandoned sanitarium.

[ ] Life: Take Two

You’ve been reborn in your old body in your old world, with access to all of your memories and future knowledge. This knowledge will fade naturally as you age, the same as regular memories.

That one was tempting. Very tempting. Damn, I wish there had been a bunch of awful choices and one solid one that would make deciding easier. I looked over all five options and considered them, before slowly reaching out and selecting my choice.

[X] Stranger Than Fiction

The chance to actually live in a fictional world was just too good to pass up. Plus that ‘talent point’… I had a good feeling about where that might be going.

[Selecting World. Please Wait…]

I watched apprehensively as a list of names and places began shuffling and scrolling and flickering frankly way too fast for me to get a glimpse of them. I thought I’d seen Fallout and Hellsing (neither good choices to be stuck in at all) but I could have been mistaken. I barely breathed as one by one the names greyed out until at last the words stopped moving, leaving one setting highlighted in green.
That was… not the worst possible place I could have wound up. Sure there was Hela and Malekith and alien invasions and supervillains and HYDRA, but… well, it could have been Hellsing, or Fallout, or Prototype or somewhere where things routinely treated humans like Twinkies.

I took several deep breaths as I forced my struggling brain to accept that this was real, that this was happening, and that I needed to focus on the potential Talent Points offered me to increase my chance of either living to see 30, or finding a way to avoid every single main character in the entire MCU for the foreseeable future.

You have been awarded <Three> Talent Points based on the Completion Status of your previous game. An additional <One> Talent Point has been added due to World State: Stranger Than Fiction. Each Talent may only be taken once unless specified otherwise. Effects are cumulative.

Three points for living my life how I did? I wonder how many I would have had if I’d been more successful, or more adventurous, or lived past 25. I pushed past that thought and looked at the offerings given to me. Some of them looked… suspiciously familiar. As in, ‘from a book or CYOA’ familiar.

[ ] The Wolverine: You heal from injuries faster than people can make them using conventional means. Death is still possible, but anything less than full atomic annihilation can be brushed off with enough time to heal. Vulnerable to drowning and suffocation.

[ ] Alabaster: You reset to a pristine condition every 4.3 seconds. This includes physical wounds, poisons or status effects, physical mutations, and any damage to anything you are wearing or holding at the time of reset. If you are utterly destroyed before a reset completes, you will perish.

[ ] Wildcard: One power from the Superpower Wiki is chosen at random and given to you. Your proficiency in this power can be increased with training and heightens exponentially with age. Another Talent Point may be used to reroll for another power if the first is not desired.

[ ] Escalation: The more damage you take, the more stress you feel, the more danger you’re in… the stronger you get. Escalating your form removes wounds and status effects, as well as increases your strength, reflexes, and speed. At your highest Escalation level you are invulnerable and unstoppable, but it will take quite the fight to get you there.

[ ] Man’s Best Friend: All animals and beasts you encounter will automatically be non-hostile to you. If taken multiple times, you gain the ability to permanently tame one or more animals or beasts to be your loyal pet. May be taken (3) times.

[ ] Planeswalker: If you survive in your current world for ten years, you gain the ability to choose a different World State upon your death with all of your skills and Talents intact. Any additional Talent Points gained in this world can be used to purchase additional Talents upon relocating.

[ ] Roll A d20: You have the option to roll a d20 before any action or decision to alter the outcome. Reality is paused while you roll. A natural 20 will guarantee a complete success, while a natural 1 will guarantee a critical failure. Consequences of rolling the d20 can be potentially fatal.
[ ] Muggleborn: You are able to select one natural magical skill from the Harry Potter series for your use. You will not be able to use magic otherwise. Potential skills include Metamorphagus, Animagus, Apparition, Natural Legilimens, Natural Occlumens, and Parseltongue.

[ ] Siren: Your voice is able to hypnotize or compel anything with ears into doing your will. The effect only persists as long as you continue speaking or singing, the moment you are silent for more than five seconds your control fails.

I stared, wide-eyed at the massive array of possibilities. These were all magnificent. I could think of reasons to take all of them, which made narrowing down my choices with my measly four Talent Points a monumental challenge. The very first thing I did was press the ever-loving hell out of Planeswalker, because that was my ticket home or—at least—to a less dangerous world if I managed to last a decade. Then I made sure to pick The Wolverine, because if there’s one thing I knew, it was that a healing factor would be a literal lifesaver in a world where aliens routinely invaded major population centers. That left me with two points, and I was seriously considering looking into Wildcard.

I’d used the Superpower Wiki before for Worm CYOAs, and even picking randomly tended to give pretty interesting results. But did I want to risk using both points and getting stuck with something stupid like Sulphur Manipulation? I considered the kinds of reality-breaking powers on that wiki and decided I did. Plus, even if it stuck me with something really useless, I still had The Wolverine and Planeswalker to back me up. It’d be difficult to survive in the MCU using only a healing factor, but not impossible.

I pressed Wildcard and wondered what would happen. What happened, it turned out, was another eye-bending scroll of words and possibilities and unsynchronized letters until it slowly clicked into a readable phrase.

[Multiversal Recreation]

User can recreate the multiverse from its beginning state in any way they wish. They can reform the multiverse by inducing a new Big Bang Event altered according to their wishes and even recreate a multiverse that was originally destroyed.

[ ] Accept

[ ] Reroll (1 Talent Point)

I… I have no words. That was… extremely overpowered and also extremely useless. What good was destroying the entire multiverse in order to recreate it from scratch to me? That would, essentially, be erasing all life in the multiverse, which potentially contained infinite universes. That was a literally innumerable number of lives I’d be destroying for… what? To remake it in my image? No. As awe-inspiring as that power sounded and looked on paper, I really needed something more immediately useful. I reached out and pressed reroll.

The letters scrambled and I watched with baited breath, praying for something I could actually use.

[Hypercompetence]

User possesses powerful/incredible skill in one, several, or in some cases every possible field or
discipline, whether intellectual or practical, formal or mundane. User demonstrates a mind-boggling level of perceptiveness and efficiency in their respective field(s), multiplying virtually impossible feats with ridiculous ease. Their unbelievable level of competency truly puts them in an unreachable category of their own, that simply eludes others’ understanding.

I blinked very heavily. I could think of worse things to have than an unnatural level of competency in potentially everything. So basically my superpower was going to be being Sebastian from Black Butler. I wasn’t discouraged; it might not be as flashy as turning into dragons or law manipulation, but what it was was subtle. I could probably actually hide that I had that sort of power, or disguise it as being a prodigy of some kind. It was a power that might not ‘fly under the radar,’ but it wasn’t going to be bringing me to the attention of things like Thanos anytime soon.

But then the text was rearranging itself, so apparently I wasn’t quite done yet.

[Perks and Disadvantages]

You may take a maximum of <Three> Perks and <Three> Disadvantages. Each Perk costs <One> Talent Point. Disadvantages taken award an additional <One> Talent Point each.

[   ] (Perk) Linguist: You are preternaturally gifted with languages. You perceive every spoken language as your native tongue, and can learn to read and write them with very little practice. With time, you will be able to speak and comprehend inhuman languages as well.

[   ] (Perk) Incognito: The source of your Talents and powers is impossible for others to determine without you informing them outright. Mind readers cannot take the knowledge from your thoughts, truth serums cannot pull it out of you, and people will fabricate their own (false) explanations for anything unusual you do.

[   ] (Perk) Comic Book Pretty: You are always airbrushed to perfection, after battle your clothes are always only artfully torn, and any wounds you take will only leave aesthetically pleasing scars.

[   ] (Perk) Runscript: You are able to split your attention in order to run mental simulations to train your skills or Talents. Experience gained during your simulations is earned half as quickly as it would be should you train them in real life, but you can do other things simultaneously without detriment to your attention. Physical strength is not transferred to the real world from simulations, although muscle memory is.

[   ] (Disadvantage) Failed a Luck Check: You wake up in your new world under unfortunate circumstances and in a hostile environment. Nothing around you will be immediately lethal if you play your cards right, but you will in no way be considered safe.

[   ] (Disadvantage) Regression: You wake up as a small child, but with access to your adult mind and emotions. You will have to age naturally, and any Talents or powers you possess will begin at weakened levels to compensate.

[   ] (Disadvantage) Headhunted: Every shadowy organization in the world wants a piece of you for one reason or another. They will never stop hunting you. Other organizations will only stop their pursuit if you are captured by one of them, or become powerful enough to be untouchable.

[   ] (Disadvantage) Like a Duckling: You imprint on the first person of authority you encounter in your new world. You are compelled to obey them, but can resist their orders with effort. You
are not compelled to remain around them, and will not be compelled to obey any orders you are not present to witness.

This was vastly more difficult than it should have been. I could see two perks right off the bat that I desperately wanted, and one that I literally required to live. So if I wanted all the perks I desired I was going to have to take all three possible disadvantages. Well, I knew which disadvantage I wasn’t taking, at least. There was no way in hell I was taking Headhunted, not with organizations like HYDRA and AIM and Department X present in that world.

This was going to be very painful. The three disadvantages I could take now were… well they were terrible to be honest. I’d be stuck as a child in ‘unfortunate circumstances,’ and set to imprint on the first officer of the law or federal agent I stumble across. One thing I didn’t want was to take Like a Duckling unless I had to, because knowing my luck the first ‘person of authority’ I met would be a HYDRA agent or a child molester or something.

So, regretfully, I set aside my dreams for Linguist setting me up with a ready-made career to follow and turned my attention to the two that would serve me best.

[X] Incognito

[X] Runscript

[X] Failed a Luck Check

[X] Regression

I looked at my choices and despaired slightly at reliving my childhood, but, well. Needs must. With a steadying breath I reached up and touched the ‘accept’ button. Abruptly, my field of view reoriented much lower to the ground than I was used to with almost dizzying speed. The text box followed me down, but I could feel that my limbs were a great deal shorter than I was accustomed to.

I didn’t have time to look down at myself before the text box flashed green and resolved into bright white words.

[Character Creation Complete]

[Starting New Game+]

And with that, the world twitched and slid sideways like a bad powerpoint animation. When I managed to squint my eyes back open, I was staring up at a bland grey ceiling and huddled in a pile of other crying children. There were bars on the door and there were no windows.

I took a moment to sift through what this meant, before catching sight of a guard walking by outside with a familiar red skull-octopus on their shoulder.

Well… fuck.

Failed a Luck Check indeed. If ever there was a situation that perfectly encapsulated rolling a natural 1, it was this one. I had no idea how I’d ended up here logically, but none of the other children
seemed to either so at least I wasn’t standing out in that regard. From what I’d gathered from my gentle interrogations, most of the other kids had been stolen away in the night or plucked off the streets. Maybe half of them spoke English, and the others all spoke various languages I didn’t recognize. None of them knew what we were here for or what the ‘bad men’ planned to do with us.

I had a few suspicions about that, each of them worse than the last, and prayed I was wrong about all of them. Because I may have been hypercompetent, but I was still only a small child. The hypercompetence of a child was vastly different from that same amount of skill on an adult.

I spent the first night in my new home with my unwanted roommates figuring out how to trigger a runscript, and ever since I’d worked out how to sort of... shift my attention diagonally away from reality (which was weird and felt strange and unnatural but was also like seeing two different worlds at once) I made sure to ‘practice’ my sneaking skills. I wasn’t sure how this worked, exactly, but I did find myself moving a little quieter each day out of habit.

And then, on day five of our relative isolation (and day five of watching children cry and be forced to relieve themselves in a hole in the floor with a dozen sets of eyes watching them), the door opened and a man in a brown suit stepped in. He was nondescript and of average height, looking like someone you might pass on the street. Nothing about him screamed ‘evil Hydra operative,’ but I suppose that’s what had made him so attractive to the shady organization I found myself held captive by.

“Dobroye utro studenty,” the man was saying. And I… felt something strange. I could… understand what he was saying. But not as if he was speaking English, or that I had actually understood the literal words he’d used. It was more like I was getting the gist of it, the meaning of what he’d said rather than the actual diction. And the more he spoke, the clearer my understanding seemed to get until I was understanding what he was saying as if I were a native speaker. “U nas vpereddi napryazhenny den’!”

Good morning, students. We have a busy day ahead of us.

Somehow, I kept my face a mask of confused terror like the other children. Somehow, I did not let on that I was able to both hear and comprehend what this man was saying. The man smiled kindly at us. He was all the more subtly terrifying for it.

“I have a special treat for you today, students,” the man said, and that time there wasn’t even a lag between hearing what he said and understanding him. “We’re going to play a little game! Doesn’t that sound fun?”

I carefully did not look at the faces of the other children. I had no way to know if any of them spoke what I was assuming was Russian, and did not intend to enlighten anyone that I was one such child. The man turned and barked a word at the door. Heel! he shouted shortly into the dark corridor. Was he calling in a dog? Was he going to set a dog on us? I wouldn’t put it past them.

I flipped my mental runscript from ‘stealth’ to ‘animal handling’ just to be safe.

But then something worse happened.

The Winter Soldier walked in. It took everything in me not to react beyond shying away like all the other children. Because this was definitely the Soldier, and not Bucky Barnes. He had a terrifying deadness to his expression, as if he were a corpse that had just gotten up one day and started walking around.

“See what a good dog I have?” the man was saying, as if from underwater. My ears were ringing,
and it wasn’t from the language disconnect. “But he is only one dog, and Hydra needs many. So we’re going to play a game.” The man smiled. At his side, the Soldier was scrutinizing each child one by one with eyes like steel knives. They stopped and settled on me for no reason that I could discern; I wasn’t acting any different than the other children, was I? Was there some tell in my expression that had let him know I was not like them? That I was actually following along with the conversation?

“Game?” one of the other children warbled. So there was at least one Russian speaker amongst us who’d been more or less understanding what was being said. By the way the speaker—a small boy of perhaps eight—had relaxed a little, I doubted they’d understood nearly enough.

The man smiled at the boy this time, a glint in his eye that I recognized even if the others didn’t. This was a man whose tastes ran far darker than anyone with a functioning moral compass had a right to.

“Yes. You are going to be playing Hide and Seek with my dog.”

I flicked a terrified glance back at the Soldier, who had not lifted his razor-sharp attention from my face. Somehow, the Soldier knew I was different. The Soldier had looked at this room, full of tiny children and fully-armed guards, and decided I was the only one who merited his attention. I prayed the man in the suit wouldn’t notice.

“When my dog catches you, it’s game over,” the man was saying, still smiling at the boy who’d proven to speak Russian. “But, if you are among the last ones he finds? You get a prize,” the man beamed, voice cajoling. “Doesn’t that sound fun?”

I didn’t dare take my eyes off the Soldier. He was poised on the balls of his feet like a wolf, or something with claws and teeth that lurked in tall grass for hours at a time, motionless, just waiting for something to get too close. The Soldier stared straight back, his attention heavy and thick like chains wrapped around my lungs.

This man in the brown suit was going to set us loose in the corridors, I realized with dim horror. And then he was going to sick the Winter Soldier on us to hunt us down one by one. Game over for those he catches, and a prize for the ones who last the longest. Helplessly, my eyes fluttered to the other children, who were still nervous but far less anxious than they should be. None of them understood, I knew. None of them could hear the undertones of what was being said, could comprehend the real threat they were about to be in.

None of them knew that most of them weren’t going to live to see tomorrow.

Because as much as I wanted to save them, to help them, I knew I couldn’t. This wasn’t a game. This wasn’t a story or a movie or a play. This was my life. And if I wanted to live, I had to be the last one the Soldier finds. So I was going to hide. And I was going to do it better than any of them, because unlike them I was an adult with critical thinking skills backed up by supernatural hypercompetence in everything I do.

I was going to run and hide and win this game, and I was going to let a dozen children break under the Fist of Hydra in the process. I looked back at the Soldier, and knew. The Soldier knew that I understood the real purpose of this. The Soldier knew what I had just decided, knew that I was going to let children die so that I could live. The Soldier knew, but there was no judgement. Simply acknowledgement.

Perversely, I felt a little better. At least someone knew how twisted I was (how cowardly), what I was planning to do, and didn’t condemn me for it. Rationally I knew the Soldier didn’t have the capability to condemn anyone, probably didn’t even have the emotional range to care about anything at all, but… but I still felt better.
“I will give you twenty minutes to hide, students,” the man said, dragging my attention forcefully back towards his face. He was still smiling. “And then my dog will start hunting.” There was a long pause as he studied us, probably looking for anyone who’d caught on to his word choice. My face was a mask of terror that wasn’t even partially faked, so he glossed right over me. “One…”

I bolted. Without even waiting for the other children to realize the countdown had started, I was hurling myself out the door, brushing directly past the motionless Soldier to do so. He didn’t so much as twitch, but his attention stayed on me until I was literally out the door and out of his line of sight. There were guards posted at regular intervals who smirked at my fleeing form, but none of them said anything and none of them stopped me.

They were all in on it. They were all party to this game, probably hoping for front row seats to watching the Soldier rip apart a bunch of children. This was probably not the first time they’d played this game, I realized with some numb horror as I kept running. Even as I ran, though, I was cataloguing differences.

The way I moved, the way I held my weight and balance, it was just better than any form I’d ever had as an adult. I could sustain this speed for a long time, I realized. Hypercompetence at work. Suddenly, what had seemed like a good jack-of-all-trades sort of superpower now appeared to be the kind of prodigious skill that Hydra would literally commit genocide for.

I didn’t have time to think about it. I just pushed on, seeking out a good hiding space that wouldn’t have me instantly located the second the Soldier slipped his leash. That ruled out every room I was passing, even if the scientists and guards inside would probably let me hide there and not give me away. A vent overhead caught my attention and before I even made the conscious choice I was skidding to a stop and whipping my head around for inspiration.

There was nothing I could use to reach the vent. Only my body. I measured the distance between the walls—to far to realistically wall-jump my way up there, but I was running on adrenaline and alien hypercompetence. There was no such thing as ‘too far.’

I dashed towards the left and hit the wall with my foot, kicking off with force no child should realistically be able to summon, and the heel of my foot hit the other wall faster than I had expected. I pushed off again, and again, until tiny fingers hooked on the grate of the vent and I threw my body weight into a sharp torque that—somehow—jerked the screws on one side free so the vent swung open. I held on and let momentum swing me back up into the vent, pulling the grate closed after me. The screws were still hanging loose in their frame, so I rolled to one side and kept a grip on the half-open vent with my fingertips to hold it closed and tried to quiet my breathing.

I waited. Occasionally I’d hear tiny footfalls as other children ran by underneath, some speaking to each other under their breath and others actually giggling slightly. They had no idea.

I quickly calculated how long it had been since the ‘game’ had started. I’d run for seven minutes before finding the vent, and it had taken me about twenty seconds to get up inside it and hide. Twelve minutes had passed since then. The game would begin in under a minute.

One minute and twelve seconds later, I heard the first high-pitched scream.

There’s something inherently chilling in the voices of children. There’s a reason horror movies always used singing children or their laughter as a soundtrack, and why their screams pierce deeper than any noise an adult could make.

This wasn’t like any of that. It was high and terrified and pained and—mercifully—very short. It was a burst of sound that echoed through the corridors and carried throughout the complex. I closed my
eyes, even as I heard other, startled screams from the hiding children who were now realizing that this game was not a game at all. I could hear muffled sobs from a room in the hallway I was hiding in. These were children. They didn’t have the discipline to keep quiet in the face of danger. They didn’t know any better. For them, death was just an abstract concept, something that happened to goldfish or hamsters or the occasional household pet.

Water slid down my cheek and I realized I was crying. My breaths were still even, and I was still quiet, but I was crying. I cried for the children whom I’d left to their fate (what could I have realistically done for them?), I cried for myself (because even winning this game meant losing in the end), and I cried for the Soldier, for the ghost of Bucky Barnes buried under that shell of ice and steel, for eventually having to live with the knowledge that he’d crushed the life out of children on Hydra’s orders. That wasn’t the kind of memory anyone could recover from. It was almost merciful that Hydra probably wouldn’t let him keep it for long.

One by one I heard the short, panicked screams start up and then cut off. Whatever kind of monster the Winter Soldier was, he wasn’t the kind to drag out their deaths. It was a small comfort that wasn’t any kind of comfort at all.

Then there was silence. Tears still slid down my face, but I resolutely did not make a sound. I was the only one left, if I counted the number of screams I’d heard silenced. It was just me and the Soldier, hunting me down like a dog.

There wasn’t any warning. I hadn’t heard footsteps, or the shuffle of fabric, or any warning whirs from the metal arm. The grate I was loosely holding onto was just suddenly gone, ripped away by titanium fingers infinitely stronger than my own. I jerked my hand away from the sudden, yawning opening to my right, but bit back all sound. My heart pounded like a jackrabbit, and it was difficult to draw in enough breath, but I was resolute. I would not make a sound.

There was silence from the corridor below me. I could feel the weight of the Soldier’s stare on me through the ceiling like a brand. Neither of us moved for several long moments.

“Priyekhat’,” a low voice rumbled from beneath me, rough like gravel. I took a stuttering breath, the first unusual sound I’d made. Come, the Soldier bade me.

Slowly, as if I were on tetherhooks, I edged sideways and peered over the edge of the vent towards the ground. The Soldier stood motionless directly underneath the opening, eyes locked on mine the second they were revealed. There was no blood on him that I could see, but the plates of his arm gleamed dully in the low light. He lifted the metal hand towards me, palm up. He was tall enough that he could have reached in and dragged me forcibly out of the vent if he’d wanted to.

I reached out and let fingers strong enough to crush steel wrap around my wrist. My hand was so tiny, so delicate looking in the grip of that huge hand. The Soldier pulled, gently, and let me reach with my other hand and wrap all my limbs around his arm as he lifted me out of the vent, effortlessly supporting my entire weight on that one hand.

The Soldier set me on the ground, still keeping his metal fingers wrapped around my wrist, and I stared up at him through red-rimmed watery eyes without making a sound.

“Priyekhat’,” the Soldier rumbled again, tugging lightly as he began to walk. He kept his stride small to accommodate my short stature, even though if he’d wanted to drag me along like dead weight he could have. Come.

“YA vyigral?” I heard myself ask the Soldier, mouth stumbling over the unfamiliar words even though I knew they were the right ones. The Soldier looked down at me, expression dead but eyes
solemn.

“Da.”

I bowed my head and let the Soldier lead me on. I had won.

But at what cost?

There were three children unconscious in the cell. The Soldier led me inside and released my wrist, stepping back even as I stared up at him through teary eyes. I hadn’t said a word after he’d confirmed that I’d won, and neither had he. He considered me with his sharp, knifelike eyes before he dipped his head once and turned to leave, closing the heavy door behind him.

I took a deep, shuddering breath and looked at the other ‘winners.’ Four of us were left out of over a dozen. One of them was the Russian boy. There was another girl with short blond hair and a boy covered in fading bruises. And then there was me. I sat down in the corner and watched their unconscious forms. I couldn’t see where the Soldier had incapacitated them, but it wouldn’t have been difficult to knock them out when they were just so much weaker than he was.

Why had the Soldier not knocked me out, too? Why had he bid me come out of the vent on my own? Was it my prize for being the last one standing? Was it because I’d obeyed him? Had he offered that command to all the winners, but I had been the only one to actually listen? The girl and the bruised boy probably wouldn’t have understood the word to know to obey it, and the Russian boy was probably too terrified to listen at all.

Had my compliance won me his compassion?

I tucked my face into my knees and wrapped my arms around them, closing my eyes tight. My cheeks were still wet. I hoped they were dry before the man in the suit came back.

“Rise and shine, students!”

I jerked upright, tense as a bowstring. The other children awoke with cries of alarm, faces wet and blotchy, as they clumped together and scrabbled away from the open door and the form of the man in the suit standing there. At his shoulder was the Soldier, who was dividing his attention between the four of us for once.

The children seemed more afraid of the Soldier than the man in the suit, which was such a huge mistake that I could barely believe such naivety existed. I knew they were young, but… I had never been very good with children. Maybe this was why.

“I hope you had fun yesterday playing with my dog,” the man grinned, eyes scanning over the two boys from time to time, just often enough for me to notice and grow cold. I’d almost forgotten that part in the horror of everything else that had happened. “He’s a good dog, isn’t he?” the man stared
at us expectantly, still grinning, as if waiting for a response.

I flicked my eyes towards the one who spoke Russian, but he was sheet white and trembling. He wasn’t going to be giving the man the answer he wanted. I wondered if anyone had heard me speaking to the Soldier and was going to give away that I, too, spoke Russian, but the man’s eyes did not move to me. He kept staring expectantly at the boy, grin fading the longer he went without a response.

“Regardless,” the man continued less brightly, seeming slightly irritated, “we’ve got another game for you today! Isn’t that exciting?”

The Russian boy paled even further, face bloodless. The other two, seeing his reaction as the ‘only’ one who understood what was being said, mirrored him.

Pleased with their reactions, the man began smiling again. “This time, though, I shall need a volunteer. Who wants to come play with my dog today?”

And then he fucking waited, as if he really thought one of us would stand up and volunteer as tribute. But.

I turned my head to look at the others. They were actually children, children who had no idea what was happening or why. It was debatable if they even knew that the others were dead. If no one volunteered, what would the man do? Would he punish us? Would he make us all play his game? I felt, deep in my bones, that the punishment for not volunteering ourselves would be a thousand times harsher than the penalties for losing this next game.

Shakily, I pushed myself to my feet. All eyes slid to lock onto me, and I trembled under the attention even as I made myself step closer to the man and the Soldier. I couldn’t make myself speak, but my ‘volunteering’ had all but confirmed for the man and the guards that I understood Russian even if I didn’t speak it. The man’s smile was not as wide as it was when he looked at the boys, but he still smiled at me all the same.

“Dog,” the man barked at the Soldier, “take her to the playroom and teach her the rules. I think our other students need a little… discipline.”

The Soldier stepped forward and the metal hand landed heavily on my shoulder. I did not resist or look back as he steered me out of the room and down the corridor, still trembling but trying not to slow him down. I flinched when I heard what sounded like a hand hitting flesh and a small cry, but still did not look back. I couldn’t afford to.

The ‘playroom’ turned out to be another cell. This one had an adult-sized cot bolted to one wall, along with a toilet and a tall sink. It was obviously a room designed with an adult in mind, and not a small child, so I wondered with dazed horror what I was doing in it.

My eyes kept drifting towards the cot. I didn’t think the Soldier was… that kind of man, but if he were ordered? He’d be that kind of man, if Hydra told him to be.

Instead, I was led to the center of the room and the hand on my shoulder pressed down. The strength behind that hand ensured I’d sit whether I wanted to or not, so I let my legs fold under me rather than make the Soldier force me down. The hand lifted once I was sitting, and to my astonishment the Soldier folded himself down on his knees in front of me with the sort of liquid grace I normally applied to cats or snakes.

His expression was still dead, and his focus still razor sharp, but I didn’t feel any sort of actual
menace from him. I hadn’t even when he was hunting me, though, so that probably had more to do with a lack of emotion than a lack of intent.

“The Superior’s word is law,” the Soldier grated, sounding just as rough as he had the night before, “Repeat it back.”

“The Superior’s word is law,” I parroted automatically, hearing myself speaking in Russian and afraid what the reaction might be should I speak English instead.

“Compliance is rewarded. Repeat it back.”

“Compliance is rewarded.” I thought of a low voice ordering me down out of a vent, and metal fingers gently shackling my wrist when I obeyed.

“Hesitation is death. Repeat it back.”

“Hesitation is death,” I repeated, being sure not to hesitate while saying it. Who knew who might be listening.

“All are expendable. Repeat it back.”

“A-all are expendable,” I replied, stumbling slightly over that one. The Soldier did not comment on my fumbling, infinitely patient.

“Hail Hydra,” the Soldier rumbled, eyes fixed on me intently. I mimicked him without pausing to wonder if I was supposed to.

“Hail Hydra.” The words tasted like bile, but I said them. The Soldier dipped his head in a nod, so apparently I had chosen correctly even though he hadn’t specifically told me to repeat him.

“Get on the cot,” the Soldier unexpectedly ordered. My heartbeat tripled in my chest, but I stood shakily to my feet. I turned and walked for the cot, because the Superior’s word is law, and the Soldier was nothing if not superior to me. It took a few tries to haul myself onto the thin sheet covering the steel frame, because I was so short and the bed was so tall, but I managed it.

I sat on the edge, feet dangling, and just stared at my own legs, dazed. I was so small. I looked back up at the Soldier, still kneeling in the middle of the floor, watching me. The Soldier was a very large man. Broad at the shoulders and taller than most people I’d ever met in my… my last life. His biceps were bigger than my head even had I been an adult.

If the Soldier came over to the cot at that moment and pushed me down, I would take it. I would not fight back, not only because it would be beyond pointless, but because if I wanted to live, I would have to toe the line. I was mentally an adult. That wouldn’t make it any better, but it would be easier than if I had actually been a child. And… better me than the little blond girl, or either of the boys.

They were innocent. I was the adult, even if I didn’t look it. I should be protecting them in any way I could. If that meant I was to lay here and let the Soldier rape me, I would take it. But I would never forget. And I’d likely never forgive, however much I knew it wasn’t the Soldier’s own initiative driving him.

But the Soldier stayed on the floor, and I stayed on the cot, and neither of us spoke.
The man in the suit opened the door to the cell I highly suspected was the Soldier’s, pushing the three other children before him. They were all crying, and the girl had a handprint on her face in a vivid red. The Russian boy’s clothes were rumpled, and for all that tears fell from his eyes, his expression was hollow. I averted my eyes, feeling a fist clutch tight around my lungs. I would never know what had happened to him, but whatever it had been was nothing a child should be living through.

The man considered my position on the edge of the Soldier’s cot, and the Soldier’s own stance kneeling in the center of the floor. Then he smiled and aimed his attention towards me. “Did you have fun with my dog, little bitch?” There was no bite in the man’s words. He was still smiling. Instinctively, with the sort of snapshot ease that made me suspect my powers at work, I knew he was calling me a bitch in the way the word was originally meant.

I also knew he wanted an answer, and that there was no way to hide my competence in Russian from him anymore. “Yes, sir,” I told him what he wanted to hear. And then, on an urging of something in the back of my mind that made no logical sense, I added “He is a good dog.” And he was, but not—perhaps—in the way the man likely took it.

But it pleased the man in the suit, that much was clear. He outright beamed at me, like a proud parent. He clapped his hands together, spooking the other children into flinching away from him slightly, although none of them ran. “What a good girl you are!” the man cooed, bending at the hip indulgently. “Can you tell your fellow students the rules?”

“Yes, sir,” I recited at once, because hesitation was death. “Repeat it back to me.”

“The Superior’s word is law,” the Russian boy stammered, expression thawing slightly into a wild-eyed terror. The other two children were still petrified, and still unable to understand Russian. The man’s smile turned sharp as he studied them, and I could almost hear the way he was considering the trouble they were causing him.

So I opened my mouth and damned myself. “Repeat it back to me,” I told them in English. Both jerked upright and stared, wide-eyed, but both understood. They both spoke English. The man’s expression turned hungry. I carefully did not look at him. “The Superior’s word is law,” I said again, drawing out the words and over-enunciating them so that they could pretend to mimic me at the very least.

They stammered it back to me out of synch, pronounced incorrectly and all but unintelligible, but the man was no longer staring at them as if considering putting them out of his misery.

“Compliance is rewarded. Repeat it back to me.”

“Hesitation is death. Repeat it back to me.”

“All are expendable. Repeat it back to me.”

“Hail Hydra. Repeat it back to me.”

When the final syllable left stuttering lips, the man clapped his hands again, grinning wide. “What a good girl! Such a smart little bitch.” His expression was considering as he swung his gaze between me and the still-kneeling Soldier. I did not like the things his face was telling me and shied away.
from the look in his eyes. “How old are you, little bitch?”

I had no idea how old this body was. But I looked about five, so that was the answer I gave him.

“Still too young,” the man sighed mournfully. His melancholy did not last long, as the grin was quickly pasted back across his face. I very carefully did not consider what I was too young for. “Since you’ve been such a good girl, you deserve a reward! Would you like a reward?”

I took a deep breath to keep down the nausea and nodded jerkily. I did not want a reward, but that was not something I was in any position to say.

“You get to stay here and keep my dog company! Your fellow students, well…” he eyed the others wryly. “…they will have other teachers. But don’t worry! You’ll see them again real soon.” The man grinned and began herding the other terrified children out of the room. “Dog,” the man barked at the kneeling Soldier, who straightened up and pinned him with his eyes. “The bitch is yours. Try and keep this one intact?” he sounded indulgently fond as he said it, eyeing the two of us with that unnerving look in his eyes.

The man beamed at the room in general before turning and leaving, pushing and pulling the reticent children with him. The door shut after him with an audible clang, and the lock turning over was even louder.

I sat petrified on the bed, hardly daring to breathe. I didn’t see or hear the Soldier move, but suddenly he was looming beside me in front of the bed. He had shed the leather and metal, and was now in nothing but the pants he’d worn beneath the armor. I didn’t look away from the door, imagining I could hear the children still crying.

“Lay back.”

Slowly I lifted my head and locked eyes with the Soldier. His focus was like shards of glass. Numb, I shuffled backwards to the side of the cot nearest the wall and lay down like a plank of wood, stiff and with arms clamped to my sides. I stared at the ceiling and did not look when I felt the Soldier settle beside me.

He fell silent and still, and then there was no sound in the room but my own slightly elevated breathing. I felt air moving and then a cold hand and arm was hooking under my shoulders and dragging me up against his side. I refused to make a sound, still staring at the ceiling. But he did nothing further, just kept me trapped between the cold metal arm and the unnatural heat of his skin.

“It will not bite,” the Soldier rasped under his breath, more air than voice. I tried to make my muscles relax in response, but mostly failed.

“Not unless it is ordered to,” I replied equally quietly.

The Soldier was quiet for a very long time.

“Yes,” he agreed at last. “Sleep.”

I closed my eyes and turned my head into his chest, because it was cold in the room and because I was wearing nothing but threadbare rags. The metal arm tightened its grip around me before relaxing again.

Obediently, I slept.
The knives thunked into the target one after another, whistling end over end and—without fail—embedding in the soft straw point first. At my shoulder, the Soldier made an approving sound. I took a shuddering breath to get the trembling back under control and left to fetch the tiny knives.

The Soldier had been testing me for a week. So far, everything he’s had me do had been preternaturally easy as my hypercompetence kicked online with a vengeance. Anything he gave me, I could wield. Any task he set to me, I could do. I gathered up my spent knives and trailed back towards the Soldier, feeling those sharp eyes on my skin.

Every night the Soldier ordered me onto the cot and told me to lay back. Every night he pressed me under the metal arm against his side and told me to sleep. Outside of those times, the Soldier never touched me unless it was absolutely necessary. And when he did, he was always gentle.

I turned back around when I reached him and lined up the target again. In the background, a runscript has been running nonstop focused entirely on pain tolerance. Because for as gentle as the Soldier was being, I knew it wouldn’t last. Eventually the man in the suit would return, and he would not hold the same strange fondness for me that the Soldier does. And my untapped healing factor just healed, it didn’t stop me from feeling pain.

I threw the first knife, already knowing it would hit exactly where I wanted it to. I wondered, sometimes, what had happened to the other children. Were they being trained like I was? Tested like I had been? They certainly wouldn’t have done as well as I had, considering all my skill was being force-fed to my bones and muscles by a Talent-given competence in all things.

The power didn’t let me do things that were physically impossible. I couldn’t leap tall buildings in a single bound or bench-press a car. But anything that was even remotely possible for a five-year-old girl, I could do. And do flawlessly.

“Enough,” the Soldier rasped. I stopped immediately, going to fetch the few knives I’d thrown. One thing the Soldier didn’t have to teach me was obedience. I had a will to live strong enough to stomach following his orders without question. “Come.”

The Soldier led me down the corridor past several sets of guards. One of them leered down at me with a grin, stepping forward to stand in my way. I stopped instantly, not wanting to run into him. The Soldier twisted on his heel the second I stopped, and before the guard had even crossed half the distance with his outstretched hand—to touch my face? To pet my hair?—the Soldier had planted the metal hand in the man’s side and shoved him face-first into the stone wall hard enough that I heard several bones in his face breaking.

I flinched backwards in surprise as the man started screaming, clawing at the wall and trying to reach his face. The Soldier held him there for a long, tense moment as other guards started running towards us.

“Mine,” the Soldier told the screaming guard, voice inflectionless and rough. He let the guard drop and ignored the way others were pointing weapons at him. Instead, he held out the metal hand towards me, palm up. I looked up and met sharp eyes in an expressionless face.

I put my small hand in his and let the metal fingers curl around my wrist, tugging me along. I followed without prompting, not looking back at the swarm of guards around their still-screaming comrade.
The Superior’s word was law.

There were only two children waiting in the room the Soldier led me to. The Russian boy, and the blond girl. The boy with the bruises was conspicuous in his absence. I didn’t dare ask what had happened to him.

“You are still here,” the Russian boy whispered loudly, looking shocked. The girl seemed equally surprised to see me. Neither of them so much as glanced at the looming form of the Soldier, lurking at my back. In their time apart, they had apparently learned who the real monsters were.

I merely nodded in response, unsure if the girl still didn’t understand Russian even after a week of constant exposure and not wanting to leave her out.

“But…” the boy hissed, finally flicking an anxious glance up at the Soldier. “But Sir gave you to the dog!” At my nonplussed expression, the boy grimaced. “I—we thought he would eat you.”

I felt myself smiling humorously. They were so innocent, to think that being eaten was the worst thing the Soldier could have done to me if he hadn’t been so irrationally kind. “He is a good dog,” I told the poor, naïve child.

I could feel the Soldier’s eyes on me but did not turn to look. It was the truth, after all.

“Good morning, students!”

I closed my eyes briefly while my back was still turned, schooling my face to the best of my ability before I let the man see whatever expression his presence had prompted. I’d come to understand quite a bit about how this particular base operated during my weeklong stint as the Soldier’s ‘chew toy,’ and at the top of that list was that the man in the brown suit was, indisputably, In Charge.

Not only was he the Soldier’s most senior Handler currently in the country (somewhere in the freezing wasteland of northern Russia), but he was also the de facto Head of Russia’s Hydra Branch. So, basically, he was the Russian equivalent of Alexander Pierce.

I turned on my heel and straightened my back, making sure to wear my blankest face even as I saw the other two trying to mimic me (with varying levels of success). The girl had the best poker face, but it was the Russian boy who stepped forward and put himself in the front as if to report.

The man beamed at us as if we were small furry animals that had just done something indescribably precious. “Today is a very special day, students. Tell me, have you ever been to the doctor?”

While an odd-sounding question on the surface, it was actually a pretty good one. I myself had the filled-out look of a child who’d never gone hungry, but both the Russian boy and the other girl were gaunt and hollow-cheeked in a way that spoke of lifelong malnutrition. It was very likely neither of them had been to the doctor, but the reasoning why the man in the suit wanted to know this was… very alarming.

I whispered the question again in English for the blond girl—to which the Handler smiled but did not protest—before nodding briefly. “Yes, sir,” I murmured respectfully, even as the Russian boy shook his head in a wordless negative.
“Y-yes,” the blond stammered.

“Da,” I corrected sotto voce.

“D-da,” the blond mimicked with a blotchy flush of her cheeks. The Handler continued to smile.

“Wonderful,” the Handler grinned, sounding genuinely enthused about these responses. Even as he spoke, I wondered when the blond had had the chance to visit a doctor in a country she did not speak the language of. “For those of us unaware,” here the Handler cast a fondly chiding look at the Russian boy, who ducked his head with a tight-lipped frown, “the doctor makes you stronger and makes your hurts go away by giving you 'shots.' Now, the shots are delivered through needles, which I know can be scary, but don’t worry! Our doctors are the best of the best, and it’s important to us that you remain as healthy as can be!”

Even as I was absent-mindedly repeating this in English for the girl, my mind was reeling over how nefarious the Handler was being. To an impressionable child—even one that had presumably just gone through a week of pure hell—that description would sound reassuring, almost.

I kept my eyes resolutely focused on the middle distance and very much did not look at the Soldier. I would bet my right kidney that there was nothing benign about the ‘shots’ the Hydra doctors were going to give us. I’d bet my left one that we’d also be told absolutely nothing about what the ‘shots’ were for or the truth about what they’d be doing to us.

The Handler grinned, showing an awful lot of teeth for a man supposedly trying to reassure a group of wary children. “Follow me, students. It’s time for your check-up.”

I followed with only a slight stutter in my stride, idly aware that the Soldier was still shadowing me. I wondered why the Handler hadn’t sent him away, and then wondered if maybe he was there to stop us from running when we clapped eyes on whatever passed for a doctor’s office in a Hydra base.

The blond girl appeared at my side, shaking and nervous. She leaned in close to my ear. “It’s… it’s not really a check-up, is it?” she whispered anxiously. She kept casting fearful glances at the back of the Handler’s head, who was busy humming a cheerful tune under his breath.

I wasn’t sure if the Handler spoke English or not, but I wouldn’t put it past him to be fluent in it and just not let on. “No,” I admitted anyway, not bothering to lower my voice like she had. The Soldier was close enough that the lowest voice I could muster would still not be quiet enough, but the blond didn’t know the Soldier had enhanced hearing. She was probably also operating under the assumption that the Soldier wouldn’t be memorizing everything we said to report later if it were asked of him.

The girl paled but nodded, swallowing heavily. She stayed at my side for the rest of the walk, as if I could protect her somehow. Maybe if I had been an adult, with an adult’s hypercompetence… but I was not. I was younger than her physically, and not capable of the level of skill required to stage a rescue this early on. Truthfully, I doubted my ‘hypercompetence’ would ever be enough to pull one over on the Winter Soldier, no matter my age. He’d been the world’s greatest assassin for longer than I’d been alive in both of my lives combined.

The Handler finally stopped by a heavy steel door that had several bolts and locks on the outside. It required a passcode and three separate keys to open it. When it swung open with a pneumatic hiss, I got my first glimpse at Hydra’s labs.

It was… sterile. I don’t know what I’d been expecting. Cobwebs and bloody tile, maybe? Perhaps instruments of torture hanging from the ceiling like meat hooks? It looked like a laboratory and not a
doctor’s office, but other than that nothing in particular screamed evil villain’s lair. There was an aging man bent over one of the tables wearing a clean white lab coat who I guessed was the doctor, but he wasn’t giving off any blatant Frankenstein vibes.

Maybe this was the ‘child friendly’ version? But why go through the effort to make us feel secure here? From the way the Soldier had cased the room when he stepped in, it was not a room with which he was overly familiar. And any lab the Winter Soldier didn’t see often wasn’t one that was used very frequently.

“Who wants to go first?” the Handler’s voice broke through my thoughts. The blond girl actually took a step back, which was as good as volunteering aloud would have been. “Ah, Sandra, excellent.” The Handler reached out and physically hauled the blond girl—Sandra—forward by the arm. “This is Dr. Sokolov. He will be looking you over today.”

Dr. Sokolov turned and approached, still bent over slightly. His expression was dispassionate as he reached down and hauled Sandra up by her armpits to sit on the examination table. He went through a roll of regular doctor things, including taking her pulse and checking her ears, which seemed to make her relax slightly.

I remained tense standing by the Soldier, who had dropped the metal arm to land warningly on my shoulder.

Then Dr. Sokolov produced the needle. It was long, and the liquid in the plunger was a bright, sickly yellow. That was not the color of a benign piece of medicine. Sandra eyed it, but lacked the worldly knowledge required to know the difference between the shots a doctor would give you and the sort of madness straight out of a bad horror movie. She did not protest when the doctor swabbed her arm (wise on her part, if done out of ignorance), and only flinched and grimaced rather than shift away when the doctor injected her with the needle and depressed the plunger.

That resolve didn’t last long.

About four seconds after Dr. Sokolov removed the needle, Sandra started screaming. The Russian boy jerked back in surprise even as Sandra started clawing at the injection sight like a mad thing.

“Restrain her,” the Handler said over the screaming, sounding conversational, and Dr. Sokolov obediently hustled forward and forced her on her back where he proceeded to strap her down. I hadn’t even noticed the straps until then. The man was obviously stronger than he looked, because he handled Sandra’s wild thrashing as if she were a flopping goldfish. Then, as if this wasn’t bad enough already, Dr. Sokolov proceeded to gag her, as if the sound of her screams were irritating him.

When she was tied down enough that she couldn’t move or hurt herself, the Handler turned back to us with an easy smile. “We’ll let Sandra calm down for a minute. She must be overwhelmed, the poor dear. Some of us just don’t handle needles very well.” The Handler shared a commiserating glance with us, as if inviting us to share in the joke. “Who wants to go next?”

Predictably, that had been the last straw for the Russian boy. He turned and bolted, and my head turned to follow him out of morbid curiosity. Where did he plan to go? The door was closed and bolted, and only opened from the outside or with a passcode none of us knew.

“Let me out!” the boy screamed, hysterical, eyes wild around the edges. He was pounding on the steel door with his tiny fists, clawing at it like an animal. When that failed, he turned and ran a circuit around the room, keeping tables and lab equipment between him and the Handler and the doctor both.
The Handler watched this with indulgent impatience, tapping his foot slightly. Then the Russian boy snatched a scalpel from a nearby tray of instruments, and the slight air of amusement around the Handler evaporated.

“Drop the knife, boy,” the Handler ordered. His entire demeanor had changed. He stood tall and straight, voice dropping an octave as he donned his authority in a way he hadn’t yet with us.

I could see in the boy’s eyes that he wasn’t going to drop the knife. He was too far into panic to understand how much trouble he was going to be in shortly. If he’d complied, obeyed his superior, he might be able to earn forgiveness. As it was, the Handler’s face hardened further, looking even slightly disappointed.

“Kill it,” the Handler ordered dispassionately.

Something moved out of the corner of my eye before a loud retort cracked through the room, deafening me. I ducked on instinct, hands half-lifted to cover my head, before my eyes caught up with my ears and I saw the hole punch through the boy’s head and explode out the back in a shower of gore, painting the sterile walls and the nearby table with blood and bone.

I choked on bile, staggering backwards and away from the scene across the room. I had… that wasn’t like in the movies. That wasn’t Hollywood acting. That was a young child, barely ten years old, having his brains blown out for disobedience. Slowly, my eyes dragged away from the mess and up to the Soldier, who was holstering the gun at his hip. His expression was still dead and the cast of his body still loose.

From a thousand miles away, I heard the Handler sigh. “Mad dogs must be put down, you see?” he was saying. I barely clung to enough self-awareness to pay him any attention. “Hydra does not need mad dogs in their kennels. You understand, little bitch?”

I forced my muscles to uncramp and my spine to uncurl. I took a deep breath through my mouth (because the air smelled like meat) before turning to face the Handler. He was watching me expectantly, completely unaffected for having just ordered the execution of a little boy.

“…yes,” I replied, frayed around the edges. “Sir,” I tacked on belatedly.

“Good. Your turn, little bitch.” The Handler motioned towards the table, and I felt my feet moving before my brain had even caught up.

Dr. Sokolov (who had not even twitched when the nameless Russian boy had been shot in the head) moved forward to ‘assist’ me onto the table. I was more than willing to struggle up by myself, but resignedly figured that probably wasn’t going to happen. Instead, I felt a metal hand suddenly reach down and hook around my waist, lifting me clear off the ground and depositing me on the bed.

This, rather than anything else that had happened thus far, made both Dr. Sokolov and the Handler turn and stare. The Soldier said nothing in response to the sudden attention, instead stepping back and resuming his regular parade-rest stance nearby. The Handler smiled, slow and snakelike.

“Proceed, doctor;” the Handler said with that eerie smile, not commenting on the Soldier’s out-of-character actions.

Dr. Sokolov muttered to himself under his breath—too quietly for me to catch anything of significance—but obligingly ran through the gamut of tests he’d performed on the still-struggling form of Sandra.

“Am I permitted a question?” I forced myself to ask, trying futilely to stop the trembling. The
Handler looked up distractedly from where he’d been reading something on a nearby clipboard. He smiled warmly, even as Dr. Sokolov was swabbing the crook of my elbow.

“Ask away, little bitch,” the Handler replied, still smiling.

“What… does the shot do?” I doubted he’d really answer me, but I couldn’t not ask. Considering the way Sandra had reacted to it, was still reacting to it, it couldn’t be anything benign, but… ignorance was not always bliss.

Dr. Sokolov snorted, looking me in the face disdainfully. It was the first time he’d acknowledged that either I or Sandra were human beings that possessed a face upon which to look. The liquid in the needle was pale blue. “It will make you strong,” was all the doctor said before he pressed the needle through my skin and depressed the plunger. “Hold still.”

Ice ran through my veins, spreading outwards in a wave from where the needle was swiftly removed from my arm. I shuddered and shivered, suddenly feeling as if I’d been dropped feet-first into a frozen lake. Very quickly, I lost all feeling in my fingers and toes and listed to one side as my muscles began to give out. Dr. Sokolov caught me, not seeming concerned, and manhandled me into a reclining position on the table. I was not strapped down.

“…reaction… promising. What… other girl?”

I blinked heavily, taking short gasping breaths. I was hearing them as if from a great distance, underwater, in an echoing room. I could not identify the speaker. Strangely, I could not bring myself to be concerned with anything other than the cold. I could no longer move my limbs. This, too, did not seem to be anything truly pressing.

Hadn’t I always been cold?

“Let… changes. …strapped… struggles. … bitch… adaptable.”

The last thing I had a chance to think before the chill pulled me under was the half-hysterical thought that these people were taking the title Winter Soldier far too seriously.

Chapter End Notes

So, originally, this was going to be way more of a "Gamer" fic than one that just used it as a plot device. But then, when I was rolling random pages on the Superpower Wiki to find out which one I was going to be using, those were the powers I legitimately got. Multiversal Recreation, and Hypercompetence. Obviously I couldn't use that first one for a multitude of reasons, but Hypercompetence... that one sounded fun.
Nightmare Mode, Part 2 (Avengers AU)

Chapter Summary

[ERROR]
[Artificial Skill: Minor Healing Factor in conflict with Skill: The Wolverine]
[Rerolling…]
[Rerolling…]
[Success!]
[Artificial Skill: Minor Healing Factor replaced with Skill: ]
[Resuming Game]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I awoke to agony. I bit back a harsh groan, muscles clamping down as searing pain radiated from highly ominous locations on my prone form. I twitched a finger—the most movement I seemed to be in control of at the moment—and felt my toes curling as they tried to find a position that didn’t ache.

They didn’t… feel quite right. Scrunched in the way I used to do sometimes in my socks, curling into the ball of my foot. Only I wasn’t doing it on purpose. My toes were just… curled. On their own. Painfully.

I blinked wetly at the slate ceiling, wearily wondering how much worse it would be if I hadn’t had a Runscript focusing on pain tolerance for weeks now. My calves hurt like a bitch, too; throbbing and sore, as if I’d simultaneously pulled all the muscles in my leg at once. The arch of my foot felt twisted, like someone had tied weights to my heel and toes and was pulling them slowly apart. And that wasn’t even touching on the minefield that was my knees. Every minute vibration made my bones audibly rattle, as if they were one hard shake from breaking outright. I stopped moving my toes, terrified I was going to inadvertently cripple myself.

I breathed through the pain, focusing past it to try and understand what was happening. What was the last thing I—?

Oh. The lab table. The needle and the cold. Hydra.

I kept breathing. Slow and steady.

Ok. Calm. Calm. What was different? What had that shot done to me? Make a list. Lists are good.

All right. My legs were shot to hell, that much I could feel without having to see them. My toes felt broken, sending weird signals to my brain that I didn’t even try to understand. My calves and knees...
felt fragile in a way that made me very nervous about my continued ability to walk, but I couldn’t worry about that right now. Focus. Had Hydra broken my legs while I was out? Why would they do that? I hadn’t presented any sort of rebellious behavior to them; did they think I’d make a run for it?

No. FOCUS.

I inhaled slowly. Calm. Calm, damn it.

What else? Headache. Centered above my temples in a weird place, one on each side. A sharp pressure, but not as bad as the pain in my legs. What else. Ears. Not a pain as much as an ache, ignorable in the face of everything else. My eyes were wet, and not because I was sad. The tears weren’t stopping. Potentially worrying. Ignore it for now.

I slowly lifted a hand (not restrained; scratch the flight-risk theory) and pressed on the places my headache throbbed from, trying to ease the pressure. I. There were.

I had bumps. Bumps? Why were there…?

No. Don’t think about it. They probably just hit you to knock you out at some point. You might have reacted weird on the table.

The Wolverine would have healed them by now.

Don’t. Think.

I dragged the hand through my hair. My hair was… coarse? And shaggier than it had been, I was sure. It didn’t feel like hair anymore. Not human hair, anyway. I kept breathing steadily. I twitched a foot and my knee clicked.

I froze, breathing steady only through sheer force of will. My bones were vibrating. A sudden movement would break them, I could feel it. I’d never broken a bone in my past life, but something whispered very harshly in my head that I was one sharp twinge from shattering all the ones from the thigh down.

I slowly, very slowly, let my hand rest on the metal table. Moving only my eyes, I tried to study as much of the room as I could. I had been relocated at some point after I’d lost consciousness. The cell was not familiar to me, which meant it wasn’t the room the Handler kept us in or the Soldier’s room.

There was a toilet across the room, adult-sized. Looking at it made me realize how thirsty I was. Immediately, my throat joined the long list of things that ached. How long had I been unconscious? I wasn’t hooked to an IV. The human body could last, what, three days without water?

I recognized this feeling. The low-grade ache throughout my body, the deep headache, the lack of energy. Usually I only felt this way if I drank too much soda and not enough water, and then it was only a fraction of this.

I kept staring at the toilet. The cell was maybe ten feet across, at the absolute most. Lying flat on the table like this I couldn’t look at my legs, but I knew I was in no condition to get up and walk.

Would anyone come in and help me? Had they just left me in here to die? Maybe I was a failure. Whatever they’d given me in that shot, it obviously hadn’t worked, not if the end goal was to ‘make me strong.’

And why the fuck was I still in pain? Shouldn’t The Wolverine have healed it by now? That it hadn’t was probably why I was panicking internally. Or, maybe, it was healing, but whatever that shot had
done was just… hurting me faster than my healing factor could fix it?

No. Don’t think about it. *Calm.* Focus on what you can actually *do,* not on what-ifs.

I needed water. The human body could last a few weeks without food, but only a few days without water. If this cell was monitored (which it had to be), they would know I was awake. No one had come in to check on me, which meant they were either content to watch me slowly die of dehydration, or they were waiting for me to do something about it.

A test?

I looked back at the toilet. Those ten feet might as well have been six miles.

I slowly moved a foot. Something in my ankle audibly *snapped.* I couldn’t bite back the shout entirely, but muffled it to a hard, short noise instead of a drawn-out wail. My breathing picked up despite my efforts to keep it even. Despair settled over me like a shroud. I was supposed to *walk* that far on bones that broke if I *moved them?* I didn’t even have the knowledge necessary to comprehend the pain I would be in if I kept going.

But I couldn’t stop. This was Hydra. They wouldn’t come to help me. No one in this entire base cared if I lived or died except *me.* I was going to have to save myself. There were no heroes in Hydra. If I could get to the toilet, I could just… stay there. As long as it was within arms’ length of me, I would not die of dehydration. I could plan further from there.

Focus. *Focus.*

I calmed my breathing. Centered my thoughts.

And swung a leg off the bed.

*Agony.*

The series of sharp *cracks* was like gunshots in the silent room. I *screamed.* The pain was sensory white-noise, static that blotted out all thought. I felt bone splinter, skin break, muscle twist and contort into shapes they weren’t meant to.

And then The Wolverine kicked in.

The bones cracked back into place one after another, just as agonizing as when they’d broken. I screamed again, high and shrill, sobbing in the back of my throat as I moved my hands to brace myself upright.

The pain didn’t stop, and neither did I. The other leg swung to follow the first, and the whole process repeated itself. My vision was in greyscale. It was fading around the edges. Bile surged up my throat and I heaved, sicking up on myself as I cried and screamed and grit my teeth against the sort of pain I’d never even considered.

And I wasn’t even off the bed yet.

I clawed for control over my breathing, letting The Wolverine break my other leg back into semi-functionality and feeling sick at the *sounds* they made. Then I looked down.

My feet. My feet were.

*No.* Focus. *Calm.*
I was not touching the ground. I was too short. I’d have to drop. The very thought of dropping my full weight on my feet at this point made me physically sick again, even though all I spat was bile.

I slid my hands forward and slowly edged towards the ground, bracing as much weight on my wrists and elbows as I could. The bones in my legs clicked.

I touched my… my foot to the ground, the toes curled under the ball of my foot so the back of them pressed to the cold stone. They snapped, one by one, cracking out of formation and fuzzing out my vision again. Then The Wolverine healed them, a little further out of place than they’d been before, and I had to do it all over again with the other foot.

I choked on another sob, waiting for the cracking to stop so I could take my first step.

I let go of the table, and put my full weight on my legs.

They broke.

I fell forward, stumbling on broken feet and broken legs, hurling my momentum as forward as I could so I’d be as close to the toilet as I could manage before I hit the ground. I made myself stagger on them, forging onward, until both my knees gave out with two distinct sounds like someone snapping a branch over their thigh.

I hit the floor face-first, screaming again. Something around my lower leg cracked and stretched upwards, blatantly unnatural, and I felt the skin on my feet and legs burst open around whatever was happening. I breathed through my teeth, choking on bile, and tried to be still.

My knees shifted, moving beneath my skin, and my brain was firing off connections that just weren’t answering anymore. Whatever was happening to my legs right now, nothing in my body had any idea what to do with it.

I reached forward with my hands and clawed towards my goal, not daring to try and stand up from this position. My toes and feet continued to break with every slight motion, but the ache in my calves lessoned, and my knees didn’t even twinge.

Finally, my outstretched fingers hit porcelain.

I collapsed, sobbing in relief and agony. I had made it. I’d made it to the toilet. I let my muscles go lax, feeling my feet tingling and barely even able to notice the pain anymore. I didn’t know if that was because they were finally healing right, or I’d just become inured to the pain of them.

Minutes or hours could have passed before I finally lifted my arm and hooked it around the bowl of the toilet, heaving myself up to lean against the cold porcelain. My foot moved on autopilot to brace beneath me, unfamiliar muscles moving to a familiar rhythm, and I tensed for the pain.

It didn’t come. I pried an eye open and debated looking down. No. Focus. Water first.

I peered into the toilet. The water level was low, but reachable. It looked clean, too, and I fervently thanked God for small mercies. I dunked both hands in the toilet and cupped them, bringing water to my face over and over and over until I was sick with it.

Only then did I fall back and lean against it. I tipped my head back and let it rest, staring out at the metal table across the room. I lowered my eyes. A blood trail led back to the table from my outstretched legs.

My legs.
I took a bracing breath and looked down at them. They were. My eyes were wet again. Beneath the thin red lines indicating recently healed gouges, my legs were a vision of gore. Painted dark red and streaked black, it was obvious at a glance that something horrible had happened to them. And my toes. They sort of… clumped together in two groups, split down the middle with two on one side and the other three on the other. They were also curled over each other, and black like dead flesh. Some kind of… bone shard protruded from where my heel used to be, black and hard like carapace. But my heel… it. It had moved. Stretching halfway up my calf, what had once been my heels had turned into some kind of extra joint, utterly alien for what they represented.

Because they were backwards.

Calm.

What was the word for that? Digitigrade? Ungulate? I had. Why were.

What the fuck was happening to me?

The door to the cell swung inwards.

"Rise and shine, little bitch!" a familiar voice sing-songed into the room.

I stared at this man, who was smiling—beaming—at me, and I wondered if he’d been watching. If he’d been watching me break my legs and my feet and fall on my face. If he’d watched me claw across the ground on shattered bones. If he’d been watching me drink out of a toilet because I was afraid they’d leave me in here to die.

"Sir," I replied, instead of the million other things I’d rather say but would never be brave enough to.

"I’m so glad to see you awake," the Handler cooed, clasping his hands together and grinning as if I were a small adorable animal he’d seen fall over a second ago. "Sandra has been asking after you, you know!"

It took me a moment to remember who Sandra was. I highly doubted she’d been asking after me, considering she still didn’t speak Russian and had been screaming herself hoarse on a lab table the last I’d seen of her.

I wondered if he planned to tell me what had happened to me. I wondered if he would tell me what had gone wrong, because something obviously had. I wondered if he planned to pretend nothing had happened and wait for me to broach the subject.

I looked into his eyes and felt cold. There was no joy in those eyes. Only a cold cunning, a black humor. Every so often his gaze would flick to my legs and lighten in laughter. He thought this was funny. He found the bloody mutilation of my body hilarious.

"I would like to see her," I said instead, my voice rough from screaming but inflectionless otherwise.

"But of course!" the Handler grinned, all teeth. He held the door open with one hand and stared expectantly, because of course I would be expected to walk on the legs I’d just repeatedly broken and twisted out of shape.

I pushed myself up using the toilet as a brace, and wobbled. My center of balance was wrong. I took a step and stumbled, hitting the floor. My toes cracked and snapped again, but I bit my tongue hard enough to taste blood before I let this man hear me scream. When I pushed upright, my toes clacked against the stone like rocks. I didn’t dare look down as I felt The Wolverine ‘healing’ them again.
My next step was little better. I was like a newborn faun, unable to find my footing. I had extra muscles and extra bones now that my brain didn’t know what to do with. My legs worked weird. I had to coordinate two different sets of diametrically opposite joints just to take a step. I forged onwards, unwilling to accept defeat or ask for help, and slowly learned how my new bones and new muscles worked. My walk was shaky, but I made it to the door unaided.

“Good girl,” the Handler praised warmly, turning to lead me down the hallway. I staggered in his wake, toes breaking and healing with each step until they stopped breaking at all. My knees and my —the heel-joints clicked with every step. “We’ll have to fix that…” I heard him mutter under his breath, peering at me from the corner of his eye. I resolutely pretended to have heard nothing.

By the time he pushed open another door, my walk had smoothed out into something almost approaching graceful. I had to lift my foot and almost hook it like a horse to make my bones work together, and I still clicked with every step, but nothing about my legs or feet hurt anymore. I didn’t let myself think about the way I couldn’t move my toes, or even feel them.

There was a child curled up in a corner of the room. It lifted its bald head and Sandra’s face peered out at us, blotchy and red from crying. I carefully did not react as Sandra’s eyes looked at us. All three of them.

The Handler set a hand on my back and pressed me inside, making my skin crawl in revulsion that I didn’t let show on my face. Then the door closed, and we were alone. Sandra’s eyes were wide in horror as she stared at me, the two eyes I was used to tracking from my head to my feet and the horror thickening as she went.

Her third eye, the one that didn’t move to track anything and with a fully dilated pupil, was set underneath her left eye at a slant. It was slightly clouded over, and the iris was the wrong color. I made a point not to stare at it as I slowly sat down against a wall, stretching out my legs without looking at them. They didn’t straighten fully anymore. I ignored that too.

“Your hair,” Sandra whispered.

I didn’t look over at her. Whatever had happened to my hair was the least of my concerns right now.

“You kept yours,” she continued, and ah. Of course. To a real child, the loss of her hair was probably far more traumatic than what she could see of my legs and feet, bloodied as they were. Was that envy I could hear in her voice? “And you’ve got two eyes, still.”

I looked at her, then. She was pouting, functional eyes wet and tight with jealousy. I supposed waking up with a useless third eye would be pretty traumatic. But I doubted she had to walk on broken bones to get that eye. What a petty little shit, to be so jealous that I’d managed to escape with only permanently mutilated legs and a headache that didn’t go away.

“And you’ve got toes,” I replied blandly, not letting any of my annoyance seep into my voice. It wasn’t worth it. She was just a child, and inherently cruel as all children were until someone taught them better.

Her face reddened unattractively and she scowled, burying her face back into her arms on folded knees. She didn’t reply, stubbornly giving me the cold shoulder for my perceived lack of sympathy to her plight.

I scoffed, clacking my teeth in irritation, and set about ignoring her. Turnabout was fair play, after all.
I considered my feet as I stood in my corner of the cell, rotating my ankle and staring at my raised foot with a blank face. I had hooves. I’d been growing hooves. I set the hoof down, and it clacked against the stone. Sandra, from her spot sulking across from me, flinched at the loud noise. In reality, the sound was not all that loud. But here, in this utterly silent cell? I might as well have been clapping bricks together.

I ignored her, focused instead on my… my new feet. They’d grown in very quickly, after I’d finished breaking them into alignment. Barely a day, and my malformed toes had melded together into solid, cloven hooves. They didn’t hurt anymore. Not physically.

I rotated the foot again, peering at the fuzzy layer of down that was growing around them. My legs were unexpectedly hairy as well, considering I was five years old and shouldn’t be growing leg hair yet. The hair was white, which made it hard to see on my pale skin, but the fact I had leg hair at all was concerning. It was thicker than the stuff I was used to in my old life, more like a layer of baby fuzz on a mammal.

*Fitting*, I acknowledged wearily to myself as I thought of my ungulate legs and my cloven hooves. The layer of fuzz went up to mid-thigh, where it petered out into regular skin before it hit my hips.

I lifted a hand and ran them over the bumps on my head again, feeling the progress those had made, too. They were soft nubs above both temples, and I had a good idea what they were at this point. If I had grown hooves and fur on my legs, it was a safe bet that the nubs were going to be horns of some kind.

I’d pulled out some hair earlier to study it since it felt so weird, and it was white now too. I’d been a brunette a week ago. It felt more like a mane than a head of hair, and it tangled in coarse curls around the nubs of my new horns.

I began pacing the room again, retraining my body to move with my new joints. My hooves clacked on the stone with every step. Sandra had stayed curled in her ball except when they brought a tray of food in for us, sulking about her misfortune.

I caught myself sneering again and blanked my face, shifting my Runscript from pain tolerance back onto stealth. I needed to learn how to be quiet on these hooves if I wanted to keep being useful. The clicking of my knees I couldn’t do anything about; the very act of walking seemed to make something in my leg click. The headache where my horns were growing in hadn’t gone away, but it was background noise at best. And my ears still tingled and felt pointed when I ran my fingers over them, but I doubted anything they would do to me could equal a fraction of reshaping my legs.

“Will you *stop it*?” Sandra finally blurted, scowling at me and my hooves. She sounded annoyed, as if my walking around was somehow offensive to her. “That noise is so stupid!”

I stopped and stared at her. My new legs had lengthened during their breaking, and I had been feeling growing pains all day. I’d gained three inches in twenty-four hours. I was already of a height with her, and she had at least three years on me physically.

I considered what I could say to her. I could cut her down in seconds with words. Children were so fragile, comparatively. It would be nothing to destroy her self-esteem, to cripple her mask of superiority and leave her an empty, ragged husk.

Instead, I slowly set my foot down and started walking again, putting weight behind each one to make the clacking more deliberate. I maintained eye contact the entire time. She scowled, face
reddening, and tightened her grip on her knees.

She’d just surged to her feet (to make me stop? To confront me?) when the cell door was shoved open.

She squeaked and recoiled, overbalancing and it was only her position against a wall that kept her upright. I turned on a dime, surprised and uncertain about that abrupt entrance. The Handler never shoved open doors like that.

Which made sense, since it wasn’t the Handler in the door at all.

The Soldier stared us down, looming and huge and dressed in full combat gear. His eyes only briefly scanned over Sandra before locking on me like a laser. Lightning-quick, his gaze traced me from head to toe without lingering on anything in particular, before he stepped into the cell with us and shut the door behind him.

I held my ground, a tremble crawling up my spine as I stared into the middle distance. Sandra was panting audibly behind me and whimpering.

The Soldier approached, stalking forwards and reaching out to take me by the shoulder. He pressed down, not hard enough to make my legs buckle, but hard enough to impress upon me the unspoken order of stay. I nodded curtly, not daring to make eye contact. There was no way to know what the Handler wanted him to do to us.

Then the Soldier dropped to a knee, and I almost looked at him in reflexive surprise. Instead, I firmed my stance and tensed my muscles. When he reached for a hoof, I couldn’t stop myself from flicking my eyes down.

My foot was settled across his knee, and a warning squeeze to my ankle (hard enough I heard the bone creak) let me know I was meant to keep it there. I resolved not to move even if the ceiling were to collapse around us.

The Soldier stared at my foot for a very long time, seeming to study every millimeter of it with frightening intensity. He rubbed his flesh fingers against each part of my—my hoof, spreading my ‘toes’ and tapping a nail against each hardened claw. Then he ran his hand up my leg, ruffling the growing fuzz the wrong way in the process and making my skin crawl, even as the metal hand clamped around my ankle to keep me still.

He stared at the white fur growing from my legs for a long time, long enough to make even Snobby Sandra in the corner uncomfortable, before abruptly reaching up and digging fingers into my hair, face set in serious lines. He unerringly found the nubs of my horns, rubbing them curiously between his fingers.

Honestly, that felt pretty good. The rubbing, that is. I leaned subtly into his hand to encourage him, earning a flick of his eyes and a little more pressure against my head before he moved on. Next he pinched an ear between two fingers, staring at the elongated point and studying its shape. It was like he was memorizing what my body looked like as if he were going to be quizzed on it later.

The metal hand let go of my hoof, which I set obediently back on the ground, and the Soldier stood again. Fingers hooked around the collar of my ruined shirt, stained with vomit and blood, and with barely an effort he ripped it off me. I flinched but was able to contain any other outward reaction to suddenly being naked from the waist up. Sandra behind me was not so composed, and screamed shrilly, once.
His attention was clinical and aimed at my chest. I looked down. That was how I realized I now had four nipples, small and prepubescent as they might have been. I quickly looked up again, not wanting to think about it. The metal hand smoothed over my collarbone, his face carved from granite. I couldn’t read anything in his expression. It didn’t feel malicious. Rather it felt detached, as if I were a mannequin he was studying, or an animal he was petting. Sandra kept making irritating frightened noises behind us.

His expression was blank, eyes inscrutable. Then he set the metal hand in my hair and ruffled it, slowly, haltingly, as if unsure what he was doing.

“Satet,” the Soldier rumbled, thumbing over one of my horn nubs. “It names you Satet.”

I blinked up at him, confused. Both of us ignored Sandra still whimpering in the corner. “You name me?” I asked him hesitantly. I already had a name. But… no one knew it here, did they? It was a name from an old life, a gentle life. The person who wore my old name died with the other children, broken under the Fist of Hydra, broken alongside the bones in my legs as I crawled across the floor.

Satet. I could be Satet, for the Soldier.

“Satet,” he confirmed, pressing harder against the horn he was worrying. I leaned into the touch. “My Satet,” he added, voice dropping an octave and coming out like a growl. The metal fingers tightened in my hair, fist ing.

“Your Satet,” I repeated, because the Superior’s word was law. The Soldier was strong, frightening, and as emotionless as a machine. But he was not inherently cruel. He would not hurt me unless he was ordered to, and even then it would not be with malice. It would be better to agree with him. Safer to let him do what he wants with me.

Because the Soldier was not a man in the way that most are. The Soldier was male, but he wasn’t a man. Not anymore. Not right now. The Soldier was simply the Soldier. He would protect what was his. Anything the Soldier did to me would be better than anything the other Hydra agents would do, simply because the Soldier did not have intent. The Soldier did what he wanted, when he wanted to, but he was not cruel. He was not evil.

He simply was.

“Your Satet,” I agreed again, leaning into the fist in my hair, letting my muscles unwind and slacken.

The hand in my hair rubbed my scalp in reward.

Sandra, alone in the corner, hadn’t stopped crying.

“The albinism was a surprise,” Dr. Sokolov said blandly to the Handler, slouching by the table I sat on. The Soldier loomed at my back, eyes never landing on my body but his focus on me regardless.

They hadn’t given me a shirt to replace the one the Soldier had torn off. Half the base now knew I had four nipples. Several had come by to gawk and leer. I tried not to think about it. I had no time for shame.

“Just the albinism, doctor?” the Handler replied dryly with some humor. “What happened?”
“The tests came back inconclusive,” Sokolov replied sourly, seeming unhappy that something unexplainable had happened. “Nothing in its blood should have twisted the serum in… this direction. Cancer, perhaps. Or leukemia. But not a full-body metamorphosis.”

He said these side effects as if they were meaningless. Like giving a child cancer on purpose was just something one did in the course of a day. It did sort of explain what might have happened, though, not that Hydra could ever figure it out, not with Incognito working overtime. If the serum was going to be lethal in some way, The Wolverine would have stopped it. But… why would stopping it have done this to me?

“I can only extrapolate that it may have been a latent carrier of the X-gene,” Sokolov finally announced, nodding firmly. “The serum must have triggered it.”

“Fascinating,” the Handler said, sounding bored already. “Is the little bi—” The Handler paused and considered my body, eyes panning over my legs and face for a long second. “—little faun stable?”

Sokolov grunted. “It's not degrading. Not like the other one is. It’s definitely a natural mutation; none of the markers for an artificial graft are present like they are in the other.”

The Handler nodded, smiling pleasantly. “Good. Thank you, doctor. You are, as always, invaluable.”

The Soldier hooked an arm around my waist and lifted me off the table at some signal I missed, setting me on my new feet where I only wobbled a little. Sokolov considered me for a moment.

“Bring it back for monthly draws,” he finally ordered. “I want to keep track of its development.”

The Handler nodded agreeably, smiling as he led the way out of the lab. I followed at his heels, the Soldier lurking at my back like a shadow. I dreaded coming back for those ‘draws.’ Because the doctor didn’t stop at blood, and having a monthly spinal tap was almost as miserable as breaking my legs over and over had been.

“You’ve been a very good girl,” the Handler cooed back at me without turning his head. I shivered slightly, pretending it was just because I was cold without a shirt. “My dog will take you back to the playroom to rest. You’ve earned it.”

I didn’t say anything as the Soldier’s hand landed on my shoulder and steered me down a side hall back towards his cell. When we reached it, I clambered onto the cot without prompting and curled into a ball.

The Soldier stripped and slid in beside me, forcing me to uncurl and pressing me tight to his side as if I were a doll. I tried to keep my naked skin from touching him, but the Soldier just exhaled through his nose and pulled me so close to him that it was impossible to not touch him.

I lay still, listening to his breathing, and feeling the way the thin mattress felt on my new legs. They were far less sensitive to touch now, and I had no feeling in my hooves at all. I lifted a hand and rubbed at my horn nubs, shuddering at the alien sensation of touch where before I’d had nothing at all. It was like waking up with another ear, or skin on your teeth. Unlike my legs, the horns were wildly sensitive to touch.

My foot—my hoof twitched, and I clamped down my muscles to stop myself from kicking the Soldier on accident. I kept trying to flex my toes. The new joint that had replaced my heel ached. The fur growing on my legs itched.

My eyes were wet. Tears tracked down my face and landed on the Soldier’s skin. His head turned to
look down at me, so I hid my face in his side instead of meeting his eyes in the dark.

I couldn’t ignore it anymore. What had happened to me was… it was not good. I was a freak, now. I could never be normal again, even if I miraculously escaped Hydra and didn’t have the Soldier hunt me down. I’d never be able to pass as a regular human again, not with these legs, and not with the horns growing from my skull. There would be no chance of civilian life.

Hydra had inadvertently just done more to bind me to them than any amount of lifelong conditioning ever could have. Because where else could I go? I couldn’t hide from them, not like this. People would think I was a monster, or a mutant, and either would get me locked up and cut open. And with my healing factor? I could not afford to be captured to be dissected. It would never end.

The Soldier rumbled soothingly in his chest, pulling me closer and making shushing noises. I realized I was crying, trembling against him. I didn’t make myself stop. Why should I? He wouldn’t care, or hold it against me. So I let it go. I poured out my grief in silent sobs, hid my face in the Soldier’s side, and let my life go.

I couldn’t be myself anymore. Not if I wanted to live for the next ten years. Because that was all that mattered, in the end. If I could just make it to fifteen, then I could be at peace. I could let myself die, knowing I could move on to a better place. A better world. But I had to live. I had to survive.

For ten years. In Hydra.

As a monster.

I felt my breathing slowly calming as my tears dried up. I still trembled, but my grief had given way to numbness. I was not a hero. I was not built to be selfless, to be a martyr. The only thing that mattered to me, the only thing in the entire world, was living for the next decade.

*Hesitation is death.*

I would not hesitate.

*Compliance is rewarded.*

I would comply.

*All are expendable.*

Well, I corrected myself as I felt the Soldier’s hand comb through my hair soothingly, almost all.

“*Hail Hydra,***” I whispered into the Soldier’s skin.

“*Hail Hydra,***” he rumbled back.

That night, I did not dream.

Chapter End Notes

When I first continued this one, I’d given her ice powers. They were super powerful and
almost blatantly OP, and had only minuscule drawbacks (i.e. giving frostbite to anyone who touched her skin). But then I thought I'd be fair and do another random roll on the superpower wiki, and guess what came up?

The "Physiology" powers all *seem* fun and interesting on paper, but then I got to thinking. What about the body horror aspect of suddenly having the physiology of something nonhuman? Very few stories I've read that make use of the superpower wiki's Physiology powers deal with that part, the part where you have to suddenly live with the fact that your body is twisted into something monstrous against your will. And even if they *chose* that power for whatever CYOA reason, almost no one seems to focus on the way such a thing happening to you would be *horrifying*. Or they only have, like, a tail and ears that they can mostly ignore. But cervids?

I did way more research into deer than I thought I'd ever need to figure out all the ways "Cervid Physiology" would really screw with someone's body, even if they get a lot of pretty nice benefits out of it as said in the wiki. I'm really looking forward to continuing in this direction, to see how much suffering I can squeeze out of my poor OC in the name of personal growth.
“Again.”

I kicked out at the sheet of metal for the nth time, the impact jarring my bones and making my teeth rattle. I could feel the microfractures forming and healing so quickly it was practically regeneration. My ankles and hooves were coated in dried blood from earlier strikes, but if even I had noticed the reduced number of breaks, surely the agent looming nearby watching me had as well.

That was the very last thing I needed right now. I knew Hydra was aware I had a healing factor—the Handler had watched me break and heal my legs over and over again not a week ago—but I didn’t need them to know it was this strong, or that it apparently strengthened with use.

The Wolverine was learning. The more I damaged a certain part of my body in a certain way, the faster it healed from those same methods all subsequent times. The first time they’d had me kick at this sheet of metal to measure my muscle strength, I’d fractured the bones in my ankle and calf and cracked my hoof. Now, it just rattled my skeleton and chipped tiny pieces off my hooves—and even that was slowly decreasing.

“Switch.”

I kicked out with the other leg, obeying my Superior immediately. It hurt. There was no way around it. Even though my hooves themselves didn’t have a lot of feeling, my bones were still bones. They weren’t super powerful, or plated with adamantium. Every kick caused cracks. Every impact made my joints ache.

But it was… bearable. On the heels of forming these legs in the first place, the pain of kicking a steel wall was negligible. With the memory of so many breaks on top of one another, coupled with my truly prodigious pain tolerance, I had noticed I was beginning to treat once-crippling amounts of pain like small muscle aches.

That was going to cause me problems later. Pain was important. Pain let your body know you were doing something wrong, that you needed to retreat, to go to ground, to heal. With a body that ignored pain signals entirely, and in possession of a healing factor that increased exponentially with every use, I was going to very quickly find myself utterly incapable of reacting properly to pain stimuli.

That was probably exactly what Hydra was aiming at, now that I thought about it.

“Again.”

I lashed out with my hoof. That time, nothing broke. I kept my face blank so as to not let on. I did notice a small divot forming in the metal wall, and I wondered at it even as I kept striking on command. Surely my legs weren’t that strong? I knew martial artists used microfractures to make their knuckles stronger, to break boards with their fingertips, but this didn’t seem like the same thing.

Maybe it was a part of my new… my new body. Super kicking. How amazing.

“Stop.”

I stopped, falling into a sort of modified parade rest and letting my breathing even out. Hypercompetence let me know exactly how to stand and how to move my body to get the most out of my kicks, but it didn’t give me unlimited stamina. I recovered very fast (thanks, The Wolverine),
but I was still only five.

“Come.”

I turned and followed the nameless Hydra agent. He’d come into the Soldier’s cell and removed me for ‘testing’ several days ago. I had not seen the Soldier since. I wasn’t too worried about it. He was currently Hydra’s best asset, after all, and was likely on a mission somewhere. The agent led me into a different section of the large ‘gym’ area, and I finally noticed the small circular track winding across one side.

Hydra had their own indoor track? Of course they did.

“Run. As fast as you can. Do not stop.”

I didn’t even bother replying. I just ran. Running on my new feet was weird. My bones didn’t work like human bones anymore. My hips were still mostly human hips, as far as I could tell, and that didn’t really translate well with my new inhuman legs. Hypercompetence stuttered as I tried to find a rhythm that worked, as I tried to work all four joints at once and keep my hooves from scraping the mat as I ran.

I was fast, that much I could tell, but I just felt that I could be faster. I tried to speed up. Something in my hip cracked audibly, and I stumbled as The Wolverine sluggishly fixed it. I didn’t stop running. I couldn’t afford to. And now, on top of everything else, I was running lopsided. I threw my body into a torque, pressing on the other hip, until it cracked too.

Now it was more even.

I didn’t look at the agent as I lapped the track again, focused on the task I’d been set. Run. I could run. I wanted to run. This body, these legs, they liked to run. It was an endorphin rush like nothing I’d felt in this life thus far. Like indulging in chocolate after being promoted at work, like a glass of cold water on a hot day, like the satisfaction of achieving a long set-after goal.

Slowly, very slowly, I began speeding up. My hips stopped cracking on every other step. My legs learned how to move, how to compensate with my new center of gravity. I stopped clipping the mat with my hooves as I ran. My strides lengthened. My muscles burned.

Nothing hurt. I felt like I was flying.

“Stop.”

I tripped. There wasn’t a graceful way in the known world to come to a complete stop after sprinting this fast. I hit the deck, rolling as my feet obediently tried to halt all momentum only for physics to smack me in the back of the head in reprimand. When I finally came to a stop, I just lay there, gasping for breath. Adrenaline was running hard and fast through veins that had previously been in their own little world.

I’d… forgotten.

Boots appeared in my line of sight, and pain impacted my ribs as one of them kicked me. I let the motion roll me rather than fight it. I felt bone scrape my lung and sucked in a staggering breath in shock. “Get up, freak. Did I say you could rest?”

I pushed myself upright, steadying my breathing as my ribs kitted back together.

“Again. Run until I tell you to stop. And when I say stop, you better fucking stop.”
I trotted back to the mat and started running again. This time, I didn’t let the euphoria of movement make me forget where I was, what I was doing. Who was watching. As I moved, I tried to figure out how I was supposed to stop on a dime without falling over. I put my Runscript to work on the problem, hoping maybe two heads would be better than one.

“Stop.”

I staggered, remaining upright but skipping right off the mat as I tried to bleed the momentum away. Something struck me across the head as I stopped, and I hit the ground as electricity burned through me. A… a cattle prod? I might have screamed. My ears were ringing, and my head always hurt nowadays, so I couldn’t be sure.

“Up. Again.”

I pushed myself unsteadily to my feet. That had… hurt. I wondered how many times I’d have to get hit by one of those before The Wolverine healed it fast enough for me not to feel it? If the hundreds (thousands) of kicks it had taken before my feet stopped breaking on impact was any indication… it was going to be a while.

But I had no other choice. I retook the mat, and kept running. If I pretended hard enough, I could almost fool myself into thinking that—if I just ran fast enough, ran hard enough—I could outrun Hydra altogether.

“Satet.”

I stopped mid-stride, swiveling easily on my hoof at the familiar rough voice. I ignored the angry snort of the nameless agent even as I clocked him approaching, cattle prod drawn. Then something weird happened.

I felt my ear move. It sort of swiveled backwards to track the approaching agent, mobile in a way human ears weren’t supposed to be. I didn’t dare reach up to touch it, but made a note to thoroughly explore it at my earliest convenience. If I was stuck with this monstrous body, I was going to own it. I wouldn’t be afraid of it. I wouldn’t let it cripple me. It was mine. The hooves, the horns, and now the ears. They were mine.

I heard the whistling of the baton as it cracked towards me. I didn’t turn to look at it, bracing for the impact. A blur of movement, too fast for me to track, and I heard a ringing sort of clang as the Soldier’s metal hand intercepted the baton aimed for the back of my head. I flinched. That baton was crackling, and the electricity wired through a metal limb had to hurt, but the Soldier’s expression didn’t even twitch.

“No,” the Soldier growled at the agent, who blanched white in shock—and no little amount of fear. I wonder if the Soldier had ever told an agent ‘no’ before. “Mine.”

The Soldier kept the glare on the nameless agent until the man stiffly backed away, re-holstering the baton. Then the man rounded on me, face red with anger at his thwarted authority. “Did I tell you to stop?!” he shouted. “Get moving!”

I looked at the Soldier, and only at his nod did I turn and start running again. I could feel those pale eyes tracking the movement of my body, so I pushed myself to the limit. I smoothed out my gait.
kept my joints rolling and didn’t let myself so much as stutter in stride. I wanted the Soldier to see how well I was doing, how fast I could be when I really tried.

I heard the agent spluttering at my sudden surge in skill, and knew he’d probably just cottoned on that I’d been more or less half-assing his exercises for the past few hours. Running in circles got boring, and he never made me stop even if I didn’t show ‘improvement.’

But now the Soldier was here. I didn’t want him to even entertain the suggestion that I might be lacking in some way, and somehow I knew he’d just know if I wasn’t giving it my best. Unlike with the agent, the Soldier would notice the way I was moving to preserve energy instead of pushing myself. He would notice the way I favored my inefficient human hips.

Now, I ignored everything but the track. I ignored the way my hips cracked and popped into optimum alignment, ignored the throbbing of my ankles and joints, and just moved.

It was exhilarating. The only thing better would have been someone to run with, or something to run from.

I heard boots hit the mat several dozen yards behind me, as if my fleeting thought had been noticed. I didn’t turn to look, just kept running. Only now, footsteps echoed me, swiftly gaining despite my freakishly fast pace.

Adrenaline spiked. My focus tunneled. Sounds muted. My entire spectrum of vision shifted into pale, sharp hues like a greyscale painting, as if someone had jacked up the ‘contrast’ setting on reality. Impossibly, defying what I knew of my own body, I picked up speed again. I had seemingly plugged right into an extra store of energy, and my muscles were humming with it.

The steps following me weren’t drawing closer, but they weren’t dropping away either. I had matched pace with them, pulling strength and will out of fucking nowhere the second my instincts had twigged a predator. And there was no greater predator than the Winter Soldier.

The area around me was a blur. I was moving too fast to track anything other than my own feet and the ground below me. I was lucky the track was flat, because if I’d had to focus on maneuvering over rough terrain, I would have tripped or had to sacrifice speed for evasion. But on this flat plane, curves and all, I could just run.

“Stop,” said a small voice from a million miles away. I recoiled from the very idea. Stop? When a predator was chasing me? What nonsense was this? If I stopped, it would catch me. If it caught me, I would be eaten. That was the way of things.

Stop, said a voice in my head. You have to stop.

I couldn’t stop. I wouldn’t. To stop was to die. I would not allow it. The hunter had not stopped, so I could not stop. I would not stop running while the predator was on my heels. Hesitation is death.

“I said stop!”

I kept running. The footsteps kept chasing me. They were heavy, big. They belonged to an apex predator. I had never met a predator this fast, this fleet-footed despite its obvious size. I was not at all certain I could continue to outrun it, for all that my muscles still felt full of energy.

Someone was yelling something, angry and rabid. I couldn’t make out the words.

“Stop,” said a voice from behind me, rough and growling and certain.
My knees locked, hooves tearing up the mat as I hit the brakes, mind blue-screening as the world rushed back into focus. I blinked. I was on the ground, a foot pressing into my back. Not hard, just pushing enough weight down that I wasn’t getting back up under my own power. Something in the back of my head reared in muffled panic, and something else bared its throat in submission.

Caught. Caught caught caught caught—

I didn’t move, still reeling from what had happened. Slowly, very slowly, sound returned. Colors shifted back to normal. Now I could hear the angry shouting of the agent at someone else, and the steady breathing of the Soldier braced above me, one boot planted into my back.

The fuck was that? What had happened to my mind? Why had I—did this body come with prey instincts or some shit? That was… that was not good. Was I going to dissociate every time I heard someone chasing me?

“Calm down, Smirnov. She’s a little faun. What did you expect to happen when a faun is chased by a dog?”

That was the Handler’s voice. When had the Handler gotten here?

“I expect it to fucking listen to my orders,” ‘Smirnov’ snarled back, with far more bravery than I would ever have. Who was this man, to snarl at the Handler so? “When I tell it to stop, I expect it to fucking eat the dirt, not ignore me.”

“Instincts can be trained,” the Handler replied, infinitely patient and not at all perturbed by being yelled at. “If you cannot see her potential, then perhaps you are not best suited for this project.”

Footsteps approached. I didn’t try to move from under the Soldier’s boot. The Handler crouched down beside me, smiling genially.

“I hope you’re not too tired yet, little faun. We have work to do.”

Fingers swiped at my back, curled like claws, and I felt my heartbeat triple even as my legs burned. I’d been running full-tilt for hours. I had not stopped. I had not slowed. And neither had the Soldier. The Handler had come and gone a handful of times, likely to eat or rest, but never did he give the order to cease.

I knew he wouldn’t.

Not until I’d learned my lesson. It was going to be a rough one.

The Handler had told the Soldier to hunt me down. I had not been told to run away. I’d done so regardless. I couldn’t not. The second his posture had switched to predatory, I was gone. My body was there, but my mind? That took a backseat. My focus narrowed. Senses sharpened. And I ran.

But I was not inexhaustible. The extra store of energy was not infinite. The Wolverine healed muscle tears and alleviated cramps, but it did not give limitless stamina. I could feel my hooves stuttering in their stride as I missed a step, just barely lunging forward to avoid another swipe at my back.

Logically, I knew the Soldier probably wouldn’t kill me when he caught me. Hydra had put too
much effort into me to just let me die here on a training mat. But instinctually?

I was dead certain that I would be killed and eaten if the Soldier caught me. And maybe not even in that particular order, if I was unlucky. I’d never known how effective a motivator the threat of being devoured could be.

Even with Hypercompetence driving me it was becoming difficult to regulate my breathing, and I was—

—my senses screamed. I hit the deck, letting my legs give out from under me as I fell, and heard whistling a hair’s breadth above my head. Seconds later, a knee landed on my back with the full weight of the Winter Soldier behind it, and a fan of knives pressed against my jugular like teeth.

I froze, drawing in panting, stuttering breaths as my muscles locked up in wet, primal terror. The Soldier’s shadow cast everything into greys and blacks, and his pale eyes were intense and sharply focused on my face. He had blades threaded through his knuckles like claws, pressed up tight against my throat as if he would take my head off at the first sign of resistance.

“Preternatural awareness,” I heard the Handler muttering to himself, marking something on his clipboard. “Let her up, dog. Give the little faun a head start this time.”

The Soldier twisted his wrist, sliding the blades lightly against my skin in a faint kiss of metal that I barely felt, before he was up and on his feet, prowling around just behind me. I stayed on the floor, eyes locked on the looming figure.

“Come on little faun. Up you get!” the Handler called cajolingly.

I pushed myself upright, wobbling slightly as The Wolverine healed my legs enough to run on again. I was exhausted. I had a low-grade ache through my entire body, and my head felt full of cotton. How long had I been training? How long had I been running? How long was I expected to do this? To run from the Soldier?

“Give her a little... incentive to stay ahead of you, dog. Maybe just a nibble. But don’t bite her too hard, now! We know what happened last time!”

Something vaguely malevolent slid across the Soldier’s eyes like oil. It was not an expression I liked. I didn’t dare wonder what had happened ‘last time,’ either.

“Run, Satet,” the Soldier whispered, voice low and soft, velvet-covered steel. The knives between the knuckles on his metal hand scraped against each other with a rasp. “It will not bite.” There was a tremor in his voice, soft and menacing as it was. He tilted his head like a curious bird, rolling his shoulders, and for the first time since I’d woken up in Hydra, I heard the Soldier tell a lie. He broadcast it with every motion, with the lines of his body, with the oil slick in his eyes. He was lying, and letting me know it.

“Just a nibble,” I whispered back, jittery and twitching with the urge to runrunrun.

He smiled, a baring of teeth. “Yes. Run, Satet.”

I turned on my heels and ran.
The wounds themselves healed in seconds, under the knowing, ravenous gaze of the Handler. The memory of them, of being pinned down while blades like claws pulled across my back in precise lines, persisted.

The Soldier would have carved me open if the Handler had but given him the word. He would have pulled back my skin and engraved his initials on my bones, would have pried out ribs to watch how long it took them to grow back.

The Soldier was not inherently cruel. But with the right set of commands, this gentle old dog grew teeth. He would not have been remorseful. He would not feel regret. The Soldier did not know regret or remorse. The Soldier did not know emotions at all.

So I let it go. I huddled on the thin cot with the Soldier, curled into his side as metal fingers dragged across my back in a mimicry of the nearly-surgical cuts he’d given me earlier, and let it go. Holding a grudge against the Soldier was meaningless. That would be like blaming the gun for shooting you. The gun didn’t pull its own trigger. It couldn’t. It hadn’t been designed to.

Blaming the Handler was easier, better, more logical. He was a more concrete target than Hydra as a whole. And a more realistic one.

I would never get revenge for anything being done to me. Because things like that did not happen in real life. One person could not destroy an entire organization like Hydra. Not alone. And destroying Hydra meant killing the Soldier, which I was both physically and emotionally unable to do. Because for all the Soldier would never feel anything but vague ownership over me, I had found myself… attached.

I was not terribly surprised. I’d known it would happen eventually, even if I thought it would take longer. Stockholm Syndrome was not a foreign concept. I’d found the one kind thing in this place and latched onto it. I was applying emotions and concepts to the Soldier that he would likely never return. Logically, I knew this. Also logically, I did not care. I didn’t need the Soldier to care for me. I just needed him to not actively be hunting me. Being close to him, submitting to him, obeying him… these things let me be furniture. Furniture was overlooked. Furniture was ignored, taken for granted. Furniture was used, appreciated, but ultimately superfluous. I wanted to be the Soldier’s furniture.

No one would tell the Soldier to execute his table, after all.

I reached up to rub at my horns again. They seemed to be growing, and it itched like hell. They protruded from my head almost an inch, fuzzy and oversensitive. The metal hand stopped drawing lines on my back and lifted up to pull my hand away. Then it replaced it, rubbing firmly around the base of my growing horn. I relaxed, letting the Soldier do what he willed.

I was not safe with the Soldier. He would not go out of his way to protect me. But he considered me his. He would stop agents from harassing me in the hallways. He would stop blows from connecting that he did not consider justified. He would cut me, hamstring me, sever tendons and drive knives through my shoulder to pin me to the ground after hunting me down, but he would not kill me. Not without orders.

That was more than I could say for anyone else in Hydra.

I leaned my forehead into his ribs and let him do what he wanted with my horn. Compliance was rewarded, after all.
For a girl who had literally hundreds of more important things to be upset about, Sandra had a very impressive scowl. Apparently, she wasn’t happy to see me.

The feeling was mutual.

I carefully ignored her as I stood in the training area I’d been led to, the Soldier—as usual when he was on base—lurking at my back. Sandra hadn’t looked at him once. Smart of her. Her third eye was slightly mobile today, drifting in the general direction of wherever her other eyes looked after about ten seconds’ delay.

I wondered what the tactical significance of giving someone a third eye would be. Had it grown on its own? Had they put it there?

But, then again, Hydra did not seem to focus much on tactical significance as much as they did on general malevolence.

I decided not to worry about it.

“You look like a goat,” Sandra said meanly, making sure to rake her eyes over my hooves in case I’d somehow misunderstood. As far as insults go, that one was particularly childish. It was hurtful, sure—it’s not like I wanted or particularly appreciated having hooves—but I heard worse on a daily basis from the guards lining the halls.

I didn’t look at her or acknowledge her in any way. She was exhibiting signs of bullying tendencies, and I figured the best way to cut that off at the knees was to just not react. Eventually she’d get tired of it and try something else that wouldn’t make me want to break her neck.

It’d almost be a kindness if I did. It would undoubtably save her from a lifetime of agony under Hydra’s hands, and I would be much quicker about it than any fate she could expect to find here. She probably wouldn’t appreciate it though, or understand.

But just because I was ignoring her didn’t mean I couldn’t be equally petty. I reached up and ran a hand through the coarse white curls that had taken the place of my hair, ‘absently’ pushing some behind my new ear and rearranging some around the base of my horns.

I heard her suck in an outraged breath, and very carefully did not smile.

I’d spent almost an hour this morning studying the ears. They were definitely not human ears anymore. At some point when I hadn’t been noticing (amongst so many other things going wrong), they’d reshaped into deer ears. Actual deer ears. They were… big. And fully mobile. I hoped I would grow into them, because right now they were practically the size of my hands.

And the horns had tripled in length overnight, now reaching up almost three inches. I hadn’t seen myself in a mirror yet in this life, so all my studying was done through hands and what little of my reflection I could see in the Soldier’s metal arm, but I was pretty sure the fuzz on my horns was velvet. Deer had velvet on their antlers, I think. Shedding it would not be fun.

“Good morning, students!” the Handler called cheerfully as he sauntered into the room, flanked by a cadre of nameless guards. “I’m so glad you’re getting along!”
Sandra flicked her eyes back to me with a desperate sort of anxiety. I didn’t react. She acts like a bitch, whines about her minor mutations, insults me to my fucking face, and expects me to still act as translator? What dream world was she living in?

*When will you learn?* said a high-pitched voice from somewhere in my memory. *That your actions have consequences?*

My face cracked a smile that I hid by ducking my head in subservience.

The Handler put hands on both of our shoulders and gently pushed us forward towards the mat set a little ways away. *“Our little faun has been here before,”* the Handler was saying pleasantly to Sandra, perfectly aware she wasn’t understanding a single word. *“It’s time to learn how to be a good dog, Sandra, and bite on command.”*

Sandra flinched upon hearing her name, but—obviously—was just as clueless as she had been before. I felt no urge to enlighten her. Any sort of bond we may have formed through our circumstances had been broken that first night when she threw a one-man pity party about having her hair fall out. I had no time to be pandering to such blatant childishness.

*“On the mat,”* said one of the guards in rough, heavily-accented English. Sandra scampered onto the mat like someone had goosed her. The guard then demonstrated a few basic exercises, including pushups and some kind of weird crunches. *“Do.”*

I watched as Sandra sniveled and lowered herself to the mat. She put her hands flat and tried a pushup. She was crying already. Her arms quivered. Her third eye was still looking off to the left, having not caught up yet.

I counted them off in my head, ticking off mistakes as she went. One. Two. Two and a half. Sandra collapsed to the mat, crying and red-faced. That was. How could someone so pathetic exist?

The Handler was frowning, staring down at Sandra as if she had soiled herself. *“Little faun,”* the Handler said, audibly unhappy, *“come show it how it is done.”*

I obediently went to the other mat and mimicked the guard without a word. Pushups were not difficult. My upper body strength had never been anything to write home about, but Hypercompetence made up for a great deal of inadequacies. I’d never known how wrongly I was doing this sort of thing until my power showed me how to do it correctly.

I was on my twenty-second pushup when Sandra apparently got her second wind, saw me outclassing her, and went scarlet with rage. She rolled back over and tried to start again, her movements jerky and uncoordinated. She got to four before collapsing.

*“Get Sokolov in here,”* the Handler barked at one of the guards. *“Obviously his latest serum is defective.”*

He wasn’t even attempting to modulate his tone or his words anymore. I didn’t bother translating them for Sandra. I kept my eyes on her as I continued my pushups, having not been told to stop. Sandra was still laid out on the mat, gasping for breath and crying.

She’d done six and a half pushups, and she looked as if she’d been shot. I was half tempted to kill her myself, and could only guess what the Handler thought about it.

What an infant.
Sokolov shuffled in, looking impatient and apocalyptic at being pulled away from whatever it was he’d been doing. The Handler didn’t wait for him to speak, instead pointing directly at Sandra, still flushed and splayed on the mat.

“What is this?” the Handler demanded. “You gave it the serum. Why is it like this?”

Sokolov stared at Sandra, looking mildly disgusted. “The serum has a very mild success rate,” Sokolov chided. “The physical mutations are generally indicators of a success, but not always. That it survived at all is a minor miracle, truthfully.”

“So it’s useless,” the Handler deduced, staring down at Sandra with inscrutable eyes.

Sandra was gasping for breath, looking back and forth between the two with increasing desperation. Finally she looked back at me. “What… what are they saying?” she whispered hoarsely, sounding a little hysterical.

I stared back, considering if I should respond. “They’re saying you’re useless,” I settled on saying flatly.

Sandra pushed herself up onto her knees and scowled, wild-eyed and flushed. “I am not useless!” she hissed back, blatantly lying. She was also ignorant of the way all the adults present (minus the Soldier) were watching us with cold, considering eyes. Their actions would depend on what we said here, I was sure. That she hadn’t noticed was another notch on her moron-meter.

“You collapsed after two pushups,” I pointed out, pointedly not stopping my own. “That seems pretty useless to me.”

“It hurts,” she whined to me, jutting out her lip in a pout that might have been cute if she’d had hair and only two eyes. As it was, it pulled a scoff from my throat before I could stifle it. “It does,” she whined even louder, as if she really expected sympathy.

“You don’t know the meaning of pain,” I hissed back, truly mad, but still obediently doing pushups until I was told to stop. “You ignorant child.”

Sandra scowled back in confusion—I was physically younger than her—but she obviously lacked the brain capacity to call me out on it. Idiot. “Why should I do it if it hurts?” she protested hotly, seeming actually indignant.

Had she forgotten the presence of the Handler and his guards? Were all children like this? Shortsighted and self-centered? Why had I even tried to help them at all? I was almost glad the other children were already dead. My sanity would not have survived a dozen or more Sandras.

“Yes, little faun,” purred the Handler, making Sandra squeak and recoil backwards in surprise. “Why should it? You may cease.”

I stopped immediately, pushing upright and standing on my hooves again, staring down at Sandra. She looked up at me with mingled defiance and renewed terror, flicking her gaze at all the looming adults surrounding us. Someone that oblivious would not last long here. I considered her for a long moment.

Honestly, I couldn’t drudge up any sort of emotion over her anymore. Before she’d turned out to be such a childish, petty bitch, I’d had some small amount of concern over her wellbeing. She was just a kid, after all, and I’d felt obligated to at least think fondly of her. I didn’t hate her. Hate implied a level of caring that was absent. You had to care about someone in order to hate them.
“The Superior’s word is law,” I told her, trying to impress upon her why this was so important. Maybe she was just mentally deficient in some way. Maybe I was expecting a greater level of maturity and competence than was possible in a child. *The Superior’s word is law.* You did what you were told. You followed instructions. You *obeyed,* or you were *punished.* Surely she did not want to be punished? Surely she had enough survival instinct to know better than to blatantly challenge her captors? Surely this was universal knowledge?

Sandra just gawped back, uncomprehending. If I knocked on her skull, it would have been hollow. I was almost dazed by this fact. She was literally stupid. Literally, *actually* incapable of rational thought. It was like having a life-size puppet walking around, parroting one of three patented phrases.

“What?” she said, as if to reinforce my newfound understanding of her idiocy. I was gaping at her. My eyes were wide. I was in shock. My ears rang.

This was. Who could. Was it *possible* to be so cripplingly naïve? A hand landed on my shoulder, thin and fine-boned, and I recognized the Handler’s touch without looking.

*“Your impression, little faun?”*

I was still staring at Sandra. Her face was a rictus of confused terror as she stared up at the Handler, and then up and across at the Soldier at my back. Her third eye was still staring at me, lagging behind once again. As I watched, it blinked in slow motion.

*“Useless,”* I finally agreed, ears still ringing and voice coming from underwater.

*“Dog,”* the Handler called over his shoulder. *“Give the little faun a fang.”*

Something was pressed into my hand. My fingers closed over it reflexively, and I looked down. A matte black knife stared back at me, leather-wrapped hilt held in my tiny fingers. It might as well have been a sword for how huge it was in comparison to my small hand.

*“Would you consider this dog mad?”* the Handler murmured into my ear, crouching down low over my childlike form. *“Look how it foams at the mouth. Look how it barks and whines.”*

I looked at Sandra, still red-faced and panting. I thought about how she’d lashed out at me with words. Me, the only person in this whole base who might have been a tentative ally. I thought about how thoroughly and persistently she’d burned that bridge. I considered my conclusions about her intellect (or lack thereof). I studied the way her lips glistened with saliva as she panted for breath, the way all three of her eyes were glassy and wet, the way her muscles trembled with exertion even when she was sitting and doing nothing.

“Yes,” I whispered, trembling with sudden understanding. Sandra, like the Russian boy, was mad. Hydra did not need mad dogs in their kennels.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Handler smile.

*“And what do we do with mad dogs, little faun?”*

*“We put them down.”*

*“Very good,”* the Handler praised, squeezing my shoulder affectionately. The knife the Soldier had handed me felt ice cold.

For a split second, less than a conscious thought, I considered sticking it into the Handler’s eye. He
was crouched down. He wouldn’t be able to react. I’d be killed immediately afterwards, but the Handler would be dead. I would, without a doubt, be making the world a better place if I killed him. I’d have my revenge, fleeting as it was. I would be executed in punishment. My death would be final. It would be slow, and very painful. The Soldier would likely be the first to react. He would not feel remorse, or regret. He would not miss me, and might not remember me for very long. My death would not inevitably haunt him like so many others did.

My suffering would be over.

I tightened my grip on the knife. I felt the Soldier’s eyes on me like razor wire.

“Would you like to do the honors, little faun?” the Handler asked me kindly, as if he were offering me a slice of cake, or dibs on a pile of warm cookies.

“W-what is he saying?” Sandra asked, high-pitched and breathy, struggling to her feet as her arms and legs trembled. “Goat? What is he saying?”

Objectively, I knew this child did not have a name to call me. Objectively, I knew that she was just using a word her mind had connected to me in place of something concrete.

Children are all inherently cruel. Even, and especially, to their own detriment.

I stepped forward, my hoof clicking on stone as I moved off the mat. Sandra flinched at the noise, scowling her irritation. The knife felt heavy. I had never used a knife like this before. Hypercompetence told me where to strike, what to do, how hard to press down to break skin and bone. None of it was instantly lethal. Nothing I could do with this knife at my current level of strength would be quick or painless.

She was a mad dog. You didn’t slit the throats of mad dogs, or stab them repeatedly until they died. You euthanized them. Humanely.

I did not have the proper equipment to euthanize Sandra. I doubted I’d be given it if I asked. This was a test. An excuse. What lengths would I go to to obey my Superior? How deep did my compliance run? How black was I willing to stain my soul in order to live?

Hesitation is death.

I took another step, deliberately clicking on the stone to focus her ire downwards and away from my face. I knew two ways to kill someone more or less instantly. One of them required a gun.

The other only required sufficient force.

While she was still looking at the ground, I shoved off with all the force and speed I’d learned on the training mat. I threw my body in a hard torque, spinning in almost a full circle as my hoof—hardened by hours upon hours of kicking at steel plates—cracked into Sandra’s skull like a sledgehammer.

I’d meant to break her neck. It was quick, and mostly painless, and something I knew I could do with sufficient force. Hypercompetence told me the angle, the rotation, the motion required. But.

I had miscalculated.

The bones of an eight-year-old girl were not nearly as dense as a solid steel plate.

Her head popped like a watermelon. I was helpless but to finish the follow-through, plowing through her skull with a series of wet cracks as her spine broke and twisted out of alignment. I slid to a stop,
pale and sick, and stared at the crumpled body in front of me. Bone and blood and pieces of thick red and pink slime covered everything. The closest guards had recoiled with shouts of alarm, painted in gore.

My foot. My foot was wet. Something dripped off my leg with a wet splat. I didn’t look down. I did not look down. I stared at Sandra. One of her eyes stared back, weirdly intact amidst the rest.

I. I had. I had killed her.

I mean, I’d meant to, but. Not like. Not like that. It was… it was something entirely different to plan a murder, and then have to look at what you’ve done. No. Not a murder. A mercy killing.

*Not a murder.* I’d been quick. It probably hadn’t hurt for long. No one could ever hurt her again. I’d seen the way the guards were eying her. If I’d turned the Handler down, her death would have been neither painless nor quick. I’d practically done her a service.

I jiggled my hoof, hearing things falling off with wet sounds. I did not look down. I made myself keep staring at her body, at the ruined mess of her head, at the shards of white bone, at the wet meat of her brain and muscle. I made myself hold contact with that single intact eye until it finally fogged over and dilated completely.

Cold metal touched my wrist, prying open my fingers. I looked down. Metallic plates folded over my hand, carefully removing the knife from my white-knuckled grip. I’d forgotten it was there. My foot was coated from hoof to knee in red. My entire front was streaked with gore. Something tickled at my lip, and when I licked it I tasted copper.

Like wind through a tunnel, everything rushed into sharp focus. Sounds snapped into being. Suddenly I could hear raised voices, from every corner of the room, shouting over one another. My knees gave out, and I hit the ground amidst the blood, violently ill. I choked on bile, empty stomach protesting, and heaved my guts up all over Sandra’s feet and ankles.

Sorry, Sandra.

“Very good!” the Handler was crowing in the distance. “Such a good girl! Take her to the playroom, dog! She’s earned a reward!”

Hands hooked under my arms and hauled me up, bundling me against an armored chest and striding off without a word. The halls were a blur. All I could smell was copper and meat.

I was set down in a familiar cell, in front of a tall sink. Hands reached over me and turned the water on, then set about pulling my clothing off. I stood and let my shirt be removed, and felt metal fingers hook in my waistband for a moment before they tugged gently down.

I shivered, staring at the sink and not at the Soldier at my naked back, and saw movement out of my peripheral vision. A rag that looked a lot like my shirt was wetted in the sink and brought back to my skin, where blood was roughly brushed off and wiped down. I felt more than saw the Soldier kneel down behind me, and a hand wrapped around my bloody hoof to lift it.

My white fur was matted red, almost grown into a proper coat, and it took several minutes of persistent rubbing with the wet rag to get my leg and hoof mostly clean again. The hoof was set back down again and rough fingers caught around my chin to turn my head towards him.

I stared at the Soldier, at his blank pale eyes and expressionless face. He had a slash of blood arcing across his cheek and speckled across the bridge of his nose, but was otherwise pristine. The rag was run under the water again and brought to my face, scrubbing until the smell of copper was gone.
The Soldier studied me, apparently searching for any spots he’d missed, and I felt my lungs and gut clench in sick reaction as male eyes slid over my naked, child’s body. His expression did not change, and he did not linger anywhere in particular.

I reached up and pulled the rag that had been my shirt from his metal fingers. He let it go without a fight. I was too short to reach the sink, but the shirt was still pretty damp and mostly clean. I stood on my—well I didn’t have tiptoes anymore—I stood taller on my hooves and dragged the rag across his face where it was bloody. I kept my touch feather-soft, terrified and sick and trembling in horror, but luckily the blood wasn’t dry yet and came off with only two passes.

He kept his eyes open and on me the entire time.

I let the shirt drop to the ground when I was done, exhausted to my very bones. My mouth tasted like vomit and I saw Sandra on my eyelids every time I blinked. My skin and fur was damp with water and I was trembling with cold, naked on the stone floor with the Soldier crouched beside me, fully dressed.

My eyes stung.

“I would like a hug,” I told the Soldier tremulously.

An arm wrapped around my shoulders and pulled me forwards face-first into his chest, more a restraint than a comforting embrace. The dam broke, and I clutched the armor with a wet sob. He smelled like blood, leather and metal. The Soldier stood, keeping me pressed to his chest with one arm, and strode towards the cot. He sat down with me in his lap and leaned back, not letting go or making me uncurl from my ball of misery.

I tucked my hooves under my thighs and tried to fuse myself with his torso.

“I am a killer,” I whispered to the Soldier.

“So is it,” the Soldier said back, inflectionless. I could almost hear the Yes, and? highlighted under his words.

A laugh bubbled up my throat, completely unwelcomed and unwarranted. “I am a monster,” I rasped back, still laughing.

The Soldier made a sound deep in his chest, like a nonverbal, noncommittal hum. It sounded dubious. “Obedience. Is not monstrous.”

I wrestled my breathing back under control, still hitching with small sobs. “Where is my reward?” I asked hoarsely, laughing again. Compliance was rewarded, right? I had complied. Where was my reward?

I felt the Soldier’s head tilt as he studied my curled form. The metal hand skated lightly across the skin of my shoulders and back, testingly, probingly, before retreating. The Soldier made another dubious noise. “Too young,” was all he said in reply, sounding unconcerned. “Sleep,” he decided, twisting sideways to lay on the cot fully armored with me clamped to his chest.

I let my body stay lax, as curled as I could manage in this position.

I was a monster. A murderer. But, in the end, what I was was a survivor. I would do anything, kill anyone (almost anyone), and obey any order that kept me alive. My soul would be black as ink by the time I left this place. I acknowledged and understood that.
I could work to get the red out of my ledger in the next life. In a better life.

For now, though. For now, I let the guilt go. I didn’t have the time, patience, or energy for it. I closed my eyes and tried to let myself sleep.

It was slow in coming.
Chapter Summary

You don’t know who you are, who you were, where you are, or what you’re meant to do now. You don’t know what it says about you that your first, second, and third choices for dealing with a problem were to perform vast amounts of extremely lethal violence upon every single human being you clapped eyes on. It probably makes you a bad person.

But it also makes you a person who won’t ever have to sit in the death chair and have their brains scrambled like eggs, so.

*Comme ci comme ça.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Waking up strapped to a death chair is not, objectively, the worst thing that’s ever happened to you. You’ve got countless memories of this chair, of having thousands of volts of electricity routed through your nerves and capillaries and turning your bones into molten iron. That’s not the part that concerns you.

The part that concerns you is that you’re waking up at all.

Because you should be dead. Are dead. Have died. You should not be in the death chair, mostly alive and in possession of memories that (you’re pretty sure) don’t belong to you.

The death chair is humming. You know that means you have exactly 4.68 seconds before it wipes your memories from your brain in a searing flash of pain and the nauseating smell of your own cooking flesh. Objectively, that would not be a bad thing. You’ve got a head full of things that aren’t yours, you’re wearing a body that you don’t recognize (except of course you do, it’s yours, isn’t it?), and you’ve had this happen to you so often that it’s practically routine (you’re so terrified you’re sick with it).

You could break out of the death chair in 3.21 seconds. That’s cutting it mighty fine, but you’ve never cared to try to escape it Before (a span of time worthy of capital letters) so you could wind up surprising yourself. Before, the knowledge of what the death chair did had been wiped clean along with everything else, so the flash of almost-betrayal and the snapshot of sick terror were new and exciting every single time.

You don’t particularly care to have the death chair zap your head again, now that you’re finally awake and aware enough to appreciate how very much you *do not want this to happen again please God.* The inexplicable memories you suddenly have are bad enough. Firsthand experience is something you could very much do without, please and thank you.

You tense your shoulders and heave, feeling the slightest bit of resistance before the solid steel band
holding down your left arm shatters like glass. Without pausing to let something useless like hesitation or surprise hinder your progress, your left hand flashes up to grip the metal halo surrounding your head and you crush it into splinters with exactly 1.03 seconds remaining on your internal timer.

The ominous whine flatlines into a screeching error message, high-pitched and sharp, and something shocks your hand like a bit of static electricity that is not nearly enough to make you regret holding onto it bare-handed.

Someone is screaming at you in Russian. You know what he’s saying (you’ve never spoken a word of Russian in your life) but choose to ignore him because what he’s yelling is just a bunch of nonsense words. Freight car? Seventeen? Who just yells that at people with no context?

Looking at the closest man’s face makes pain throb behind your right eye. You remember this man beating you, striking you across the back with whips and canes, forcing you to the ground to suck his dick with a cattle prod jammed into your neck to keep you compliant (you don’t recognize this man at all).

Crushing his head with your super-special-killing-arm is almost a religious experience.

One of the other men produces a gun. You tear his arm out of its socket and beat him to death with it. The rush of endorphins this act gives you is like eating a particularly extravagant piece of cake. Delicious. You want more, so you kill everyone else in the room while you’re at it. They don’t feel as good as that first or second kill (does murder have diminishing returns?), but at least no one’s shouting nonsense words at you anymore, and no one’s trying to force you back into the death chair.

Some kind of alarm is going off. It makes the pain behind your eye throb again. It’s really awful, a wailing klaxon accompanied by flashing red lights from seemingly all corners of the room. The door locks audibly behind you, but you rip it open as if it were made of cardboard. Whoever these people are (Hydra, your handlers, your masters), they must be full of incompetents if they were trying to hold you somewhere you could get out of this easily (something in the back of your mind had whispered hold back, don’t let them know, wait for an opportunity even when there was nothing in your mind at all).

Every person you encounter shouts nonsense Russian words at you. You get irritated with this, and start yelling them right back. See how they like having someone screaming Nine! and Rusted! at them completely out of the blue like some kind of madperson. The expressions they made in return were vastly entertaining. You held them close to your heart even as you were ripping out spleens and jabbing your improvised shortsword (a piece of broken rebar from the third door you crumpled like paper) through kidneys and sternums.

By the time you can’t find any more crazy Russian people to shout words at you, the act of killing them has sort of worn down to a really faint buzz, like taking a single shot of vodka on a full stomach and drinking copious amounts of water afterwards (you’ve never tasted vodka, have you? Of course you have, aren’t you Russian?).

You stop in a hallway, surrounded by corpses, and finally, finally look around at where you are and what has happened to you. You woke up. You were dead. You’re alive. But you’re not you.

Who are you?

(Not even you know the answer to that.)

Who were you?
(Were you always male?)

Where are you now?

(Had you ever known that, really?)

What are you supposed to do?

(Not go back to the death chair, for one.)

You nod. That seems like a good plan. Avoid The Death Chair. You don’t know who you are, who you were, where you are, or what you’re meant to do now. You don’t know what it says about you that your first, second, and third choices for dealing with a problem were to perform vast amounts of extremely lethal violence upon every single human being you clapped eyes on. It probably makes you a bad person.

But it also makes you a person who won’t ever have to sit in the death chair and have their brains scrambled like eggs, so.

*Comme ci comme ça.*

You make your way through the weird underground supervillain lair you seemed to find yourself in, searching for an exit. You make sure to step on every corpse you pass, because they were all undoubtedly assholes and you have very explicit memories of about two thirds of them. (None of the memories are good.)

“*Zhelaniye,*” you say to the body of an older man whose face alone had made your hearing devolve into white noise and your higher thought turn to static. (See how annoying it is to have people tell you random Russian words with no fucking context, you pretentious bastard?) You’d gelded him with your rebar and shoved what remained down the throat of the brute who’d died protecting him.

Their deaths were almost as pleasing as the first two.

You make sure to trod over them as you pass, hearing ribs and bones break and splinter apart as you press your full weight down on your heavy combat boots. Wimps.

You shake your foot as you walk and scrape your heel against the floor, wanting to dislodge anything that might have stuck. Walking across shit is hell on your shoes.

It isn’t until you’ve walked in circles for almost an hour (finally just stepping over the corpses because deliberately walking on top of them was taking too long) that you stop, take a deep breath, and express your frustrations in a very logical, level-headed way.

“How the fuck is the exit?!”

Chapter End Notes

Reincarnating as the Winter Soldier mid-wipe probably isn't the *worst* time or place for
that kind of thing to happen. Probably.
Chapter Summary

They called him the Winter Soldier. It was not a facetious title.

Bucky Barnes had Manifested at all of ten years old, coating his fists in rime as he broke the nose of some jerk who’d been picking on little Stevie Rogers. Steve, short and stick-thin and grey with ill-health had scowled fiercely at Bucky, at the ice forming tiny spines on his fingers, and jutted out his chin.

“I had ‘em on the ropes,” Steve declared solemnly. Bucky looked at the ice on his fingers, at the veins of power he could feel even now curling under his skin, and then at this little punk with a mouth bigger than his fists and grinned.

“Sure, pal. I just figured I’d lend a hand, yeah?”

He’d shaken the snow off his hands and offered one to Steve, who’d squinted and scowled but taken the offer and let Bucky haul him up to his feet.

“My name’s James, but you can call me Bucky,” Bucky informed his new best friend. Anyone who could take a fist to the face and get up swinging was a friend of Bucky’s.

Steve’s face flushed an unattractive, blotchy red. “…Steve.”

Bucky swung an arm over Steve’s shoulders and started steering him away from the frostbitten mooks on the ground. “C’mon Stevie. Let’s get outta here; it’s startin’ to smell.”

Steve was too sickly too often to Manifest properly, but he never let that stop him. Bucky’d swear up and down that he’d be some sort of Bulwark, or maybe even a Healer like his ma. Steve would just scowl at his shoes and insist that he didn’t need magic, because magic was cheating Barnes, and cheaters went to hell.

Bucky would just cackle at him and throw snowballs at him until he started smiling again.

War taught Bucky Barnes that the ice magic he’d previously thought only good for making snowmen in summer and for chilling beers with a touch was something else entirely. Elementalist, that Stark fella called him, all breathy and excited like a dame taken dancing.

War taught Bucky Barnes to sharpen his magic into knives and spears. War taught Bucky Barnes
how to flash-freeze a man’s blood and make their fingers shrivel up and fall off, black and dead.

War took Bucky’s childish delight in his magic and turned it cold.

When Steve showed up in that lab, he was wreathed in flame. Feathers of fire hissed and spat around his shoulders like a mantle of sparks and ashes. He looked like a god, like an angel come down to smite the wicked.

His hands on Bucky’s skin steamed and left silvery burns behind that they didn’t notice until they’d made camp that night, the others shivering in the cold that neither of them could feel. Steve had apologized profusely, exclaiming that the serum they’d given him had made him Manifest quite… spectacularly.

Steve had frowned at the burns on Bucky’s arm and ribs, at how frost was creeping over them and turning the skin a faint pale blue. Bucky waved him off, spinning a tale about how he didn’t even really feel it anyway, Stevie, don’t sweat it.

Steve had smiled, relieved and exhausted to his bones.

Bucky hadn’t been lying. Not exactly.

Whatever Zola had done to him on that table, he didn’t have feeling in his skin anymore.

And he was always cold.

The Russians found him in the snow at the bottom of a ravine, down one arm and almost invisible due to the ice covering every inch of him like shards of broken armor. His magic had saved him from the fall, but the impact had rattled his skull and one of his arms had snapped off like an icicle from the pressure.

He didn’t know where he was. He barely remembered his own name.

It was the easiest thing in the world for the Russians to fill in the blanks for him.

He left on his own two feet, under his own power, and followed them out.

By the time his memory came back properly, it was too late.
The Red Room would have given him a new arm, if his magic hadn’t beaten them to it and built him one on its own. It was a thing of nightmares, all spikes and shifting panes of ice like armored plates. It did not melt, did not burn, could not be broken by any force the Red Room could muster and gave frostbite to anyone else who laid hands on it.

It responded to his thoughts just like his other arm. They wiped him so thoroughly and so often that he didn’t really see the difference between them.

As far as he was concerned, he’d always had one arm made out of ice and rime.

They put him in a cryochamber between missions to heal. The cold leeched pain from his muscles and knit flesh back together, cracking bone into place and repairing damaged cells. He never tried to break free. The cold felt like home, and the longer they kept him in it the deeper his well of magic grew.

That was one thing Hydra had overlooked, hadn’t accounted for.

He didn’t have enough self-awareness to think it something noteworthy, so never mentioned it to his handlers.

Quietly, behind his bones and running through his veins, thin sheets of ice solidified into glaciers.

There was a man on a bridge with wings made of fire. When they clashed, the Asset could almost feel the heat of the burning pinions. Then the mask had been destroyed—turned to ash on a face that felt no heat nor warmth—and the fire had smothered, banked beneath horror and desperation and Bucky?

The Asset did not know that word, but it sounded like a name.

The Asset had never had a name, before. He decided he would keep it, even as he struck out with the Arm to keep the seraphim at a distance. It had been given to him, after all. He wasn’t giving it back.

The Bucky was strapped to the Chair, considering the handlers and the technicians surrounding him. They would not answer his questions about the seraphim from the bridge, in fact seemed slightly confused as to what he was talking about until he clarified. Then the handler struck the Bucky, lying to the Bucky about the seraphim, and tried to have the memories of the seraphim removed.

The Bucky didn’t like that. Neither did his magic.
The temperature of the room instantaneously dropped hundreds of degrees. Everyone else in the room died immediately from shock, lungs shutting down as oxygen crystalized and blood burst in veins as spikes of red protruded from eyes and noses like icicles. Corpses hung where they’d died, immobilized as everything literally froze in place. Metal splintered and broke, fragments hanging like darts in water. Concrete shattered as the room destabilized. For one, eternal instant, time stopped.

His magic receded, forcefully dragging the ambient temperature back up to habitable levels. Corpses dropped all across the room as metal knives flashed across the air like shrapnel released from a gun. Walls crumbled, and alarms blared throughout the base. The Bucky stood from the ruined remnants of the Chair, and stepped over the unimportant bodies littering the floor.

His magic hung around him like a shroud of teeth and knives, spikes forming on the surface of the Arm like blades. The seraphim was his. His to remember. His to hurt. His to help. His.

And no handler was going to take those memories from him.
The fuck were you doing in a closet? You blink several times, and even squint for good measure, but the area stubbornly refuses to resolve into anything other than the musty interior of a closet. You have memories of abruptly panicking at the sight of the Hall of Corpses like a complete wuss, flinging yourself at the nearest doorway not decorated with gore—hyperventilating, you might add—and closing yourself in here to have a good cry about your poor life choices.

That’d be fine, if emasculating, had it actually been you who’d done any of it.

The fuck is wrong with your head now?

*Panic panic fuck there was blood everywhere crippling fear what happened to my arm AGONY where am I what happened to me*

And now you’re hearing voices. Great. Excellent.

*Voices in my head have I gone mad fear terror PAIN what killed all those people*

—breathe for a fucking second, dude, chill—

*Oh God what have I done my bones are crimson my hands my tongue my lips ANGUISH all I see taste hear feel is blood*

—for fuck’s sake nix the melodrama, princess—

*Terror hysterical horror why is this happening to me*

CALM. THE. FUCK. DOWN.

The voice in your head abruptly silences itself, thank God. You sincerely do not need to be dealing with this on top of everything else that was currently going wrong.

You shove open the door to the closet with your awesome killing-arm and see—to your faint pleasure—that your Hall of Corpses remains none the worse for wear after your little dissociation moment. You should get a fucking medal, seriously. That’s a lot of kills for one person who was flailing around with maybe 2/13ths of a functioning mind.

*Oh God I’m a psychopath.*

Well fuck you too, pal. You won’t let something as asinine as a voice in your head rain on your parade of badassery.

Whatever. Voices later, escape now.

*Yeah, this place gives me the creeps.*

You can’t really argue with that (the taste of a bite guard on your tongue), so you set yourself marching down the hall again in search of an exit. Kinda like you’d been in the process of doing before some wimp had hijacked your body to go cry in a closet.

...*Winter?*

You pause, frowning in consternation. That had been deliberately aimed at you, rather than just a
generalized complaint. When the voice in your head actively starts talking to you, that’s when you know you have problems. But your mama didn’t raise no rude asshole, so you rake through your secondhand, piecemeal memories to see if maybe that’s your name.

Lots of the crazy Russian bastards had called you “Soldier” or “Asset” (not even given the consideration of a pronoun in your own thoughts), and a few of the twitchier science-y types had referred to you, collectively, as “the Winter Soldier”—which was an extremely badass name so fuck yeah the voice can call you Winter.

Sup, Voice.

Oh God. Voice sounds horrified. Poor Voice. It must suck to be such a total pussy.

You start walking again, vaguely feeling Voice having some kind of Come-to-Jesus meeting with himself in your head. It’s weird, but nothing beats waking up in the death chair with a brain full of appropriated memories (you can still smell your flesh burning). Hell, who knows? Maybe they are yours. You remember them from a first person perspective, and could objectively recall experiencing them if you focused.

In fact, now that you’re looking, you’ve actually got more memories of being Winter than you’ve got of being you. Like, significantly more. They’re all also significantly terrible.

So maybe you’re not you. Maybe you’re Winter with memories of being you, rather than you having memories of being Winter. Makes as much fucking sense as anything.

Whatever. You’re Winter now. Winter was 1,000% more badass than you could have ever hoped to be. Winter also had zero personality, which is probably why the you that woke up in the death chair took command of your brain so fast. There just wasn’t any competition.

Well. Until now, at least.

You’re… self-aware?

Voice sounded kind of like he might be violently sick soon. You very dearly hope subconscious projections could not actually vomit inside your head. That sounded gross. And your threshold for “gross” was ludicrously high (you tread upon the viscera of the dead).

Self-aware and trying to find a fucking exit. What is this, the Labyrinth? Is the door fucking disguised as a wall or some shit? Are you going to run into a minotaur? Are you a minotaur? How do you have memories of literally hundreds of confirmed kills but can’t remember where the fucking door is?

This is some serious bullshit.

A bullet pings off your badass metal arm, and you swivel on your heel in vague surprise. Oh ho? A survivor? Well you can’t have that! Survivors meant people who could pop out of the woodwork and make life difficult for you later. They also tended to hold grudges, for some reason.

Stop. Don’t kill him.

You get the feeling from the defeated, inflectionless cadence to those words that Voice is used to saying them, and used to not being heard.

But what the fuck kind of ridiculous request was that? Let this asshole live? Doesn’t Voice remember when this guy held your head underwater until you almost drowned, and then tried to
choke you to death with his cock?

Voice asphyxiates on his own metaphysical spit, a spluttering kind of gag that felt fucking weird in the back of your head.

…ah, Voice stutters, after approximately a million years of deep contemplation. Must be nice to have that kind of time to ruminate on things that don’t fucking matter anymore.

While Voice was busy waffling, you’d crushed the survivor’s head under your boot until his skull broke open like a watermelon. Ew. Also, satisfying. That’s one less Russian asshole to shout nonsense at you and take advantage of your placid compliance to shove body parts down your throat.

You look up from wiping your boot on Russian Asshole #54’s shirt and notice he’d been lurking in front of the exit. Finally! Progress. You march forwards, determined to get the fuck out of this hellhole before Murphy comes down on you like a ton of bricks. Things have been going fantastically so far, which meant you were guaranteed to have some kind of epic complication thrust itself in your face soon.

The exit is at the bottom of an infinite staircase, because of course it is. You sigh to yourself and start the arduous climb. God you hope you aren’t a billion stories underground or something.

How long have you… ah… been awake?

About twenty minutes, maybe? Not being zapped by the death chair was a great motivator to get shit done, and you lacked the sort of infinite calm the old Winter had which would have let you keep downplaying your abilities to the detriment of your conscious mind. The old Winter had been kind of a doormat. You resolve to let no one tell you what to do ever again.

Starting with Voice, because so far all of his contributions to your escape have been the exact opposite of helpful.

Hey, Voice protests mildly.

People who go cry in closets while there’s escaping to be had should be grateful you’re not actively blocking them out. You could do it, you figure. You can sort of feel where Voice lives in your head (a nebula of scratchy cotton and the smell of oil paint), and whatever Winter’s failings in the waking world, he’d had a mind like a literal steel trap. You’ve inherited that (or reclaimed it), and it would only be a matter of will to make Voice shut up forever.

And now that you know that, so does Voice, and the tiny indignant protests dry up.

Good to know he can be taught.

And hey look, you’ve finally reached the top of the stairs! That only took about eight years, give or take a decade. The door at the top is barred shut, but only pussies who cry in closets let tiny bars of steel stop them. You shoulder the door open, ever-exhilarated by how strong you are now (you’ve always been this strong, though, haven’t you?).

A gun muzzle greets you at eye level.

You react without conscious thought, ducking down and slapping the gun aside even as it fires, clipping a few hairs. You hear the wrist of your attacker break at your absentminded swipe (which, could you just say awesome) but that doesn’t stop them. A knife flashes out of nowhere, and suddenly you can’t stop to think—
Block with the metal arm strike at the joints dodge dodge dodge counterattack oh hey rebar you’d forgotten you were still holding that haha take that sucker shit they’re slippery land a solid blow to the ribs break four of them shallow slice under your eye (that’s gonna scar) (silly thing, you don’t *scar*) garrote around your throat who the fuck is this person where the fuck were they keeping that fuck they’re on your shoulders how did that happen are they strangling you with their *thighs* (you decide to try that on the next loser who attacks you, it seems fun) reach up with the badass metal arm grip hold of their armor and haul them off you (they cling like a snake) throw them into the wall and crack their head against the plaster and

—“*Bucky!*”

You freeze, keeping your assailant planted face-first into the wall hard enough to have broken their nose at the very least, idly fending off their squirming attempts to stab at you backwards without looking. They’re very bendy.

You squint at them. Oh. It’s a woman. A redhead, even. Feisty. Do you know this person? You think you shot them a few times. Also, you might have slept with them? Maybe? And also trained them? The fuck?

Whatever. This chick just tried to take your fucking head off. Your sweet death-arm whirs as the plates realign as you tense to crush her head into a pulp.

“*Bucky!*” Oh, right, someone had yelled another nonsense word at you, this time in English. You think. It’s not a word with any sort of actual meaning in *any* language you know, and you know a surprising number of languages.

You turn your head. Feisty Redhead isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. She’s even stopped trying to gut you and is more or less resigned to having her face jammed into a wall.

There’s a huge blond guy running towards you, carrying a fucking shield. The fuck is this nutjob?

**STEVE**

Holy shit turn down the volume there, Voice—

**STEVE STEVE STEVE**

Voice sounds like he’s having a seizure. A joyful seizure. Of joy. As if he was going to burst out in tears and blubbery out his eternal love in extremely flowery prose.

You squint at “Steve.” Do you know him? You don’t have any memories of him, not like you do of the Russian assholes or the Feisty Redhead. Considering the context of every single memory you possess, that probably means Huge Blond is a stand-up kind of guy. And probably also not Hydra.

On that basis alone you’re practically best buds.

**STEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE**

“Hey, pal,” you say to Huge Blond. “This yours?” You shake your awesome robot arm and the Feisty Redhead attached to the end of it.

Huge Blond makes huge eyes at you, as if you’re some kind of angel he’s been blessed to lay eyes upon. Well, he’s not wrong. You are pretty amazing. Does he know how many dudes you murdered down there? A lot of dudes. Like, a lot. And you didn’t even get *scratched* until Feisty Redhead butted in.
“Buck,” Huge Blond honest-to-god *whimpers*, like some kind of tiny animal desperate for love and care and hugs and snuggles and warm blankets in front of a fireplace. Fuck he packed a lot of desperate hope into that word. Why Huge Blond is calling you a male deer is kind of weird, but to each their own.

“Name’s Winter,” you introduce yourself, figuring you might as well be polite to the first not-Hydra person you’ve ever met. “I’d shake your hand, but it’s got a little something on it.” You wiggle the Feisty Redhead again for emphasis.

Huge Blond looks kind of like he wants to punch you in the face, and also latch onto your body like an octopus and never let go until the heat-death of the universe.

Oh good, Voice is finally done.

*Don’t you dare hurt him,* Voice snarls, deep and guttural, and wow okay that was actually mildly intimidating. Kind of pointless though. You weren’t planning to attack Huge Blond since he wasn’t a Hydra asshole or an annoying redhead.

“Buck, let Natasha down,” Huge Blond says, holding out his hand in a pacifying motion. The other’s still got his big fuck-off shield in it.

You scowl. You don’t take orders anymore, especially not from random strangers you literally met two minutes ago.

*Steve’s not a stranger,* Voice protests zealously, sounding on the cusp of doing something rash, like breaking out into a big musical number. *You can trust him.*

Yeah, like you’re going to trust Huge Blond just because some voice in your head told you to. Did Voice miss the part where you weren’t taking orders anymore?

“Don’t tell me what to do,” you scoff at Huge Blond, who looks kind of like someone just whacked him across the face with a live fish.

“Yes, Steve,” says Feisty Redhead into the plaster, dry as the Sahara. “Don’t tell the Winter Soldier what to do.”

You feel a thrill down your spine when she calls you that, like it’s some kind of conditioned pleasure-response. Neat. You wonder how many people you could get to call you by name? Enough to have an infinite pleasure-loop of rapturous joy, maybe?

“Buck—” Huge Blond starts to protest, face scrunched up and defiant like he was planning on being contrary for the sheer sake of being contrary. Voice turns to mush in your head at the expression, feeling irrationally fond.

“Call me Winter,” you interrupt, staring fixatedly at Huge Blond. Feisty Redhead saying it had been like a full-body massage. Something tells you that Huge Blond saying your name is going to be even better somehow. Huge Blond’s face does something painful looking. That’s a lot of emotions to be spilling all over the place there, pal. “Please,” you tack on, because you could be polite when the situation called for it.

“…Winter,” Huge Blond capitulates, sounding as if you had hooked the fingers of your metal hand
around his sternum and then ripped out his heart for good measure. Voice makes a sad-sounding noise in your head in sympathy.

You make a face. The expected rush of pleasure did not materialize, which meant that either A) Feisty Redhead was special, or B) you’d only get the pleasure if someone said your whole name and not the nickname Voice had given you.

Damn.

You shrug philosophically. Oh well. You turn your head back to Feisty Redhead, contemplating if you should really let her go or not. On the one hand, killing her would eliminate any chances of her backstabbing you later (you taught her everything she knows, can read her inscrutable expressions like a book). It would probably also inspire Huge Blond to attack you, which would make escaping without giving Voice an aneurism tricky.

“Are we going to have a problem, little spider?” you hear yourself rumble, pulling on sense-memory from years and decades and lifetimes ago. The accent you suddenly have is very thick, grating and rough. Your entire body language has changed, pulling on the skin of the old Winter like you’d just put on a jacket.

Feisty Redhead’s muscles all go lax in artificial calm. All expression in her face wipes away immediately, leaving nothing behind. Something in the back of your skull purrs approval. Something else (probably Voice) shakes in terror.

This is you, you realize dimly even as you lean closer to press your jaw to Feisty Redhead’s temple. The real you. The you that had calmly sat and let yourself be electrocuted into oblivion for the sake of being eternally underestimated. The you that had wiped out dozens of armed soldiers less than an hour ago and felt nothing but vague satisfaction.

This is the you that earned the title of the Winter Soldier.

“Little Natalia,” you purr, voice like steel wool, Feisty Redhead’s name popping up behind your eyes like a neon sign. Ahh. Now you remember. Your favorite little spiderling. Any aggression you’d held for her ambushing you drains away, replaced by amusement. You almost feel proud. You had taught her well if she was able to get the jump on you like that, even if she’d ultimately failed.

“Yasha,” Natalia mutters back, still boneless and not resisting your hold on her head anymore. Good. It is good that she remembers you. You wonder if she’d done so before you’d addressed her directly; it hadn’t seemed like it.

You rub your jaw across her head like an affectionate cat, if that cat was the size of a bear and covered in blood. “I will let you live, Natalia. My sweet little spiderling. My favorite little widow.” You croon endearments into her ear, feeling her go more and more lax with every word, as if you were drugging her. You probably were. She’d undergone quite a bit of subtle conditioning during her time with you to make her more compliant. In lieu of a death chair, the Red Room had had to get… creative.

If you can reap the rewards of that conditioning, well. No one ever said you were a saint.

You watch Huge Blond screw up his face out of the corner of your eye, and hide a smile in Natalia’s neck. Something tells you that wherever this shitshow is going, it’s going to be fun.
Chapter Summary

With a game shrug, Alex confirmed his choices. He still didn’t know what the stats for a regular human were, but if he was bench-pressing tanks at 70 STR, he could only guess that human baseline stats were extremely low. He would rather have the stats directly tied to how hard he was to kill be monstrously overpowered than find himself unpleasantly surprised by a powerful new enemy.

Nodding to himself, he looked around the void for any sort of ‘continue’ option. “Uh, continue? Finalize options? New game?”

[Finalize Choices and Start Game?]
[Y / N]

Alex Mercer chuckled to himself, took one last long look around the empty void that was his death, and said fuck yes.

Chapter Notes

Pure self-indulgence. AKA, Crack Treated Seriously.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He hummed nonsensically, tapping skeletal fingers over the multiverse like piano keys. This one led to one of the myriad animes, full of large-breasted women and male fulfillment fantasies of amassing a harem. This one led to a world of ice and fire. And this one… this one led back to the Origin. Alternates of the Origin were fine, but the Origin… that one was sacred. He carefully pressed that one down and out of sight. No need to tempt Fate any more than he already was.

Now. He grinned, baring teeth like knives, and considered his options. Things had been so terribly dull lately. In fact, one could almost say he had been bored to death. He laughed at himself. He was such a comedian.

But he didn’t feel like watching another protagonist go forth and defeat another foe. He didn’t want to watch naïve youths gather groups of friends and comrades and overcome some malicious entity. He wanted something new. Something different.

Perhaps if he pushed two worlds together…? He idly chose two keys at random and slid them until they were touching one another. The others fizzled out of existence obediently in his wake. He pondered the two keys, tapping one finger to his chin in the way he’d seen so many fictional humans do when contemplating things.

Simply shoving the worlds together wouldn’t do very much. They were inherently incompatible with one another, he could feel it. He could make them coexist, but the entire universe would likely destabilize within a few years. Not really long enough to see anything interesting happen.
But taking one person from one world, and inserting them into the other… that was doable. He took a closer look at the worlds he’d chosen, and his grin widened unnaturally. How delicious. With a flick of thought, he snatched one mortal from death and relocated them to their new world.

But that alone wasn’t interesting enough. Chaos would follow, certainly, but he didn’t want to watch the same game play out with different characters. He wanted his new champion to rewrite the game entirely. And what better way to do that than to let them in on the game itself?

He’d read fiction to that effect, before. It was trivial to rework reality to suit his new whims. He laughed as he felt his gifted power latch onto his champion and burn into effect. He leaned closer to the key and let his vision move across dimensions, until he had a good angle on the action.

He couldn’t wait to get started.

---

[GAME OVER]

He crouched down on his heels as he considered the large, neon red words glowing in front of his face. He was actually rather surprised to still have a face, considering he’d just tanked a nuclear warhead at what constituted point-blank range. Idly, he looked around. He found himself in a featureless black void, empty save for the glowing red words hovering about two feet in front of him at eye level. They’d followed him down when he crouched, and turning his head kept it locked in his field of vision as if it were superglued to his retinas.

He turned his attention to the words, and what they were implying. He wasn’t panicking, not like a human might have. He could fake emotions well enough for Dana, but ordinarily he didn’t really feel anything other than hunger or rage. Neither of those applied here—he’d expected to be dead, which meant this sort of not-death he found himself in was actually a step up—so it was easy enough to focus on the important things.

Like the implication that his life had been a game, and now it was over.

He’d eaten enough people to have plenty of memories of games to draw from. The fact that the void was telling him that the game was over sort of implied there was a way to restart it. Otherwise, why show him at all?

He stood up and walked in a circle around the words, which oriented to face him in a truly two-dimensional way. Was there a way to move past this screen? He didn’t see any buttons or keys, and his hand passed right through the words when he tried to touch them.

“Okay?” he said aloud, interested to hear his voice did not echo despite the seemingly large space. As if his voice had been the trigger, the neon words dissolved and reconfigured themselves into something new.

[New Game?] 

[Y / N]

Now he was getting somewhere. He tried to reach out and touch the ‘yes’ option, but his fingers passed right through it. Well, verbal commands had worked the last time. “Yes,” he said aloud. The ‘Y’ highlighted briefly before reconfiguring again.
He lifted a brow beneath his hood. Were those his… ‘stats’? He had no way to know what a baseline human looked like stat-wise, but he was pretty sure a 5 in charisma and a fucking 2 in luck were in no way acceptable. Was that why he was always getting screwed over by everyone and their grandmother, he wondered? Also, he had 500 unspent status points? If he got five for every level, that would make sense. And since he hadn’t known this was a game until now, he wouldn’t have known how to ‘spend’ them. God, if he was this strong at only 70 strength, how monstrous would he be at 570?

“Titles,” he said, wondering if it would give him some information in lieu of something to click.

[Titles]

**The Prototype:** Allows enemy-absorption and shapeshifting abilities. Can retain memories, experiences, biomass, and physical forms of enemies consumed.

**Blacklight:** Evolutionary chimeric mutation-causing infectious agent with a 99.99% fatality rate. Surviving allows Host to rapidly adapt to damage and evolve in response to situational needs.

**ZEUS:** Elevated to Tango Primary, kill-on-sight order in regards to all military personnel. Civilians actively flee from you and avoid getting in your way.

Well he couldn’t fault the system for being skimpy on details. He eyed the rest of what he guessed was his ‘character sheet,’ still floating off to the side of his new title list. He already knew what his skills were—he used them rather frequently, after all—but he was curious about what achievements were supposed to be.

“Achievements,” he decided aloud, wondering what the system could tell him about them.

[ Achievements]
Each Achievement awards 1 Perk Point

**Hard to Kill:** *Complete Story Mode in any difficulty without dying.*

He looked skeptically around himself, pretty sure this formless void counted as *dying*. Unless… he was *supposed* to die, and had actually finished the ‘game’? Not a pleasant thought at all, but not one he could do anything about at the moment.

**Web of Knowledge:** *Acquire all nodes of the Web of Intrigue.*

The what? Maybe it was talking about the Nexus, where he stored the important memories of his targets?

**Mankind is Your Mask:** *Complete 3 missions without causing a single Military Alert.*

**Unnatural Selection:** *Acquire all available upgrades.*

**The Butcher:** *Kill 50 characters in 5 seconds.*

He smirked. If the system was giving out achievements for killing things, he was going to be just *drowning* in ‘perk points’ pretty soon.

**Trail of Corpses:** *Kill 53,596 infected.*

Called it. But that was a… very specific number of infected. He wondered what the significance was?

**Infiltrator:** *Infiltrate 10 military bases disguised as a Commander.*

**Misconception:** *Destroy 25 Infected Water Towers before they hatch.*

**Self-Deception:** *Discover what happened to Alex Mercer through the Web of Intrigue.*

**SME:** *Gain the ability to drive and fly all vehicles.*

**The Cleaner:** *Destroy 10 Military Bases or Infected Hives in New York City.*

**Threat Elevated:** *Destroy 25 strike teams.*

**Cleanup:** *Kill 15 characters with a single Whipfist attack.*

**Endless Hunger:** *Consume 200 characters to boost your health.*

**In Plain Sight:** *Evade 10 strike teams.*

**Return Fire:** *Catch any object tossed by a Hydra; and throw it back.*

He did a quick count of all of those. Let’s see… so, basically, just living his life netted him 16 ‘perk points,’ whatever those were for. Presumably ‘perk points’ were used for ‘perks,’ so maybe asking for that would bring up the next option?

“Perks?”

[Perks]
You have (16) available Perk Points

His vision was getting kind of crowded with all of these text windows open. Swiping through them didn’t accomplish anything, and neither did asking them verbally to go away. Mentally picturing them rolling up and closing however, did. Now with far less clutter, he let his eyes refocus on the list of ‘perks’ available to him now that he was officially dead. How ironic.

**You Are What You Eat:** *Rather than be limited to one disguise, you can assume the form of anyone you have ever consumed, at any time.*

**Reality Unwoven:** *Meta-shapeshifting taken to its (il)logical conclusion. Allows you to assume qualities of eldritch horrors.*

**FATHER of the Year:** *Biomass removed from your body will transform into infected beasts if not reassimilated within five minutes. These beasts will fight to get back to you no matter the distance or obstacles in their way. If they are killed or subdued, their cells will devour each other and ultimately self-destruct. If they reach you, you can choose to reabsorb them or give them further instructions.*

**Apex Predator:** *You gain the ability to consume animals and apply their biological traits to yourself. The more traits you have active, the stronger your predatory instincts become.*

**Jumpscare Champion:** *You are undetectable while actively stalking, hunting, or hiding.*

**Armory:** *Allows you to have complete control over the form your armor takes.*

**Endbringer Physiology:** *You gain the ability to compact your biomass into impossibly dense layers, increasing in density as they progress. Allows shapeshifting into small forms by compacting biomass and large ones by pulling from deeper layers. No upper limit to biomass storage.*

**Blood In The Water:** *Your aversion to water is removed. You’re still too heavy to swim, but you won’t feel instinctually compelled to avoid large bodies of water anymore.*

Eight, huh? Why give him sixteen points if there were only eight available perks in the first place? Since there wasn’t a reason not to, he took all of them. He was especially intrigued by the one allowing him to consume animals for biomass—that would make blending in so much easier. And that ‘Endbringer’ one… that sounded very promising. He could only assume more perks would be unlocked later, since they’d given him so many points right off the start.

He pulled his ‘stat menu’ back up and stared at it, hard. He had 500 points to allocate, and knew exactly nothing about how his current ‘stats’ measured up to baseline humans.

“Stats?” he tried, wondering if maybe that would detail things for him.

**[Strength]:** A measure of how physically strong a character is. Controls the maximum weight a character can carry and melee attack damage.

**[Dexterity]:** A measure of how agile a character is. Controls attack and movement
speed and accuracy, as well as the ability to evade an opponent’s attack.

[Endurance]: A measure of how sturdy a character is. Influences health points, resistances for special types of damage, and fatigue.

[Intelligence]: A measure of a character’s problem-solving ability. Controls a character’s ability to comprehend foreign languages and their skill in magic.

Magic? The fuck?

[Charisma]: A measure of a character’s social skills, and sometimes their physical appearance. Generally influences prices while trading and NPC reactions.

And with his charisma at a 5, that would… really explain why everyone seemed to cotton on that he was an inhuman cannibalistic monster at first glance.

[Luck]: A measure of a character’s luck. Luck might influence anything, but mostly random items, encounters and outstanding successes/failures.

And with that as a 2… it’s a miracle he lived through the whole game, probably.

As helpful as that was, though, it didn’t give him a baseline to measure his stats against. He studied his stat page very carefully. He had no way of knowing if this… menu feature would persist in the ‘new game,’ or that he’d remain conscious of it. He really couldn’t afford to leave those 500 unspent points unspent when there was every chance he’d never get to use them again.

Considering his fighting style, dumping a lot of them into STR and DEX would probably be smart, as well as bulking up END. He wanted to at least get CHA into the double digits, and leaving LUK at a 2 was almost certainly bad for his health.

After some mental fiddling, he decided on a course of action.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{STR:} & \quad 70 \ [+130 = 200] \\
\text{DEX:} & \quad 70 \ [+130 = 200] \\
\text{END:} & \quad 85 \ [+115 = 200] \\
\text{INT:} & \quad 70 \ [+30 = 100] \\
\text{CHA:} & \quad 5 \ [+45 = 50] \\
\text{LUK:} & \quad 2 \ [+50 = 52] \\
\end{align*}
\]

[Confirm?]

With a game shrug, Alex confirmed his choices. He still didn’t know what the stats for a regular human were, but if he was bench-pressing tanks at 70 STR, he could only guess that human baseline stats were extremely low. He would rather have the stats directly tied to how hard he was to kill be monstrously overpowered than find himself unpleasantly surprised by a powerful new enemy. The 50 in CHA would hopefully stop people from pegging him as a sociopath on sight, and his new LUK score would maybe keep Fate from screwing him over at every conceivable turn. Not waking
up on any more morgue tables would be a nice start.

Nodding to himself, he looked around the void for any sort of ‘continue’ option. “Uh, continue? Finalize options? New game?”

[Finalize Choices and Start Game?]

[Y / N]

Alex Mercer chuckled to himself, took one last long look around the empty void that was his death, and said fuck yes.

[Quest: Break the Learning Curve]

Complete the tutorial.

Success: 10 gold, ?, ?

Alex blinked, finding himself flat on his back and staring up at yet another neon red text box. So he hadn’t hallucinated that entire situation in the death-void, then. Good to know. Was this a quest? He had quests? Well, if his life was a game he supposed that made some amount of sense. But it was giving him gold as a reward, and he was pretty sure stores didn’t accept gold as payment.

Your settings are set to: Voice Activated. Try saying “Menu” to open the Menu!

God, if the whole tutorial was like this he was going to have to kill someone. “Menu,” he rasped obediently.

[Stats]

[Journal]

[Inventory]

[Achievements]

[Skills]

[Perks]

[Options]

Try exploring your Menu now!

Alex took a steadying breath. Hopefully it was only the tutorial that was going to treat him like a small child. He forcefully pushed aside his annoyance and turned his attention to his ‘menu.’ He already knew what his stats were—since he’d literally just finalized them—and there was no point to checking achievements and perks again, but the others seemed interesting.
“Inventory?”

He carefully did not react when a huge wall of boxes unfolded in front of his eyes like a rolodex. They were all empty, but some careful mental wiggling revealed he could ‘slide’ the boxes to the left and right revealing potentially infinite boxes. That was bullshit, but whatever. There was also a bar at the bottom of the inventory that looked like a generic sort of currency tracker. At the moment he had nothing, but that wasn’t particularly shocking.

“Journal.”

[Quest: Break the Learning Curve]

Complete the tutorial.

Success: 10 gold, ?, ?

Progress: 2/7

And that was it. So the journal was a quest tracker. Useless for now, but might be helpful later if he wound up in one of those games that hands out quests like candy.

“…options?”

[Subtitles: Off]

[Gore: On]

[Minimap: Off]

[Difficulty: Normal]

[Activation: Voice]

[Hints: On]

[Spectator Mode: On]

Alex sat up and leaned closer to this, very interested. Were these options actually affecting the outside world? He mentally switched the ‘minimap’ on curiously. Instead of a literal map appearing in the corner of his vision like he’d been half expecting, he abruptly gained an awareness of everything around him for about half a kilometer. He knew where paths were, where caves and ponds were located, and could feel the presence of various creatures and their potential hostility. That was… vastly more overpowered than he’d been expecting out of a minimap. He’d be leaving that one on, that was for damn sure.

Another bit of mental fiddling got the ‘activation’ to be mentally activated instead of by voice, so he wouldn’t be suspicious saying video game words out loud with no context. He wasn’t concerned with subtitles or gore, didn’t dare touch difficulty with a ten-foot pole, and he turned ‘hints’ off with glee. Maybe that was what had made the tutorial sound so demeaning.

And then there was that ‘spectator mode’ that was crossed through and greyed out. No amount of poking or mental consideration could change it. He didn’t even know what it was. It was implying that he was being watched by something or someone—probably by whatever or whoever decided to turn his life into a video game—but since there wasn’t anything he could do...
about it he left it alone. It’s not like it was hurting him any.

[Quest: Break the Learning Curve] Complete!

Rewards: 10 gold, Skill: Observe, Gene Sample: Mule Deer

Alex did a double-take. Was that…? He pulled up his inventory and stared. Yep. There was a cartoonish double-helix chilling in the first box of his inventory. He reached up and touched the ‘gene sample,’ which appeared in his hand with a small airy sound. It was shaped like a stand of DNA about the length of his forefinger, and staring at it intently made more words unroll next to where it lay in his hand.

Gene Sample: Mule Deer

Consumable

The genetic blueprints of a Mule Deer.

Gives: Cervid Physiology, Danger Sense, Heightened Senses

‘Consumable’…? Morbidly curious, Alex let his feeder tendrils swarm over the DNA strand and drag it inside his skin. Immediately, he felt his biomass rearranging itself and shifting into strange configurations as the knowledge of how to be a deer unfolded across his consciousness. He knew how to form antlers, how to forage, where to hide from predators… A flick of thought formed his armor, and it was the easiest thing in the world to adapt a branching crown of antlers on its head.

If quests were going to give him samples of animals to use at his leisure, he’d be doing all of them.

He’d also gotten a ‘skill,’ which was interesting. ‘Observe’ was a pretty straightforward name for a skill, and it was also probably the reason information on the gene sample had shown up when he stared at it long enough. But what was he supposed to do now? He looked around, but didn’t recognize wherever it was he’d been dropped. No buildings or humans around, at least. In fact, if he didn’t know any better, he’d think he was in some kind of enchanted forest.

The unicorn he’d glimpsed in the bushes before it galloped away helped sell it.

[Quest: Geographically Displaced]

Figure out where you are.

Success: ?, ?

Failure: Minimap disabled

Well he didn’t want to lose his new mind map, so he should probably put in some real effort to figure out where the hell he’d wound up for this ‘new game.’ He supposed it might have been a bit optimistic of him to think he’d wind up in the same world he’d just left.

The unicorn pointed to a world with magic (the INT description made a little more sense), but that honestly didn’t narrow it down. It could be a fictional world, a book world, another game world, or even an entirely unique world built specifically for him. He hoped it wasn’t that last one. He’d like to have some idea as to what was going on.

Without any other ideas, Alex started walking. The trees looked normal enough, if a bit bigger than
any he had ever seen in person, and all the animals he was seeing bolted away as soon as he got within twenty feet of them. Some of them were obviously magical—like the massive spider the size of a small car—while others seemed perfectly mundane.

But, to a one, all of them were fleeing him like he was the literal plague. Well, he was, but he hadn’t been exposed to many animals in New York Zero so this was a new phenomenon. If he sent animals fleeing with his very presence, that was going to make utilizing his Apex Predator perk kind of difficult.

And then something crossed the boundary of his awareness, arrowing right for him, and didn’t slow down. Alex felt his claws spreading from his hands without conscious thought, body reacting to the presence of a threat before his mind had even caught up. He swiveled on one heel and made split-second eye contact with the rabid beast as it leapt at him and a text box unfolded in the corner of his eye.

Fenrir Greyback

Alpha Werewolf

Level: 20

STR: 15

DEX: 20

END: 20

INT: 5

CHA: 2

LUK: 8

His claws lashed out before his mind really wrapped around what that implied. He had meant to maybe bat it aside, or at least cripple it until he got a better look at it.

What actually happened was his claws cleaved through bone and flesh as if the thing was made of wet tissue paper. It had exactly enough time to make one alarmed canine yelp before his tendrils swarmed it on autopilot. He hesitated as his biomass settled and cheerfully informed him of what, exactly, had just tried to jump him.

Firstly, there was the virus attempting to infect him. How adorable. He would have laughed aloud if he hadn’t been busy reeling with the influx of knowledge on an entire magical world that he’d apparently been dropped headfirst into. The Harry Potter books, really? He sighed, even as he eagerly assimilated all that Greyback had known.

Then his vision was full of text.

[Enemy Consumed!]

+1 Status Point

Skillset: Wizard Added!
Skillset: Werewolf Added!

Perk: Alpha Presence Added!

Perk: Mother Moon Added!

Gene Sample: Werewolf Added!

[Quest: Geographically Displaced] Complete!

Rewards: 10 gold, Minimap Expanded

[Skillset: Wizard]

Ability: Wand Magic Unlocked

Wand Magic, Year One Unlocked

Wand Magic, Year Two Unlocked

Wand Magic, Year Three Unlocked

[Skillset: Werewolf]

+10 STR

+15 DEX

+15 END

Alpha Presence: You are, indisputably, the alpha in the room. Creatures will acknowledge your status and submit to you unless they are also alphas, whereupon they will challenge you for dominance.

Mother Moon: While not dependent on the phases of the moon for strength, you are three times as powerful when she is full.

Gene Sample: Werewolf

Consumable

*The genetic blueprint of a werewolf.*

Gives: Heightened Senses, Heightened Reflexes, Canine Physiology, Infectious Teeth, Infectious Claws, Bloodthirst

Alex closed his eyes as he tried to reorganize his thoughts. Irritatingly, the neon red words did not go away when he closed them, and were far more glaring on the back of his eyelids. A quick burst of dismissals closed them, but that didn’t remove the knowledge of them or what they had told him.

First off, and probably the most important, was the fact that consuming the werewolf had given him a status point as well as a not-insignificant boost to his already overpowered stats. If that was an ‘alpha werewolf’ (and his in-depth knowledge of the Potterverse implied Greyback was supposed to be pretty dangerous), then he had vastly overestimated the stats of an average person. Taking into
account the bonuses he got from his ‘werewolf’ skillset, he could pretty easily guess that 5 was the average for just about everything, here.

God, he was going to walk over just about everything in this place. He couldn’t fucking wait.

Secondly, eating the werewolf had ‘unlocked’ magic. Which meant he could use magic. As if his entire life hadn’t been bullshit enough already, some god or what have you had taken one look at him and gone hahaha NOT STRONG ENOUGH! and dumped three years’ worth of quality magical education into his skull.

If it had been possible for him to get headaches, he’d damn well have one.

Sure, he’d need a wand to use any of it, but the fact that magic was possible for him to do at all considering he was A) not magical and B) not from this universe was stretching it a bit. Oh well. He probably wouldn’t get much use out of any of the ‘magic’ from this place, but it wouldn’t hurt to get himself a wand and practice it. He was a very firm believer in ‘the best kind of kill is overkill.’

Now that he knew he was in the Forbidden Forest (and just what had Fenrir Greyback been doing so close to a magical school?), it was decision time. Did he go towards Hogwarts and interfere with the plot? The Potter kid should be in his second year, which meant consuming a random Hogwarts student and integrating into the population wouldn’t be too difficult. Or did he focus on what was actually important, and abuse the hell out of his various perks and abilities to turn himself into a veritable nightmare?

[Quest: Outclassed]

Hunt down and consume one of each of the XXXX class wizard-killers.

Success: ?, 100 gold, ?

Progress: 1/10

Alex smirked.

1992

Chamber of Secrets

Harry Potter was not having a very good day. Or a good week. Or month. Or year. Heck, if he wanted to be accurate he hasn’t been having a very good life. Everything had seemed to be looking up for him that day Hagrid had broken down the door and introduced him to magic. Magic! He was still giddy even now about the fact that magic was real, that it existed. And, while his time in the magical world might not have been all that great (considering), it was still loads better than anything he’d have gone through with the Dursleys.

That’s not to say he really liked the magical world, just that it was better than the Dursleys. The lesser of two evils was still an evil, after all.

As he kept his back pressed against a pillar, deep in a chamber no one but him could enter, alone
except for a hat and a sword, trying to keep his panting quiet so the massive basilisk that was currently hunting him wouldn’t hear him, Harry couldn’t help but reflect on what, exactly, he must have done in a past life to make Fate hate him this much.

First, there was the fact that the Dark Lord himself had personally targeted Harry’s family for some reason that no one would tell him, murdered his parents, and then tried to kill him while he was still an infant. He had to have been a warlord who ate orphans in his spare time in a past life to have amassed that kind of negative karma. And then, as if that wasn’t enough, he’d been dumped on the Dursleys’ doorstep in November with only a blanket between him and hypothermia whereupon he was then subject to a decade of constant abuse and neglect.

And then, when he finally gets reintroduced to this wonderful, magical world, his very first year is punctuated by a plot by the same Dark Lord who’d tried to off him staging an attack on some kind of immortality rock. And of course he’d wound up facing off with him, because he was Harry Potter and his face might as well be placed next to ‘trouble-magnet’ in the dictionary.

And now, now, Ron’s kid sister had been possessed by some kind of evil book with the Dark Lord’s younger self inside of it, which had lured him (and Ron, and the useless Lockhart) down here to confront a basilisk that could kill him by looking at him funny.

Harry was not having a very good time, is what he’s saying.

And Fawkes, the mystical phoenix that could teleport people with fire, had—instead of grabbing him by the robes and simply rescuing him—given him a hat and a sword with which to kill a basilisk. Fawkes could have done a billion more useful things than give an untrained twelve-year-old a sword. He could have brought Dumbledore. He could have brought some Aurors. He could have brought a bloody rooster.

But no, Fawkes gives him a hat and a sword.

To say Harry was kind of upset about that was to say that Vernon was kind of overweight, or that Snape was kind of mean.

Please, Harry prayed to God, to Merlin, to anyone who was bloody listening, please give me a miracle and don’t make me fight this thing with this toothpick?

The basilisk’s head snaked around the pillar, nostrils flaring, and Harry tightened his grip on the bloody sword he was going to have to fight this thing with—

—and something impacted the basilisk’s head like the Fist of God. Scales buckled like tinfoil, bones snapping and cracking as already-ruined eyes erupted from their sockets. Blood sprayed in an arc as the basilisk thrashed in its death-throes, bucking and whipping its sixty-foot length into pillars and walls as it wailed.

A scream answered it. High-pitched and low like a hunting falcon crossed with a Nazgul, the thing that had just punched a basilisk to death materialized on its head as if it had just glitched through reality to be there. Harry had exactly three panicked seconds to study it, burning its appearance into his mind forever, before it flickered away again.

The basilisk slid backwards so fast Harry thought maybe it had just learned to teleport. He peeked around the pillar and saw that, no, instead the thing which had just cratered its head had just yanked it backwards and into the open. Then the thing jammed claws the length of Harry’s arms into the basilisk’s supposedly impenetrable hide and swarmed it with what looked like worms or vines. They squiggled and squirmed all over the basilisk’s corpse, before contracting with a series of
sharp cracks of all the snake’s bones breaking and scales shattering. Then the lump was pulled backwards, where it writhed in place before reforming into the figure that had killed it.

Harry took a careful breath. Had the thing eaten the basilisk?

“No!” the shade of the Dark Lord shouted, making Harry jump. He’d actually forgotten the man was there. “What have you done to my basilisk?!”

The thing turned its head towards the angry form of the young Tom Riddle (almost fully solid), and Harry took this moment to fully observe it from where he was safely hidden. With his useless hat and his useless sword.

It was… not a human, that much was obvious. It was tall, taller than anyone except maybe Hagrid, and while it walked upright its legs were backwards like a deer or a dog and it had talons instead of feet. Its head was just a long skull, like that of a horse or a wolf, full of sharp fangs and crowned with a rack of antlers that gleamed wetly in the low light of the chamber. Armor covered it in jagged, sharp angles and planes of white bone, and a mantle of what might have been fur ruffled around its neck and shoulders. Quills covered the backs of its arms and shoulders, and as Harry watched they all stood up and rattled like a rattlesnake. Its eyes were just empty sockets, and the briar-like claws twisting out of its hands looked like actual metal.

“Repurposed it,” came the deep, rasping reply. The skeletal jaws opened as it talked, showing it was not actually a mask but rather the things actual head. The claws suddenly shivered, and when they reappeared there was a layer of black ichor covering them.

“No matter,” Riddle declared disgustedly. “The girl’s soul is nearly mine. Then it shall be too late to stop me from recovering my true power.”

Like a bolt of lightning, Harry abruptly recalled the actual problem he’d been down here to fix. Ginny! His eyes snapped to the diary spread somewhere between Ginny and the monster. He’d never be able to cross that distance before one of them killed him. He had even less confidence in his chances against the basilisk-killer than he had against the actual snake, and he’d already been hopeless there.

“The diary!” Harry shouted from his spot behind the pillar, cringing back when Riddle whirled to face him, incredulous and angry at his continued survival.

The monster turned its head and seemed to notice the diary. It tossed its head like a horse and closed the distance between them with arrogant, predatory strides. Without pausing, it jammed one of its black-coated claws through the diary, to tremendous effect. Black blood seemed to ooze out of the book, even as Riddle suddenly had a huge hole punched through him before he screamed and disintegrated.

The monster tilted its head and considered the book impaled on a claw. The vines swarmed the book briefly, and when they retreated all the black ‘blood’ from the diary was gone. The monster let the book fall to the ground then, apparently unconcerned.

And then, because he was Harry Potter and life was never fair, the creature turned to face him. Harry bit back the urge to just run screaming from the chamber, and instead dredged up all his Gryffindor courage to step out from behind the pillar, still holding his useless sword.

The creature seemed to study him for a long moment, before it snorted and tossed its head again. It promptly turned on its heel and flickered away out of sight, as if it had never been there at all. Harry was left alone(?) in the chamber, with his useless sword, an unconscious Weasley, and no proof that
any of it had happened except the remains of the diary with the hole in it.

But he was alive. He was alive, and he hadn’t had to fight a basilisk with a sword. For that alone, he decided that he wouldn’t mention the monster when he inevitably had to tell the headmaster what had happened down here. He was the only one who could even get in here, so who’s to say anyone had to know the basilisk wasn’t still dead down here? Ginny was still pretty out of it, so he could probably drag her out of the antechamber before she woke up and wondered where the corpse was.

The destruction of the diary would be a little harder to explain, but the size of the claw-hole was about the circumference of one of the basilisk’s fangs, so maybe he could say he’d tricked the basilisk into biting the book when it lunged at him? It was implausible, but so was his life.

Harry threaded the useless sword through his belt and scooped up the diary on his route to Ginny, pulling her awkwardly onto his back. As he was marching out of the room towards the rockslide where he’d left Ron, Harry couldn’t help but feel relieved.

Something had heard his prayers and sent him a miracle. Sure that miracle was probably a bigger monster than Riddle and the basilisk combined, but it hadn’t tried to hurt or kill him so it was already a step above most of the adults in his life.

Harry decided to put this one down as a tentative win.

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**Harry Potter**

**Title(s): The Boy-Who-Lived**

**Level:** 6

**STR:** 4 (-3)

**DEX:** 6 (-3)

**END:** 6 (-3)

**INT:** 15 (-9)

**CHA:** 8

**LUK:** 8 (-7)

**Status Effects:** *Core Block (x3), Malnourished, Subject of Prophecy*

Alex still shook his head just thinking about it. The one quick Observe he’d gotten on the Potter kid before he’d bailed had given him a lot of questions. He’d even briefly considered consuming him and just living out his life as Harry Potter, before his entire field of vision had filled with red.

**[WARNING: SCRIPT CONFLICT IMMINENT!]**

And that had been accompanied by a truly horrible wailing klaxon alarm that apparently only he
could hear. It had only been his ironclad control over every cell in his body that kept him from reacting outwardly. The second he stopped considering eating the Potter kid the warning had gone away.

Message received, Spectator.

Regardless, he’d managed to find and consume a basilisk, which had been one of the three creatures on his list he’d actually wondered about finding. Also, the horcrux of the Dark Lord was apparently eatable, which was a boon he hadn’t honestly been expecting.

As if on cue, a deluge of notifications swarmed his field of vision now that he was ‘out of combat.’

[Enemy Consumed!]

+1 Status Point

Skillset: Basilisk Added!

Perk: Ouroboros Added!

Gene Sample: Basilisk Added!

[Skillset: Basilisk]

+80 STR
+80 DEX
+80 END

Ability: Compulsion Magic (Basilisk) Unlocked

Compulsion Magic (Basilisk): Compels creatures to make and maintain eye contact.

Ouroboros: Like a snake, you can shed your skin to return to baseline health. Every shed skin costs 5% of your total biomass and permanently increases your END stat by (10).

Gene Sample: Basilisk

Consumable

The genetic blueprint of a basilisk.


[Horcrux Consumed 1/7!]

+1 Status Point

Ability: Parseltongue Unlocked

Ability: Dark Magic Unlocked
Title: **Soulhunter Added!**

Wand Magic, Year Four Unlocked

Wand Magic, Year Five Unlocked

Wand Magic, Year Six Unlocked

Dark Magic, Acolyte Unlocked

**Soulhunter:** You've developed a taste for souls in addition to flesh and bone. You can now choose to consume the souls of prey in addition to or instead of their biomass. Souls consumed do not grant biomass, but instead allow you to bolster your ‘life count’ by a 1:1 ratio. Every soul allows you to escape certain death exactly once. Souls are destroyed when used in this manner. If you have at least one soul consumed, you cannot die.

Holy ever-loving shit. That was. That Soulhunter title had. It had made him immortal. Like, legitimately immortal. He’d already been practically impossible to kill, but now that he could eat souls he could just… live infinitely? Just thinking about the kind of things he could just… shrug off now as inconveniences (like nuclear warheads) as long as he’d eaten somebody beforehand…

It was making him honest-to-God salivate. This body didn’t even have salivary glands! He wondered what he’d get if he consumed the other six?

And fuck, just looking at everything the basilisk (on top of the utter bullshit that horcrux had dropped on him) had given him was making him shiver in excitement. Now all that was left was the Nundu and the Dragon. The others, oddly enough, had actually been found thanks to Greyback’s memories. Greyback knew exactly where to find the shadier side of the magical world, and his ability to apparate (and wouldn’t Cross just have an aneurism if he knew Blacklight could teleport) crossed with a truly monstrous 100 INT stat let Alex pop across countries like stepping stones. It was surprising what kind of creatures you could find chained down in the black market.

And hell, that basilisk venom was something else. It made Taipan venom look like sugar water. And that wasn’t even counting the fact he could now make himself a nifty set of basilisk eyes at will. He knew where he’d find a dragon in two years’ time, but weren’t Nundus native to Africa?

Well, no time like the present.

**Progress: 8/10**

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**1994**

**Chamber of Secrets**

Harry sat on the steps of the chamber, staring out at the huge statue that had—what felt like a lifetime ago—disgorge a basilisk. This wasn’t the first time he’d retreated down to the chamber to be alone, and it likely wouldn’t be the last. Only, usually it was because he’d gotten sick and tired of Ron and
Hermione’s nagging and he wanted some time to himself. This time it was because someone had entered his name into a death tournament and no one believed him when he said he didn’t do it himself.

He sighed. He’d had any sort of naivety about the magical world burned out of him over the past three years, but it would have been nice to keep living in his delusions for a while longer. The witches and wizards of Britain would always flip between revering him and hating him, seemingly at the whims of Rita Skeeter and Minister Fudge. Dumbledore would always be cryptic and unhelpful and unempathetic towards his burning desire to not have to go live with the Dursleys every summer.

Life would continue to be a bitch and things would continue to try and kill him every year.

It was getting harder and harder to keep up the ‘goofy, affable Gryffindor’ face when everyone and their dog spits at his feet when he walks by. He sighed again.

And now there was the first task. Dragons. As if Dark Lords and basilisks and cerberi weren’t enough, now he was supposed to go up against dragons.

Harry Potter was going to die in front of a crowd of his peers. Like a spectator sport.

He sighed again, long and loud.

Air blew over the back of his neck in reply, and Harry felt every muscle clamp down in fear. There weren’t any breezes in the chamber. It was airtight and underground. Nothing lived down here, not anything big enough to blow on the back of his neck. His skin crawled as the whatever-it-was kept breathing steadily. Calmly. Not at all as terrified as Harry himself was.

Maybe he wouldn’t die in front of a crowd of his peers. Maybe he’d just die down here instead, and some parslemouth a thousand years from now would find his bones lying in the chamber on the front steps like a cautionary tale against brooding.

He turned his head an infinitesimal amount and caught a glimpse of fur and bone. Not a person, then. Definitely some kind of animal. Did Slytherin have more monsters hidden away down here? He didn’t dare make any sudden moves. His wand was in his pocket and doing no one any good, not that he knew that many offensive spells to begin with. People were strangely reluctant to actually teach him anything useful at this ‘magic school.’

“Easy there,” Harry breathed quietly, trying to unwind his tense muscles and present a softer target. Animals all relied on body language, right? Maybe if he convinced it he wasn’t going to try and hurt it…?

He heard a clicking, like claws on stone, and something stood up behind him. Well. Good news was the air on his neck was gone. The bad news was if it was standing upright it was probably not something he wanted to be running into down here alone. A werewolf, maybe?

Then it stepped out from behind him, and Harry felt his heart stop.

The monster from two years ago stared down at him from the empty sockets of its wolf skull, antlers branching up like a crown of thorns. The massive arm-length claws were gone, replaced by a set of curiously human hands tipped with hooked claws like a cat. The mantle of fur had changed color; a sort of mottled brown with dark spots instead of the flat black it had been before. It was also sporting an additional dozen eyes—currently covered by a milky film—on its shoulders and biceps, and its throat was covered in spikes.

“Bloody hell,” Harry whispered under his breath, straining not to reach for his wand. He
remembered what this thing had done to the basilisk. If he attacked it, he stood exactly no chance.

The bone jaws parted, baring three rows of sharp fangs and a black serpentine tongue, and it *spoke*. “Harry Potter,” it grated in a rough, hoarse voice. Harry startled. He recalled that it *had* spoken when Riddle had addressed it, but somehow what that implied had been lost in translation.

If it spoke, that meant it was sapient. If it was sapient, that meant it could be reasoned with. Probably.

It also *knew his name*, which was not exactly encouraging considering his track record with things trying to kill him.

“‘ello,” he replied anxiously, not sure what response the monster wanted. It snorted at him in reply, a strangely equine sound for all that its head was shaped like a wolf and its fur looked like a lion’s mane.

“The dragons,” it began with no preamble. “Lead me to them.”

Harry blinked, startled. The thing wanted to see the dragons? Wait. If it had eaten the basilisk, did that mean it made a habit of eating dangerous creatures? Was it going to *eat* the dragons? Harry wouldn’t be exactly sorry to see them go, but…

“Why do you need *me*?” he asked, bewildered. Surely if the monster was strong enough to punch a basilisk to death it wouldn’t have any trouble getting past a few dragon tamers.

It rumbled in reply, sounding like a steam engine crossed with a huge tiger. “Wards,” it deigned to explain. “Misdirection.”

Which probably meant it *couldn’t* get to the dragons unless someone led it there, and since Harry had been down here all on his lonesome and just so happened to have been there before…

Well, it was a very small price to pay for not getting slaughtered. Honestly, Harry had zero problems leading the hungry monster to the dragons. He still owed it for the basilisk, and he was *far* more willing to be accommodating to things that could *kill* and *eat* him without batting an eye than he would have been to, say, Voldemort or Dumbledore.

“Yeah, all right,” Harry conceded, pushing himself to his feet. The thing didn’t seem surprised at his easy acceptance, but maybe it just didn’t feel emotion like humans did. “Can you meet me out by Hagrid’s hut? I don’t think you can really… sneak through the school without someone spotting you.”

It hummed, sounding amused. “I will follow. No one in the building will detect me.”

And then it was gone.

Literally. Between the span of an eyeblink, the creature was *gone*. Harry felt a chill crawl down his spine, kind of like the one he got when he felt eyes on him in a crowded room. Only *worse*, because these eyes also felt like they might want to sink fangs into his throat and eat him alive. Taking a steadying breath, Harry tried to ignore the ramifications of the monster being able to just disappear at will and headed for the exit.

It wasn’t his problem. It was *not* his problem.
Alex was pleased. The wards had been an irritant when he first ran into them, since they could not be entered unless accompanied by someone who had already been keyed in. He supposed he could have just consumed one of the dragon tamers, but he’d learned enough about magic through the knowledge of his victims to not want to tempt it with loopholes. It would be much easier to just coerce someone into bringing him through them, and the Potter kid had been there before and was probably easier to cow into obedience than an adult.

Not that there had been much cowing going on. Potter had actually seemed ambivalent about the entire affair, as if he was fresh out of fucks to give and was just going with the flow.

Probably not inaccurate, considering what the kid was going through every year.

As Alex stalked along behind him—hunting him to keep Jumpscare Champion active—he considered the Potter boy. His stats hadn’t increased noticeably since the last time they’d met, but Alex had noticed that no one in this world really worked to increase them the way he sort of expected people to. Sure they didn’t have a numerical representation of their skills to look at, but for not a single one to be attempting to better themselves?

It was a sad thing indeed.

Alex himself had been having a very productive few years since consuming the basilisk. Everything he consumed gave him a status point to use at his leisure (no matter how small the creature was) and the ‘wizard-killers’ even gave actual increases to certain stats. Mostly to STR, DEX, and END, but considering the sheer number of things he’d been devouring over the past few years, well…

If he’d been overpowered before, he was practically godlike now.

Alex Mercer

Title(s): The Prototype, Blacklight, ZEUS, The Soulhunter

STR: 450
DEX: 500
END: 500
INT: 150
CHA: 50
LUK: 52

Consuming wizards or witches each gave him anywhere from 1-5 points of INT—which was interesting, but not as immediately helpful as the loads of STR, DEX, and END—which meant that if he were to cast a spell, he’d probably have a lethality range starting at localized apocalypse and going up from there.

Hell, Dumbledore only had an INT of 40, and he was supposed to be one of the strongest wizards alive.

He dipped his head under a low-hanging torch on the wall and considered the armor he was currently wearing. Armory hadn’t sounded like a very useful perk when he’d picked it, but he had to
admit he got a kick out of making his armor into some kind of supernatural nightmare creature. The wolf skull head he thought was particularly inspired. Plus it let him incorporate all the useful things from his kills onto his body, like the basilisk eyes, venom, and the nundu fur and throat pouch. Not that breathing diseases was something he couldn’t have done on his own, but the nundu had the blueprint for every disease in existence in its genes, including the magical ones that had mostly gone extinct over the centuries.

His favorite was one that rotted the magical core of witches and wizards, turning them into squibs. The nundu couldn’t single out individual diseases to use, whereas Alex could. So he could, theoretically, neuter the current generation of magic users right here with a single exhale.

It was a good thing he didn’t have a quest for that.

He was really hoping the dragon let him breathe fire. Or let him fly. He was far too heavy for wings to lift him conventionally, but dragons shouldn’t be able to fly either following that logic. They probably flew through 90% magic and 10% wings, which was a ratio that might work for him too.

Potter pulled a silvery cloak out of his pocket and swirled it around his body, promptly vanishing from sight. Alex let the eyes masked by the sockets of his skull switch over to thermal vision, whereupon the kid was visible again. Wizards didn’t really cover all of their bases, generally. Potter hadn’t even silenced his footsteps or put on a scent-blocking charm, which Alex knew existed because Greyback had known and used them frequently.

To the kid’s credit, he didn’t once hesitate or second-guess himself as he led the way out to the forest and—more importantly—the dragons. With Potter ‘leading’ him, the wards let him pass with nary a whisper. Convenient, that.

Alex let his attention shift from the boy to the closest dragon, which also happened to be the biggest, most mouthwatering one.

**Hungarian Horntail**

**Level:** 70

**STR:** 90

**DEX:** 35/90

**END:** 100

Like its fellow animal brethren, the dragon only had three stats displayed. Alex had figured that was an indicator of a lack of sapience on their part. The odd dexterity score also wasn’t anything new to him at this point. He’d seen the same thing on other winged creatures, even if he wasn’t actively hunting them at the time. It just meant that the 35 score was earthbound, and the 90 was if the thing was allowed to get into the air.

Not that the impressive scores were going to help it here, even if its base stats were stronger than Alex had been in the old world.

It might as well be a worm for all the good those stats were going to do it now. Its levels were more or less consistent with the basilisk from the Chamber, even though its strength and endurance were slightly higher. It had nothing on the stats of that nundu, though, so Alex wasn’t particularly worried. Any sort of threat it could have possibly posed to him would have been worth it for whatever abilities it gave him upon its consumption.
He brushed past the invisible Potter boy, who flinched in surprise but managed to stifle any sounds, as he stalked towards the dragon. He had no intention of revealing himself to the thing until it was about to die. Grandiose displays of ostentatious power were useless, and would be lost on this mindless animal anyway.

Thanks to Jumpscare Champion, he managed to actually get all the way into the enclosure and within easy striking distance before the dragon cottoned on that something wasn’t quite right. It whipped around with impressive speed, spewing molten fire in Alex’s general direction and flaring its wings as it mantled to make itself larger and more threatening.

Too bad for the dragon that Alex was just a thousand times faster than it could ever be.

Even as it was turning and starting to spew fire, Alex had lurched forwards and under its guard, claws tipped with basilisk venom whipping up and severing vocal chords and its jugular vein in one smooth movement. The first had been deliberate, an attempt to keep the fight quiet so no one came snooping, and the second was just a pleasant bonus.

The dragon’s fire cut off abruptly as it choked on blood, recoiling and flapping its wings in desperation. Alex had no intention of letting this thing get away. The ‘quills’ he kept on his arms and shoulders twisted into spiked tentacles that lanced out and wrapped around (and stabbed into) every part of the dragon they could reach, nailing it to the ground as Alex made short work of consuming it.

Within seconds, nothing of the dragon remained except a scorch mark on the earth and pawprints in the dirt.

[Enemy Consumed!]

+1 Status Point

Skillset: Dragon Added!

Perk: Ashes to Ashes Added!

Gene Sample: Dragon Added!

[Skillset: Dragon]

+90 STR

+90 DEX

+100 END

Ability: Fire Manipulation (Dragon) Unlocked

Ability: Air Manipulation (Winged Flight) Unlocked

Fire Manipulation (Dragon): Allows generation of dragonfire from the throat and mouth.

Air Manipulation (Winged Flight): Allows manifestation of wings that permit unaided flight.
Ashes to Ashes: Your innate connection to and control of dragonfire grants you total immunity to all flame types and fire-based magic.

Gene Sample: Dragon

Consumable

The genetic blueprint of a dragon.


[Quest: Outclassed] Complete!

Success: Death’s Boon, 100 gold, Title: The Black Huntsman

Alex reeled a little from the deluge of text, but quickly dismissed everything once he’d scanned them. If he hadn’t been trying to stay under the radar he would have cackled aloud at what the dragon had given him. Fire breath and winged flight? He was so glad he’d given himself those extra points in luck, because that was obviously the only reason things were going so spectacularly well.

He was just itching to see what ‘Death’s Boon’ and that new title were going to give him, but for now he needed to ditch the Potter kid and get away from the wizard encampment. For now, he settled for letting his armor grow a pair of dragon wings—spiked and chitinous and arching far overhead. He returned to where he could see Potter’s heat signature, letting his instincts mentally dismiss him as prey so Jumpscare Champion would deactivate long enough to interact.

“A debt is owed,” Alex finally decided, fudging the truth a little. As far as he was concerned, Potter and he were even for the basilisk now. But the boy didn’t have to know that. Alex reached out and let a piece of his biomass detach from his body, where it fell to the ground in a perfect sphere. He firmly imprinted upon the flesh ball that it was not to become a beast until it was submerged in water, whereupon it would immediately come fetch him. “If you require aid, place this in water and I shall come.”

Potter reached down hesitantly and picked up the biomass ball, squirming a little at how it felt. “I… thanks?”

Alex nodded. The boy would obviously get in over his head at some point and want his help. For
now, Alex figured the conversation was over, and quickly darted away faster than the human eye could track.

He didn’t stop until he reached what he judged was a safe distance from Hogwarts, crouching in the underbrush as he eagerly turned his attention to the new item in his inventory. He reached up and removed it, staring at the small item left in his clawed hand. It was shaped like a small headstone, about the size of his palm. He scrutinized it curiously. It had, after all, been one of the rewards from a pretty sizable quest and ought to be interesting.

**Death’s Boon: Grants a skill upon use.**

And that was it. Alex frowned at the little headstone. It wasn’t going to tell him what the potential skills were? Well, that was kind of strange. But not strange enough to deter him from ‘using’ it and getting a free skill. Having a skill didn’t mean he’d have to use it, after all, and he was creative enough to make use of just about everything.

He squeezed his hand into a fist, powdering the small headstone easily. Immediately, the world greyed out around him as words began revolving into place in an unusual shade of green instead of the regular neon red.

He was… having a slightly bad feeling about this.

**Death’s Boon Granted!**

**Skill: Blindstep Unlocked**

**Blindstep: Once certain conditions are met, allows User to move between realities.**

Alex blinked. Well, that was not what he’d been expecting. He supposed it made sense, though. If the Spectator was the one who’d made his life into a game (presumably for entertainment), they’d probably get bored just watching him curbstomp the Harry Potter world after a while. This way, they get to keep watching his life and he gets to keep getting stronger by visiting various worlds.

Once he’d consumed the rest of Voldemort’s horcruxes, he’d probably go ahead and use this new skill for the first time. He’d have accomplished everything he could think to do here by then anyway. And while he was thinking about it, he took a look at that new title the quest had given him.

**The Black Huntsman: Your inexorable persistence on your hunt has granted you a supernatural ability in tracking prey. You can find anyone, or anything, anywhere in the world at will. Nothing can hide from you. Nothing can be hidden from you. If it exists on a plane of reality accessible to you, you can find it.**

That had potential. Alex grinned, a rictus baring of fangs, and finally let himself laugh.

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Harry rolled the weird ball the monster had given him between his palms pensively. He’d taken to using it as a slightly squishy stress ball recently, especially since they’d been on this stupid horcrux hunt that was going absolutely nowhere.
He squeezed it in one hand, by now inured to the flesh-like feel of it as it squished between his fingers before reforming without so much as a dent. They needed help. Ron had bailed on them not too long ago, and Harry knew Hermione was at the end of her rope. They honestly could not do this on their own anymore. Dumbledore hadn’t given them nearly enough answers for Harry’s liking, and he was beyond sick and tired of this wild goose chase across the continent.

He hadn’t told Hermione about the flesh ball, or the nightmare dragon-eater who’d given it to him. If it was one thing the Dursleys had taught him (and his Hogwarts adventures reinforced with prejudice), it was that it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission.

He pulled his wand from his pocket and transfigured a bowl from a nearby rock, then filled it with water. He hesitated, squeezing the flesh ball one more time, before he dropped it into the water with a soft splash.

For a moment, nothing happened.

And then the ball writhed.

Harry lurched away from the bowl he’d left on the forest floor as the flesh ball expanded like a stop-motion film, jerking and twisting and spiking out into thorns and limbs until a… a thing was spilling out over the bowl and getting water everywhere. It was shaped vaguely like a dog in miniature, if dogs were hairless and covered in eyes and teeth. About the size of a chihuahua, the creature bristled with spikes and thorns and its numerous eyes glowed like hellfire. It didn’t make a sound, but it opened its little mouth and bared rows upon rows upon rows of teeth going backwards in a throat that glowed red and seemed to taste the air with a tongue like a snake.

It snuffled around the grass for a second, before it turned and took off at a speed that had to be at least four times as fast as Harry could fly on his Firebolt. Harry gaped as he watched it go. He guessed it was… running off to fetch the monster?

Harry cast a guilty glance into the tent where Hermione was still asleep. He’d… he’d tell her about the monster in the morning. Or tomorrow night. Maybe. If he remembered to.

It might slip his mind, after all.

One minute he and Hermione had been trooping through some thick trees, and the next something landed heavily in front of them like a meteor. There hadn’t been any warning. No sound of displaced air or rustling of branches overhead. It was just suddenly there, landing hard enough to crater the ground and uproot the nearest six trees.

Harry whipped his wand out and had a protego between it and them before his eyes caught up with his brain. He lowered the wand immediately, reaching out and snapping his hand around Hermione’s wrist before she could fire off a hex at it and make it angry. He shook his head sharply at her in response to her startled glance, and turned his attention back to the monster.

It looked more or less the same as it had the last time he’d seen it after devouring a fully grown dragon. Tall, broad shouldered and covered in black chitin and bone. Massive dragon wings spreading from a spiked back as a lupine skull grinned at them from a ruffled mane of mottled fur, antlers branching out like a crown of thorns. It had a great deal more eyes than it had the last time he’d seen it, but they were all covered by that milky film. Its throat and the gaps between its fangs...
glowed orange, visible even through the armor on its neck, and steam rose from it like a haze over the air. Smoke trailed from its nostrils and the empty eyesockets of the skull, and its face was set in a permanent sharp grin.

“I have come,” it announced in its deep, gravelly voice, quills rattling. “What need have you?”

Harry fumbled the Locket from under his robes, holding it out to the monster. Its skull tracked the motion, and its jaws parted as a long black tongue snaked out to lick at a fang. “We’re, we’re hunting these. We need to find others that are like this, and destroy them.”

The monster reached out a hand tipped with hooked talons and Harry hesitantly let it take the Locket from numb fingers. He hated to let the only horcrux they had out of his hands, but he had hope that maybe the monster could help them somehow.

“Horcrux,” the monster purred, deep and low and rolling, and Harry felt a shudder crawl up his spine. The word sounded… hungry. “I have scoured the Earth for this and its ilk. A book, a crown, a ring, a cup, a snake, and now… a locket.”

Harry twitched before he could stop himself. It sounded like… “Did you destroy others like this?” he asked desperately. If the monster had actually hunted down and destroyed the other horcruxes…!

The monster hummed in confirmation, even as its hand broke apart into spiked vines and tendrils which pried the locket open and swarmed inside. The locket screamed, shaking and hissing and spitting fire and sparks as the monster laughed low in its throat. And then the locket fell still, and the tendrils retreated and reformed into a clawed hand holding an inert piece of jewelry, which it held out for Harry to take.

He reached and took it with a trembling hand. The compulsion to wear it was gone. He no longer felt sick or tainted by holding it. The monster had… eaten the horcrux right out of it.

The creature seemed to turn its head and stare at a spot far in the distance, at something neither Harry nor the petrified Hermione could see. Then it turned its attention back to Harry with a wolflike leer.

“One remains,” it grated, quills vibrating with a bone-rattling clatter. Suddenly, the monster was directly in front of him, inches away, one clawed hand hooked around his jaw to hold his head in place, and the other clasped around Hermione’s entire head to keep her still. Its snout was aimed at his forehead, and all the milky eyes were oriented towards his scar.

Harry’s blood ran cold at the implications. Oh, and the knowledge that this thing was probably about to eat him the same way it’d eaten the basilisk and the dragon.

“This will not be pleasant,” the monster informed him. It opened its mouth, and Harry realized with some dull horror that it was so much bigger than him that it could fit his entire head in its mouth.

Then it proceeded to do just that. He felt a stabbing pain at his temples as fangs pressed through his skin, and then—mercifully—everything went dark.

[Horcrux Consumed 7/7!]
+1 Status Point

Ability: Wandless Magic Unlocked

Dark Magic, Grandmaster Unlocked

+50 INT

[Hidden Quest: Patchwork Soul] Complete!

Devour all seven fragments of the Dark Lord Voldemort’s soul.

Success: Level Cap Increased, 1,000 gold, Gene Sample: Yig

Gene Sample: Yig

Consumable

The genetic blueprint of Yig.

Gives: Eldritch Physiology, Serpent Manipulation, Omnifarious, Fatal Countenance

LEVEL UP!

You have reached Level 200!

Unspent Status Points: 500 (+218)

Alex pulled his teeth out of Potter’s skull, the remnants of the horcrux clinging to his black tongue, and laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

Alex Mercer

Title(s): The Prototype, Blacklight, ZEUS, The Soulhunter, The Black Huntsman

STR: 540 [+200 = 740]

DEX: 590 [+210 = 800]

END: 590 [+210 = 800]

INT: 200

CHA: 50 [+50 = 100]

LUK: 52 [+48 = 100]

Blindstep Conditions Met!
Alex ran his eyes over the new deluge of text boxes, considering the unconscious forms of the kids that had brought him the last horcrux. Potter would be fine—a few wandless healing spells had taken care of the injuries, and the witch was just out from a lump to the head. He’d already sampled the best this world had to offer in terms of powers and skills, and that Yig sample the hidden quest had given him…

Well. Suffice it to say that that form alone was more powerful than anything else he could put together, even with his bullshit stats.

He guessed it might be a good enough time to put Blindstep to the test. With the horcruxes gone, Potter should be able to kill Voldemort at any time, and the thought of leaving wasn’t triggering any ‘script conflicts’ like eating Potter had so the Spectator, at least, wasn’t against the idea.

With a low chuff of laughter, Alex shifted his weight and considered the body he was wearing. His Armor had become more like his default skin after all the time he’d spent working on it, and it made for an excellent disguise if he ever wanted to do something illegal. No one could possibly connect the nightmare creature with Alex Mercer, after all.

He’d keep it on until he knew where this next reality was taking him. If nothing else, it might afford him a little breathing space if everyone runs away screaming on arrival.

With a sharp grin, he mentally nodded Yes and let the world unfold around him.

Chapter End Notes

Because I thought why NOT make an already OP character hilariously godlike for the sake of chuckles? The "ROB puts unsuspecting person into other world with gamer powers" storyline was always interesting to read, so I thought I'd put my own spin on it and--instead of using a baseline human--take a character who already HAD monstrously strong abilities and just keep making them exponentially stronger for the sake of lulz.
Chapter Summary

Alex sat on his haunches—he had haunches now—and held eye-contact with the reflection in the water. He was a dog. Well, a small orange and tan dog with fire in its bones. Whatever it was, it was so alien from human biology that adapting to it had killed any chance of turning back. He was, effectively, a Growlithe now.

Chapter Notes

I'm not even sorry.

His world was agony. He could not see, or smell, or taste. The only thing he could do was feel, and the world was pain.

He tried to grasp at any sort of sensation at all, to claw at the fragmented memories he could almost remember, only to fall short as they just… scattered. He wasn’t sure how long he remained in this state—clawing for consciousness, struggling for a cohesiveness of form, until he felt it.

Something was touching him. It was pure instinct to reach up and grasp hold of it with limbs made of vines and teeth and rip it to pieces. He sunk hooks and barbs into fur and hide, burrowed through bone and sinew, repurposed what he found for his own use.

Only.

Something wasn’t quite right.

The Growlithe studied itself in the small pool it had woken next to, furrowing its brow and snorting smoke at its own reflection. This was… wrong. It couldn’t quite remember why, but something told it it should not be a Growlithe. It was… human? But it had always been a Growlithe. It had hatched from an egg as a Growlithe, had its first battle as a Growlithe, and unless it stumbled over a fire stone, it would probably die as a Growlithe.

If that were true, why did it have memories of being a man?

Growlithe growled at the water, pain throbbing behind its eyes. Fire burned through its veins, which was not new, but yet felt distinctly unnatural all the same. Why couldn’t it remember? What had it been doing just now? It remembered seeing the strange purple ooze and thinking it might have been an injured Grimer, and stepped up to investigate, and…

Then there was only pain.
Growlithe dipped its head and pawed at its snout, ears flattening. It didn’t like this.

*Why couldn’t it remem—*

...Oh.

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Alex sat on his haunches—he had *haunches* now—and held eye-contact with the reflection in the water. He was a dog. Well, a small orange and tan dog with fire in its bones. A ‘Growlithe,’ if the fractured memories could be believed. Whatever it was, it was *so alien* from human biology that adapting to it had killed any chance of turning back. He was, effectively, a Growlithe now.

Chitin and spikes crawled over his form like armor, forming pauldrons and greaves and a breastplate, until the innocent puppy looking back at him was now an innocent puppy wrapped up in nightmare spines.

He could still manipulate his biomass and form claws and armor, but he couldn’t reassume his ‘Alex Mercer’ shape. He figured it was a ‘Pokémon’ thing. Because this? This was *not* the same world he’d just been in before the nuke.

He allowed himself seven seconds of despair over the loss of everything he’d known, before he set the emotion aside and moved on. He didn’t really… experience emotions the way humans did. He could choose to feel them or not feel them as he saw fit, since emotions were just brain chemicals and his ‘brain’ only did exactly what he told it to do.

Alex stood from the pool and headed off into the small copse of trees for lack of anything else to do. It wasn’t like he had a goal. The Growlithe hadn’t had much of one, either. The Growlithe had mostly been an animal. A very intelligent animal, but an animal nonetheless. The extent of its life goals was pretty much to reach a high enough level to discourage wild Pokémon from attacking him, maybe find a pack of other Growlithe to run with, and if he was *really* lucky he’d find a fire stone and become an Arcanine one day.

Alex approved of becoming stronger to prevent challenges, but he *mostly* approved of the Arcanine dream. This Growlithe shape was… cute. And small. And pathetic. Alex wanted to be bigger, stronger, meaner. He wanted the power an Arcanine would give him. But fire stones were… well, to say they were *rare* was putting it mildly.

‘Trainers’ tended to collect the ones they found and then keep them circulating amongst themselves. It was very difficult to find fire stones in the wild anymore. Any kind of evolution stone, really. And while Alex was a master at evolving himself, he couldn’t do anything without a template to work off of. The template for an Arcanine was *there* in the Growlithe’s DNA, it was just… missing some very key pieces. Pieces that were probably in the fire stone, now that he thought about it.

Alex snorted, idly noticing that he released smoke when he snorted now. That was new. And hinted at the ability to breathe fire, which he’d mostly overlooked what with suddenly being bound into the body of a dog for the rest of his presumably very long life. He’d have to master this fire-breathing skill immediately.

His ‘Growlithe’ knowledge hinted at a few things he could do with this ability. Alex laughed at the idea of limitations, and set out to find a place to practice.
Alex chewed on the worm creature in irritation. This new body was so aggravating. The need to actually eat was just the first thing on a massive list of inconveniences this Growlithe body had saddled him with, and it was just so much less efficient than his usual consumption ability. Because apparently Growlithes can’t do that, and so neither could Alex.

He’d tried. He’d hunted down some kind of tan bird thing his memories insisted was called a Pidgey (the naming convention of these animal things was stupid) and thought that—as a thing that presumably used flight as its major mode of transportation—it might be a good idea to incorporate wings into his pool of available DNA.

That plan hadn’t even gotten off the ground.

He’d taken out the Pidgey easily enough (the bird had very obviously not expected what it saw as a normal Growlithe to suddenly grow tentacles and leap thirty feet into the air), but his body just didn’t know what to do with the idea of consuming it. The feeder tendrils had sort of… squirmed uselessly over the bird for a while, poking at it as if he had just told his body to eat a rock, and then the fucking thing went and died on him so it was useless anyway.

And then his stomach had grumbled at him, alarming him on several levels, and his Growlithe instincts bade him bend over and bite down, and, well.

Pidgey didn’t taste all that great, but Alex had bigger concerns. Like the fact that he apparently had actual organs again, something that he’d only ever really experienced in memories. And his actual organs were fucking inconvenient.

He had to actually eat and drink now, or his fucking body complained at him like some kind of whiny toddler. He’d tried to fix the problem—he knew how his body was supposed to work, and this wasn’t it—but this stupid animal body wasn’t cooperating. It seemed stubbornly convinced that organs were necessary (which they weren’t, damn it) and refused to budge on the issue.

So he’d gracelessly resigned himself to eating like some kind of mortal creature, and actively keeping a nose on the nearest body of water at all times.

The Growlithe body seemed perpetually ravenous. No matter how much he fed it, or how often he indulged in its desire to eat, it was never any less hungry. That was irritating, but manageable. Careful testing had revealed that the hunger never actually increased, and the body never actually weakened, even if he went several weeks without indulging.

But the hunger. It persisted. The longer he ignored it, the more persistent it became until it was impossible to fight it. Alex had come to the conclusion that the Growlithe body had reacted pretty badly to the Blacklight virus, and now the two were sort of coexisting in a Cold War sort of state.

He was almost sure he didn’t really need to eat to stay alive, but the Growlithe body thought he did, and drove him rabid with hunger if he didn’t pander to its fucking delicate sensibilities. He wasn’t even all that sure if the organs he thought he had were actual organs, or just simulacrums his Growlithe body had tricked itself into creating to assuage its delusions of mortality.

But until he figured that out, he was stuck eating things with his literal mouth.

At least he’d figured out how the fire-breathing thing worked, and could effectively charbroil the
things he ate now. Horribly burnt worm-creature didn’t taste all that much better than regular worm-creature, but any improvement was a good thing.

Alex snarled around the mouthful of worm-creature (he categorically refused to degrade himself by calling it a *Caterpie*) at his own traitorous anatomy. This eating concept was fucking useless. It didn’t transmit any memories to him, and while he could extract DNA from dead tissue it was never enough to do anything with. He’d have to devour hundreds of those tan birds before he had enough information to make wings, and even then this body was so rigid that he doubted he’d actually accomplish much with them.

The dog body was so aggravating—!

“Wow, a Growlithe!”

Alex paused mid-bite, looking up. There was a kid standing at the entrance to the little clearing he was in, a fucking child, with some kind of yellow rat on his head. There was a girl with orange hair (orange hair!) beside him, who looked very green around the gills at the sight of him. Alex swallowed his mouthful, intrigued.

This was the first evidence of human life he’d run into in this weird place, and for all that they were fucking children (where were their parents?) they were at least visibly humanoid. Alex was a little relieved; he’d been sort of afraid this place was just full of intelligent animal creatures. The Growlithe body had sort of abstractly known about the existence of ‘Trainers,’ but had never connected ‘Trainer’ to ‘human’ in its pea-brain.

This was good information to have.

Then the kid with the crazy hair and the weird lightning bolt things on his cheeks pointed a little red device at him. The only thing that stopped Alex from bathing him in fire at the aggressive action was the complete lack of hostility in his body language.

“Growlithe, the Puppy Pokémon,” said an automated voice from the red thing. Alex felt his ears prick forward in vague interest. He took another bite of the worm-creature. “While loyal to its master, the Growlithe will drive away enemies by barking and biting.”

Alex withheld a snort. Maybe regular Growlithes were like that, but Alex did a hell of a lot more than barking and biting to his enemies. Also, ‘loyalty’ was not exactly a core principle of his, except maybe to Dana.

“I’m gonna catch it!” the boy shouted, pulling out a red and white ball.

“Yeah!” echoed the rat on the boy’s head.

Alex, only vaguely aware of what was going on, nonetheless recognized that the kid was challenging him for some reason. The concept of Trainers was, even for the original Growlithe, more of a fairytale warning from the packleader, so Alex didn’t have an awful lot of information about it. But ‘catching’ him sounded vaguely ominous, as did the rat’s evident interest in fighting.

Alex considered the yellow rat, absently licking his chops. He hadn’t seen anything like the yellow rat before, which meant it was probably pretty rare. Eating it wouldn’t accomplish much, since he couldn’t extract meaningful DNA from such a small sample size. If it had been a Pidgey or another worm-creature, that would have been an entirely different kettle of fish.

Also, this was the first proof he’d encountered that the animals could talk. It was less startling, though, since he had memories of other Growlithe talking to him and to each other. He’d sort of
thought it was species-specific, since neither the worm-creature or any of the birds had ever said anything to him.

Of course they rarely lived long past spotting him, so maybe they just hadn’t had the chance?

“Go, Pikachu!” the boy shouted, pointing dramatically. The rat leapt off the boy’s head, using his outstretched arm as a springboard, sparks flying from its red cheeks. Alex’s interest piqued. Another animal able to use an element like he could use fire? “Thundershock!”

“Take this!” the rat—presumably Pikachu—yelled, electricity flaring around it and spiking out towards him at a surprisingly slow speed for something that was supposed to be lightning. Alex nimbly hopped out of the way, letting the dead mostly-eaten worm thing take the hit. It promptly became a pile of charcoal, which was irritating.

“I wasn’t finished with that,” Alex snarled at the rat, fur bristling and smoke trailing from his mouth and nose.

Undeterred, the boy only seemed more excited. “Hit it again, Pikachu!”

Obediently, the rat fired another shot of slow-moving lightning at him. Alex, again, jumped out of the way.

“Stay still!” the rat yelled, sounding impatient, firing off another bolt that he easily dodged. Honestly, this rat thought some fake lightning was going to be enough? Alex had taken down armies, been shot at by tanks. The rat was going to have to seriously up its game.

“Ash,” the orange-haired girl warned, sounding uneasy. “I think it’s a lot stronger than Pikachu! Be careful!”

At least one of them had something resembling a brain. Alex didn’t really put much stock in the ‘levels’ concept the Growlithe had ascribed to. It seemed like a great way to create arrogance and overconfidence in animals with higher ‘levels,’ while encouraging feelings of weakness and submission in those of lower ‘levels.’ Alex knew from experience that true strength was more than just an arbitrary comparison of relative power. Just look at Cross; a regular human (mostly), able to go toe-to-toe with the Monster of Manhattan using only his sheer skill.

“We can handle it, can’t we Pikachu?” the boy (Ash?) replied, sounding determined. Were those fires burning in his eyes? What kind of fucked up reality was this? “Quick attack!”

“Right!” the rat suddenly blurred forward at an impressive speed. Alex nimbly sidestepped, slightly surprised at the burst of agility the rat was showing. None of that dexterity had been apparent before the kid had shouted out that ridiculous attack name. Were this rat creature’s powers voice-activated? That seemed inconvenient.

“Iron tail!” the boy yelled.

Iron what?

Something struck him in the side like a sledgehammer, sending him rolling. He quickly slid to his feet in surprise, eyes slightly wide. That had been a not-inconsiderable amount of force, considering he had—if the attack name could be believed—just been hit by a fucking tail. It hadn’t done any damage, of course—this body might be useless and rigid, and he might have lost a great deal of his accumulated biomass after the nuke, but he’d been devouring countless woodland creatures for months now and was a great deal heavier than the rat was likely expecting—but the surprise of it lingered. Maybe he’d underestimated the powers of this rat creature?
“Quick, hit it with another Thundershock!”

“Hah!” the rat exclaimed, firing off another bolt. This time, out of sheer curiosity, Alex stayed put and let it connect.

It was... disappointing. He felt the electricity arcing over him, dancing through his fur and utterly failing to ground in any part of him. It was like being lightly tickled. Alex planted his feet and endured it.

The expression on the rat’s face when the light faded to reveal his standing form, utterly unharmed, was very amusing.

“Your name is Ash?” Alex spoke, addressing the human directly, who seemed more than a little alarmed. The rat startled, looking confused at why Alex was talking to the boy and not the thing that’d just attacked him. “Fitting,” Alex decided, pulling fire into his throat and feeling his eyes glow with it. “For that is all that shall be left when I am done with you.”

And then Alex exhaled, and the air ignited.

When the smoke cleared, Alex stood and considered the carnage he had wrought. The rat creature was charred and unconscious (with swirls in its eyes, this world), and both the human children were coughing and covered in soot. The trees around them were aflame, several cracking as they collapsed under their own weight as his fire ate through them.

Alex was actually a little surprised none of them were dead. He hadn’t put a lot of power into his fire—they were, after all, just children and therefore less of a threat to him than water droplets—but he wouldn’t have shed any tears over them if they’d died of smoke inhalation or something. Also, he would have gladly eaten any of them that dared die in his presence.

At least the rat was out cold, so maybe the boy would take his yellow lightning bug and beat it so Alex could get back to feeding his never-ending appetite.

“Pikachu!” the boy coughed, stumbling towards the unconscious rat. The boy quickly scooped the rat into his arms and hugged it tight protectively, gritting his teeth. Strangely, the kid didn’t seem all that mad at Alex himself for effectively setting his rat on fire. He just looked more determined. What a weirdo.

“We need to get to a Pokémon Center,” the girl shouted hoarsely at the boy with his rat. “Come on Ash! Just leave it! It’s too strong for us right now!”

Ash coughed on some more smoke and looked right at Alex, fire burning in his eyes again. Actual, literal fire. In his eyes. Alex sometimes thought that maybe he’d gotten stuck in some kind of cartoon.

“I’ll be back, Growlithe!” the boy yelled, sounding resolute. “And next time I won’t go easy on you!”

Alex flattened his ears in incredulous disbelief, deadpan.

Then the boy was hightailing it out of there, cradling his unconscious rat, and left Alex alone in his
charred clearing that was still actively on fire. Alex considered the retreating kids, and their rat, and then the forest he’d spent the past few months honing his new abilities in.

For all their stupidity, those kids were still the only humans he’d seen in a long time. And their rat had talked, which was always nice. What all was there for him in this forest anyway? More worms and birds? ZEUS had become accustomed to a much heartier diet than his Growlithe body was currently getting. Maybe… it might be time to hunt elsewhere? Track down larger prey?

With a snort, Alex trotted off in the direction the kids had went. They’d mentioned a ‘Pokémon Center,’ which was presumably in a city of some kind. Cities were great places to get information.

And if there was one thing this encounter had taught him, it was that information was something he could no longer afford to overlook.

Behind him, the forest continued to burn.

It was pathetically easy to find the boy and his rat again. If there was one thing his new body had on his old one, it was his massively increased sense of smell. Tracking them had been literal child’s play. He sat a little ways away from their makeshift camp, peering out from some bushes at the odd group.

For one thing, there was an older teenage boy with them now. He had darker skin and eyes like slits —were they closed? Was he blind?—and Alex figured maybe he was their chaperone. Where had this guy been when the boy had thrown his rat into a deathmatch with the Blacklight Virus?

Alex redirected his focus to the yellow rat, who looked none the worse for wear after being flambéed a few days prior. Those Centers must be some kind of powerful healing facility. Access to those would be very beneficial; they probably had lots of injured or otherwise weakened animals in them ripe for feeding.

And speaking of feeding.

The chaperone had a pot of something that smelled *heavenly* cooking over that fire. The rat seemed equally enthused, nose twitching towards the pot, and Alex could feel his own maybe-stomach growling.

He supposed he could go in and just kill them, and take their pot of good-smelling food for himself. Three human bodies would go a long way towards sating his hunger for a while, not to mention the rat.

But giving a man a fish versus teaching him to fish, and all that. It would be much more efficient to coerce the chaperone into making more food for him over time; the returns would be greater overall, if less immediately gratifying.

How to convince them, though? Last time he’d interacted with these people he’d set their rat on fire. The boy hadn’t seemed too upset about it—probably aware of the miraculous healing center they had access to—but was that a risk Alex was willing to take?

Fuck it. What risk? These kids couldn’t hurt him if they were armed with fucking rocket launchers. He strolled out of the bushes into the clearing without a care in the world.
The kid and the orange girl stared at him, dumbfounded, while the other guy just looked vaguely surprised.

“Feed me, and I will permit you to live,” Alex demanded of the chaperone, stopping by the pot and fixing him with a soul-searing stare.

“I guess he’s hungry,” the chaperone said, sounding amused, and began agreeably ladling out a portion into a bowl for him. Yes. Excellent.

“Is that… the same Growlithe from the forest?” the orange-haired girl was whispering, sounding shocked. Alex ignored her in favor of the bowl being put in front of him, which smelled even better up close. He couldn’t recognize any of the ingredients, but poisons didn’t work on him so he had nothing to fear there.

Alex took a bite of the offering, and paused. He looked up seriously at the chaperone, gravely swallowing. “I will spare you. This offering is acceptable collateral.”

The guy just smiled, bemused and oblivious. “So this is the Growlithe you fought earlier, Ash? He seems so sweet!”

Alex ignored that, it having become obvious that the humans could not understand him. A pity, but a not-insurmountable obstacle.

‘Ash’ jumped to his feet, pointing at Alex dramatically. This kid did a lot of things dramatically, Alex was noticing. “Growlithe!” he shouted, way too loudly considering Alex was like four feet away. “You won’t get away this time! Pikachu, I choose you!”

The rat twitched an ear, looking dubious, but it gamely stepped forward to face him. Alex lifted his lip in a snarl, showing off sharp teeth, and hunched over his bowl. Like hell was he letting the rat blow up another meal.

“Step closer and I will melt the flesh from your bones,” Alex snarled, guttural and angry. The rat twitched again, looking morosely back at the boy.

“Ash, I don’t think this is a good idea,” the rat protested uncomfortably.

“Ash,” the chaperone scolded, sounding disapproving. “You never take food from a wild Pokémon, or interrupt one while it’s eating. Didn’t you learn this in school?”

The boy rubbed the back of his head. “I, ah… didn’t really, go to school?”

The chaperone actually face-faulted, legitimately hitting the ground on his face. Alex paused chewing to look at him skeptically, shuffling a step away before he resumed eating. The humans in this place were so weird.

“Maybe that’s why it was so mad earlier,” the girl offered. “It was… ah… eating that Caterpie…” she turned green at the very thought.

The chaperone sighed, deep and heartfelt. “Ash, tell me you didn’t try to fight a wild Growlithe while it was literally standing over its food.”

Ash just grinned sheepishly, rubbing his head again. The chaperone shook his head.

“Leave it alone, Ash,” the guy commanded, sounding aggrieved, even as he was ladling more food into another bowl for the rat, who had stood down when the boy was being scolded by his
“I’m Pikachu,” the rat introduced itself, not sounding at all like it was harboring a secret grudge against him for setting it on fire. “That’s Ash, Misty, and Brock,” it continued, pointing at the boy, the orange girl, and the chaperone.

“Alex,” Alex grunted back, more interested in finishing his delicious food than memorizing names that weren’t important.

“You have a Trainer?” Pikachu asked, sounding surprised. Alex lifted what passed for a brow, skeptically. “Your nickname,” it went on to explain, apparently seeing his confusion.

“I named myself,” Alex corrected, only being technically truthful. He had chosen to continue using the name of his maker, even if it wasn’t accurate to say he’d come up with it all on his own.

“Oh,” Pikachu said, seeming slightly confused but willing to roll with it. “I’m sorry about earlier,” it apologized. “Ash gets really excited about new Pokémon, and he doesn’t always… think before acting.”

Alex lifted his head from the bowl and looked at the rat. He couldn’t actually remember the last time someone had apologized to him for a wrongdoing. Maybe the rat wasn’t so bad. “Do you always go along with his bad ideas?” Alex asked, genuinely curious.

“Ash is my Trainer,” Pikachu explained without explaining anything, and Alex could almost hear the capitalization.

“So you are his slave,” Alex concluded, eyeing the boy and considering setting him on fire. Alex doubted he was as damage resistant as the rat was.

“I’m his partner!” Pikachu protested hotly, standing up with cheeks sparking. “I follow his orders in battle because I trust him, not because he’s my master!”

Alex stared at the rat. He’d honestly offended it somehow. “Pikachu?” the boy asked, concerned. “Are you all right?”

Pikachu took a steadying breath, still frowning at Alex. It nodded curtly at the boy before turning back to him. “We’re friends,” the rat proclaimed gravely. “I am not his slave.”

Alex folded his ears back. He hadn’t expected the rat to get so worked up over his question; maybe there was a story there. “I am not familiar with the concept of Trainers,” Alex said in lieu of an apology.

Pikachu took a few more steadying breaths before sitting down again, ear twitching in annoyance but no longer looking actively hostile. “A Trainer captures a Pokémon and helps them grow stronger. In exchange, the Pokémon follows their Trainer’s orders in battle. Most Trainers are friends with their Pokémon; it’s kind of difficult not to grow to like someone you spend so much time with.”

Alex perked up at this. “Help them grow stronger? How?”

“With battles,” Pikachu gamely explained, putting a piece of the chaperone’s offering in its mouth. “Battles between Pokémon in The Wild don’t afford nearly as much experience as ones between Trainers. Pokémon fighting with a Trainer gain experience almost five times as fast as those who live exclusively in The Wild.”
Alex thought this over as Pikachu resumed eating. He liked the idea of growing stronger faster, certainly, but didn’t care much for the idea of indenturing himself to a human. “Is it a lifetime commitment? Do Pokémon have to stay with their Trainers forever?”

Pikachu didn’t let on with body language or facial expressions that it found these questions at all suspicious. “No,” it explained, “most Pokémon grow to like their Trainers and decide to stay with them, but Pokémon can be released from capture if their pokeball is destroyed.”

Alex decided against asking what a pokeball was. It was probably that red and white ball the boy had brandished at him in the woods, and Alex didn’t want to come off as too ignorant. He looked between Pikachu and the kids for a few minutes, considering.

He hadn’t grown noticeably stronger during his stint in the forest, despite spending months in almost ceaseless combat. If ambushing and then eating the opponent could be called ‘combat,’ that is. His chances of running into a fire stone would be exponentially higher if he stuck around the humans, and the prospect of getting stronger was very appealing. Maybe he’d even get a good fight out of something? In a world where things like the lightning rat and fire dogs existed, surely there was a creature strong enough to give him a real challenge?

“These children are good humans?” Alex finally asked, eyes flinty. “They are not cruel? They will not cage me? They will not plot against me, or seek my death?”

Pikachu’s ears flattened and its eyes were huge, appearing very alarmed. “Ash isn’t like that,” it insisted urgently, leaning forward a little. “And neither are the others! They’re good people. They won’t make you stay in the pokeball if you don’t want to, and they’d never hurt a Pokémon!”

Alex exhaled smoke through his nostrils, staring at where the kids and their chaperone were chatting over the fire. “They will make me strong?”

“They’ll make you the best,” Pikachu promised solemnly.

Alex considered the three kids again, weighing his options thoroughly. Well, he knew for certain he wasn’t going to let the Ash kid ‘catch’ him. The kid couldn’t be older than ten, and Alex was in no way whatsoever comfortable with giving a ten-year-old human child any sort of power over him. The girl was almost as bad, only looking maybe a year or two older, and if the way she turned green at the thought of him eating that worm thing was any indication of her constitution, they likely wouldn’t get along.

But the chaperone had fed him. And he cooked well. He was also significantly older than his two traveling companions, and looked to be maybe in his upper teens. He also hadn’t done anything ridiculously dramatic yet, like have burning eyes or green skin denoting illness. Alex could generously overlook the face-fault from earlier as a fluke.

Decision made, Alex primly trotted over and sat himself beside his chosen human, feeling that he’d made the best of three terrible choices. At least this one could cook, and would feed him.

“Hey Growlithe,” the chaperone—Brock, he assumed—said warmly. “Did you like it?”

Alex nodded his head solemnly. Brock’s cooking was vastly preferable to bird or worm, even charbroiled. Pikachu pranced over and began gesturing towards Alex, making encouraging noises without any real vocal context, kind of like someone trying to communicate with a favored pet.

“Alex wants to join you,” Pikachu enunciated slowly and carefully, despite the humans being entirely incapable of understanding. Pikachu had made its face into a wide, encouraging smile, waving its
stubby arm at Alex and then at Brock a few times to get its point across.

Alex figured interacting with the humans was going to be like an aggravating, never-ending game of charades.

“I think it wants you to catch it, Brock,” the orange girl finally cottoned on, hands clasped in front of her chest.

“Aww, I wanted to catch it,” the boy despaired, slumping. An actual literal dark cloud materialized over his head and cast his face in shadow. Alex resolutely ignored this.

“Don’t be greedy!” the orange girl shouted, whacking the boy on the back of the head and sending him crashing to the ground.

“You want to come with me, Growlithe?” Brock asked, sounding surprised and pleased. “I’m a rock-type trainer, so I don’t have a lot of experience with fire-types, but I’d be happy to have you along.”

Alex understood maybe six percent of that, but got the gist of it. Regardless of what kind of animal Brock was used to training, Alex didn’t need babysitting like his other animals. Alex just wanted the experience boost of being with a Trainer, not necessarily actual training.

But one thing had to be made very clear.

Alex pointed his snout at a pokeball on Brock’s belt, and then looked pointedly at Pikachu with a derisive huff. He repeated this twice before Brock seemed to catch on.

“You don’t want to stick in the pokeball? Like Pikachu, huh?” Brock smiled, not seeming upset about this. “That’s fine. You might have to stay inside if we ever cross the ocean, or if we’re in a building that doesn’t allow Pokémon, but I don’t mind if you want to stay outside with us.”

Alex nodded firmly, glad that he was getting his point across to his new chef, and that the guy was so agreeable.

Brock pulled out a tiny red and white ball, pushing a button to make it expand with a quiet mechanical noise, and he held it out towards Alex. Alex hesitated, ears flattening, but he’d made this choice and he was going to stick with it.

Think of the experience, he told himself. And the battles!

With tense muscles, Alex leaned forward and touched the pokeball with his nose.

That’s when things became weird.

Abruptly, Alex rematerialized several feet away at an angle from where he’d just been standing. He jerked a little, startled at the sudden inexplicable movement, and caught Brock putting a pokeball back in his pocket. Alex blinked rapidly.

“The fuck was that?” he asked, baffled.

Pikachu made an amused noise. “Time doesn’t matter to pokeballs,” was all the rat offered as explanation.

Ah. So it was like a stasis-lock, rather than a pocket dimension like he’d previously thought. He felt justified in not wanting to stick around in a pokeball now; it would become very disconcerting very
quickly if he routinely lost time like that.

“You want to meet my other Pokémon, Growlithe?” Brock was saying, dragging Alex’s attention away from the fact that pokeballs effectively froze time. He had two other pokeballs in his hands now, and he was smiling.

Alex shrugged as best he could in this useless dog body and nodded, barking for good measure. Brock tossed the two balls, and they opened up on hinges to spill out crimson light all over the clearing.

When the light focused and formed into two creatures, Alex couldn’t help the way his ears pricked up in interest. Because those were rocks. Moving rocks. That were alive.

One of them was floating, blatantly defying the laws of gravity, and was basically just a ball with arms. The other was a massive collection of boulders shaped like a snake. Alex understood now why Brock had claimed to be a ‘rock-type’ trainer. The name was pretty self-explanatory after seeing these things.

“Geodude, Onyx, this is Growlithe. He’s the newest member of our team,” Brock introduced them, beaming.

The ball with arms peered at Alex. “Greetings,” it said, voice rough and deep. “I am Geodude.” The snake rock—probably Onyx—just dipped its head in greeting.

“Alex,” Alex replied, still trying to figure out how the Geodude was floating, and why no one else seemed to find that at all strange.

“I look forward to working with you,” the Onyx said, voice almost inaudible with how loud and low it was.

“Looks like they’re getting along,” Ash was saying over by the fire, and Alex flicked an ear in that direction. “We better get some sleep if we want to get an early start tomorrow,” the kid went on, glancing up at the dark sky.

The others made agreeing noises and began setting up tents and bedrolls, while Brock recalled Onyx and Geodude without a word. Neither protested, which baffled Alex, but at least he hadn’t tried to put Alex away like that.

Pikachu hopped over to Ash’s bedroll and curled up by his head, apparently perfectly willing to just go to sleep next to its Trainer. Alex considered Brock and wondered if he was supposed to do the same, but decided against it. It wasn’t like he actually slept, and remaining motionless for hours in the company of a human he wasn’t allowed to eat would be maddening.

Instead, he waited until the others were all asleep before prowling off into the trees. Hopefully he could find something more filling than a tiny bird or a worm creature in there. He was already hungry again.

“Prepare for trouble!”

Alex looked up from his ‘foraging’ at the distant, tinny voice, amplified by some kind of
loudspeaker. He could hear shouting from the kids, as well as the distinct sound of the rat calling out for its Trainer.

Damn. He leaves for five minutes (well, all right, it was more like five hours) and the children somehow managed to stumble headfirst into danger. He heaved a sigh, abandoning the remains of the large grey rhino-creature he’d found and dashing back towards the camp. He figured he’d better go help them out; he couldn’t lose out on his potential experience gain on the first day!

When he skidded to a stop in the clearing, he had to blink a few times to make sense of what he was seeing. There was a huge hot-air balloon shaped like the head of a cat creature, along with two adults who seemed to be trying to make off with the yellow rat.

Alex squinted. Did that woman have gravity-defying, massive hair? He sighed, and decided to ignore that as another oddity of this place. The man’s blue hair was almost tame in comparison.

“Give me back my Pikachu!” Ash was yelling, trembling in anger, as he pulled out a pokeball and enlarged it. “Go, Pigeotto!”

A familiar bird creature burst from the pokeball, and Alex pricked his ears forward. He’d only seen a few of those kind in the forest, and only caught two, but they’d offered almost three times as much workable DNA as the tiny birds had. Alex wondered if he could sneak the bird away from Ash without the boy knowing? He seemed excitable and easily distracted.

“Pop that balloon!” Ash was shouting at the bird, which obeyed immediately and swiftly closed the distance between it and the adults with the rat.

A cat creature resembling the hot air balloon jumped up on the railing, hefting some kind of cartoonish firearm. “Take this!” the creature yelled—in fucking English—and shot the approaching bird with some sort of blue goop. The bird squawked in alarm as it was effectively blinded, pinwheeling out of control before it rammed head-first into a nearby tree.

“Alex!” the rat shouted, pulling his attention. The rat was dangling from a large mechanical claw covered in rubber, squirming to get free. “Help!”

“Alex?” called the cat creature mockingly. “Who’s that? Some new twerp youse picked up?”

Alex flattened his ears with a low grumble. Twerp, was he? He bunched his muscles and bristled his fur, launching himself up with all the force he’d once used to cross skyscrapers. He saw the cat creature’s eyes widen dramatically as he hurled himself skyward, twenty, thirty, forty feet in the air.

He didn’t land in the balloon so much as he slammed into it like the Fist of God. The impact caused the basket to explode from the force, splinters and shrapnel and shrieking adults flying in every direction. He torqued his body mid-air and grabbed the speaking cat thing by the tail with his teeth, making it yowl in pain, dragging it down with him as gravity reasserted itself.

The two adults, contrary to his expectations of falling to their deaths, seemed to be launched out into the stratosphere at lightspeed, wailing about ‘blasting off again,’ before they actually vanished with a twinkle of light.

Alex sighed through his nose as he fell, his captive in his teeth, and thought he was getting way too used to this kind of shit.
Thou Shalt Not Litter (Infinity War x Harry Potter AU)

Chapter Summary

Death stood smoothly from his chair, letting it dissolve behind him, as he considered the crowd of flustered souls crushed around him. There had to be… perhaps half a universe here. That was a not-insignificant amount of souls to dump on him without prior notice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Oh my,” Death murmured, slightly surprised, as he abruptly found himself in the middle of a rather sizable crowd. Ordinarily this would not be a very surprising thing to happen to someone. Crowds were not exactly rare, after all.

Except Death was currently lounging around in the Void, where life could not exist, and thus suddenly being in a crowd was not only surprising, but also statistically impossible.

Fascinating.

Death stood smoothly from his chair, letting it dissolve behind him, as he considered the crowd of flustered souls crushed around him. He let his awareness drift slightly outside of the Real and peered out at the teeming mass of souls, which stretched far beyond any sort of sightline a mortal could have achieved. It was a… very sizable group of beings.

And they truly were beings. He was feeling souls in this crowd that were distinctly inhuman, and not in the way he was accustomed to. There were no werewolves, no vampires, no goblins or house elves or veela. Instead, he was tasting hints of things that were utterly alien.

He laughed aloud at the thought, making the nearest souls cringe back with alarm as their eyes roved sightlessly over him. He was such a bloody comedian.

Death took a step and shifted to the side of the closest ‘alien’ soul, reaching out to grasp it gently around the neck. It went limp immediately, submissive to his power in a way the souls of the Origin never had been. He bent over it and inhaled, tasting of it and licking carefully into its memories.

Jotuun, Death mused. That was not a species that existed in his universe. He released the Jotuun and snagged another alien soul. Asgardian. Elf. Celestial.

Death let the souls disperse amongst themselves as he stood up straight and considered what this meant. Several trillion souls had just spontaneously crammed themselves into the Void with him. They were not souls native to his current universe cluster, which meant someone was littering into his Void from another dimension. How rude.

None of the souls in his immediate vicinity knew anything at all about how they’d wound up here. They weren’t truly dead, not really, which was why they’d probably been dumped here in the Void rather than just bloody moving on like any reasonable dead person.

With a flick of will, Death relocated to a small cluster of souls that had clumped together seemingly on instinct. These ones had the information he sought. Death grabbed one at random, batting aside
the retaliatory strike from an arm made out of some kind of black metal. He didn’t punish the soul for that—Death knew it had been an ingrained reaction, and not done with malice. It was curious that the soul had brought an imprint of a false limb with it into the Void. They must truly believe it to be part of their body, or had it long enough that their soul had forgotten that the limb had once been flesh. Materialistic things did not follow souls into the After, after all.

The soul didn’t try to attack him again, which meant it was intelligent, and Death grinned at it in approval. None of the souls watching seemed comforted by his sincere smile. Mortals.

Death didn’t bother with questions. That was a waste of time, and since everyone currently present in his Void was both not-living and trespassing, he didn’t feel inclined to make small talk to put them at ease. Instead, he simply took the knowledge he wanted from the mortal soul in his grasp for himself. He was gentle about it, though—he wasn’t a complete monster. The mortal soul still flinched, as if it had felt it, but Death ignored that. An uncommon sensitivity to mental manipulation was honestly the last thing he cared about right now.

Death watched the last few hours of the mortal’s life, ignoring the emotional connections trying to latch onto him. A purple creature and a war seemed to be recurring themes in the mortal’s thoughts, alongside some kind of very strong brother-bond to a fictional character.

Death refocused, eyes sharpening. Oh? The mortal began struggling, then, seeming to sense the target of Death’s focus. Its efforts to hide those memories were laudable, but ultimately pointless.

“Steve Rogers,” Death mused aloud. Huh. He’d figured there had to exist universes where fictional worlds were housed. He just hadn’t expected to have one literally dropped on his doorstep like this. “Captain America.” He turned his attention to the tense mortal in his grip. “That must make you… Barnes? James? It has been… a very long time since I’d last indulged in such frivolity.” He was honestly impressed with himself for remembering such trivial details after having not heard of that particular storyline in at least six thousand years.

Obviously the soul didn’t answer. It couldn’t. They didn’t have vocal chords—which some of them were only just now figuring out, judging by the alarmed expressions on their thought-forms—but this particular mortal had a very expressive face, and was conveying threats of bodily harm should Death do anything untoward towards Captain America.

Death smiled, slow and snakelike, baring teeth like blades. Every mortal currently able to see his face froze in horror. That reaction, like him, never got old.

“I would be cautious whom you threaten, trespasser. This is not your world, your time, your place. Here, you are ultimately insignificant.” Death tilted his head and considered the seething crowd of souls again. It truly was an eclectic group. There were children, elderly, women, men, and those which were neither. Even a few that were both.

There had to be… perhaps half a universe here. And that wasn’t even counting the wisps—all that remained of a sizeable group of animals and plants, mindless and lacking the sapience required to form a true soul. That was a not-insignificant amount of souls to dump on him without prior notice. It’s not that he wasn’t grateful. There were enough souls here to let him indulge for centuries, probably. He could devour them by the handful, glut himself on souls until he was drunk with it, and still have enough left over to populate a small solar system.

Had Death been younger, had he still been the foolish, impulsive youth he’d been for so many millions of years, he might have accepted this gift without question.

Death was no longer so naïve.
Nothing came without a price. Something like this? Half a universe, given to him on a silver platter? That had to have one hell of a price.

He supposed there was nothing for it. He was going to have to go track down whoever had flooded his Void with souls and figure out what they wanted in exchange. That purple creature, Thanos, in Barnes’s memories seemed like a likely culprit. Barnes didn’t have a motive for the gift-giving, but he had a name and a place. Death needed nothing more.

He released the mortal soul and let it stagger back into its small group of strangely-dressed fellows, and let his power unfold around him. Here, in the Void, surrounded by things that could not die simply by touching him, he did not have to be nearly as careful as he was going to have to be in the mortal world.

It was easy enough to trace the lingering fragments of the power that had shifted all of these souls here, to his Void, and follow it back like a fishing line. Death gritted his teeth in a wide grin and unraveled his consciousness out into Infinity.

When Death pulled himself back into the Real, his entrance was… dramatic. He hadn’t meant it to be, exactly, but this reality was vastly younger than his own universe cluster and he’d overestimated how resistant it would be to his magic. So he didn’t really arrive in his preferred form so much as he simply ripped into being in the middle of some kind of fight as a massive amorphous form of shadows and teeth.

Oh well.

First impressions were everything, and at least his was memorable.

He swept his eyes over the gathering—which had predictably frozen at his unsubtle arrival—until they alighted on the only figure present which matched Barnes’s mental picture of ‘a large bald purple guy with a flashy gauntlet.’

“Thanos,” Death grated, voice echoing into registers that threatened to unmake reality. He quickly reached out with his magic to hold the universe together long enough to get what he came here for. Rebuilding a universe he wasn’t familiar with would be a bloody chore.

“Lady Death,” Thanos replied, sounding fanatic and manic and obsessed and a million other unflattering things. Death paused. Lady what? Did this creature just call him Lady Death?

Death quickly did a scan of the body he was wearing. It was large, and amorphous, and made mostly of bones and eyes and mouths. Nothing about it seemed particularly feminine. Well, to Thanos’s credit, nothing about it was innately masculine either. But that was one hell of an assumption to be making when talking to something several dozen stories tall that was staring at you out of about a thousand eyes.

It wasn’t that Death was particularly offended or anything. He was old enough to acknowledge that he mainly only wore a male body most of the time because it was easier to intimidate people. But still. No one had flat-out called him Lady Anything before, and he’d existed for a very, very long time.

Death decided not to correct him. It wasn’t that important, all things considered.
“Did my tribute please you?” Thanos went on, apparently not noticing Death’s brief moment of introspection.

Ah. So it was Thanos who’d dumped all those souls in his Void. Good to know.

“Please me?” Death questioned, bemused. “A small amount of warning might have been appreciated.” Because, honestly, the thing that bothered Death the most about this entire chain of events was the way they’d been dumped into his Void like so much trash. Who did this guy think he was to go littering into other people’s Voids like that? “It was quite a gift, however,” Death admitted. “What is sought in exchange?”

Thanos fell to a knee, apparently content to ignore the mortals who’d been trying their best to murder him a few minutes ago. Those same mortals seemed too shocked at what was happening—or maybe they’d temporarily gone mad at the sight of something so close to his True Self—to really react in any meaningful way.

“My Lady Death,” Thanos breathed, reverence in every line of his body, “I desire only your favor. And, perhaps, your affection.”

Oh? So Thanos had given him half the souls of his universe as some kind of weird courting present? Well, he was certainly ambitious, Death could give him that much. It was kind of flattering, actually. No one had ever gone through so much trouble to woo him, before.

“My affection,” Death parroted blandly. “Titan, I do not believe our definitions of affection match.” Because Thanos was operating under the assumption that Death was female, for one thing. Which he most emphatically was not. This was the most amusing thing to have happened to him in lifetimes.

Thanos shuffled forward an inch, still on his knees. “I am but your humble servant, my Lady. I will accept anything you see fit to give.”

Well now. Wasn’t that tempting. Death leaned a bit closer as he studied the man. Thanos was not… conventionally attractive. But he was sturdy. He had a soul that was very old, and very strong. He might even survive skin contact.

It was the man’s potential durability that was the real selling point, here. Death was not a necrophiliac. But, because of the way his power worked, had he ever tried to lay with a woman, by the end of it he would have been. If Thanos here had a soul anchored firmly enough into his body to survive being touched… well. The luxury of being choosy was something that he’d lost countless eons ago, when he’d stooped to pick the Stone from the forest floor.

“Anything?” Death replied softly, shifting his voice into something higher, something softer, more liquid. Something that could be considered feminine, if you tilted your head sideways and squinted at it. Thanos thought he was a woman. There was no reason to disabuse him of that foolish notion until he already had a verbal contract in place. “Would you Swear it to me? Vow it? Bind yourself to me in all ways?”

“I Vow it,” Thanos swore without hesitation. Wow. Death hadn’t figured someone as old as Thanos would be so naïve as to let their little head do their thinking for them. “I will do anything, accept anything, accept everything, that you ask of me.”

“So mote it be,” Death replied, pleased and amused. He reached out a fragment of power and plucked Thanos out of the Real, translocating him back into his suddenly-crowded Void. Oh. Right.
He had people littering in there. That was going to be annoying. And, if Death was busy letting Thanos accept *everything he had to give him*, he wasn’t going to have time to eat all of those souls before they got on his nerves.

So Death put them back where they came from. The ambient life-energy in the universe abruptly doubled, and he could hear sounds of shock from a small ways away as some of the recent casualties were reversed.

As Death turned back into Infinity and left that universe behind, he absently reached out ahead of him and erased that pesky gauntlet full of rocks that had started all this mess. Thanos’s mild surprise followed the action, which was very amusing indeed.

Death grinned, a slow baring of teeth. Thanos expected a woman. Thanos had Vowed to do anything Death asked, accept anything Death gave him. Thanos had a soul that could survive skin contact. Thanos was, essentially, his *slave*.

He cackled, the sound echoing out ahead of him and deepening as it went. Boy, was he in for a *surprise*.

Chapter End Notes

I haven’t actually WATCHED Infinity War (I am very much In Denial that any of it actually happened, and do not accept the events of That Movie as canon), but I absorbed enough via internet osmosis to know vaguely what happened.

So I decided to fix it. Because I had a ready-made Death in one of my stories, and he probably wouldn’t be impressed by having half a universe (half of *someone else’s* universe, at that) dumped on him without any sort of warning.

I read somewhere that Thanos was trying to win the affection of "Lady Death" with half a universe of souls, in addition to the "balance out life" thing he had going on. And then this happened, and I laughed and laughed and laughed...
Chapter Summary

He kicked off the ground at full speed, sending up huge unsubtle geysers of sand in his wake. He shrugged, figuring maybe that would encourage someone edible to come investigate and save him some time.

He’d just spotted what looked like a primitive city in the distance when the world rocked.

And then, as if to underline how bad his day had just gotten, neon red words unfolded ominously in front of his eyes.

[Quest: Here There Be Monsters]

Survive.
Success: 1000 gold, ?, ?

Chapter Notes

This is a direct sequel to my other little Bite, "Gamebreaker." Direct as in, it takes place like two minutes after the first one ends.

Using the Blindstep was like walking through a revolving door. One second he was in a forest over the unconscious bodies of two teenage magic users, and the next he was in a desert. The heat slapped him in the face like a physical wall, sand grinding against the impossible density of his ‘Endbringer’ body and futilely trying to burrow through nonexistent cracks in his armor.

Alex tossed his head in annoyance even as he formed a protective, translucent membrane over the eyesockets of his helmet to keep the sand out. Just because he didn’t necessarily need those eyes to see didn’t mean he wanted to walk around with sand in them. He let his expanded minimap unfurl across his consciousness, scanning for lifeforms, only to be unsurprised when the most complex creatures he could sense were a handful of scorpions that were even now burrowing further underground to avoid him.

He scented the air curiously—the nundu had given him a tremendous sense of smell that he rarely needed to make use of—and found it very interesting that every grain of sand around him smelled like old blood. There would have had to be several wars’ worth of conflict waged here for the smell to be ingrained in the dunes like that.

Well, no sense just standing around like a mannequin. Alex mentally reached for The Black Huntsman and set it to finding the closest outcropping of civilization. Immediately, he could feel his
‘muscles’ tensing and his instincts flaring to life as his biomass strained towards the southeast. It was almost like a taste, if the color blue and the sound of grinding metal had a taste.

As it was, he followed the glowing blue line that had just formed under his feet, crossing over the dunes and around obstacles as if someone had painted a guideline directly over the earth for him to follow. Neat.

He kicked off the ground at full speed, sending up huge unsubtle geysers of sand in his wake. He shrugged, figuring maybe that would encourage someone edible to come investigate and save him some time.

He’d just spotted what looked like a primitive city in the distance when the world *rocked*.

And then, as if to underline how bad his day had just gotten, neon red words unfolded ominously in front of his eyes.

**[Quest: Here There Be Monsters]**

*Survive.*

**Success: 1000 gold, ?, ?**

Alex staggered, the sand beneath his feet suddenly losing cohesion and turning into something almost liquid, but quickly righted himself and leapt away. And then kept leaping away, because the desert had just fucking *come alive* and tried to *step on him*.

The sand surged upwards like a timelapse of someone building a massive sandcastle, only instead of a nice, peaceful castle it was instead some kind of mutated sand monster that was several dozen stories tall. Because of course. The sand creature formed a head full of jagged protrusions that looked like teeth and gaped open a maw the size of most buildings. Its ‘eyes’ were small, yellow and feverish, set in a slash of black even as markings were swirling into life on its ‘body.’

“I SMELL BLOOD!” the massive sand monster roared, laughing like a madman as a hand larger than a dragon slammed down where Alex had just been standing, claws gouging up the earth even as the rest of the desert apparently gained sentience and tried to smother him in sand.

Alex leapt back, getting some distance from the insane monster, focusing his attention on the creature and feeling a weight land heavily on his shoulders the second his Observe clicked on.

**Shukaku, Incarnation of Sand**

**Title(s): The Ichibi**

**STR: 1000**

**DEX: 1000**

**END: 1000**

“Fuck me,” Alex spat as he jumped away from another strike and lashed out at the fucking *desert* currently trying its best to *kill him*. Obviously his claws did nothing but disperse the sand tentacle that was trying to strangle him, so he tried another tactic. He opened his maw and spat a torrent of fire directly at Shukaku’s main body.

The monster *screamed*, incensed, and the speed of its attacks fucking doubled. Alex quietly cursed
the Spectator for fucking dropping him into a world where the fucking *introductory monster* had stats that made him look like a clumsy toddler. He flung a killing curse at it in desperate curiosity, not terribly surprised when the wash of green only blew a chunk out of the sand creature’s hide instead of actually *killing it*.

So magic was useless, physical attacks were useless, and Shukaku was stronger, faster, and tougher than he was. Fire made it mad but didn’t really seem to damage it, and Alex couldn’t risk closing with it without getting skewered by sand spikes.

And the fucking desert was *still* trying to kill him.

He felt some lifeforms approaching rapidly from where he’d tracked the closest civilization, but they were shaped like humans and were therefore going to be less than helpful against something like this fucking thing.

“**STAY STILL AND LET ME KILL YOU!**” Shukaku screamed, following up that ridiculous demand by spitting massive bullets of condensed wind at him. Alex swore again, colorfully and with great feeling, as one of them gouged right through his armor and sheared off his left arm. He ducked down and grabbed it as he jumped away, reattaching it with a thought.

So not even staying at range was safe. Fucking figured.

Alex clocked the humans stopping out of visible range (and likely out of range of that wind attack) but didn’t bother wondering what they planned to do about the huge monster rampaging near their city. Alex had one more thing he could try before he got the hell out of dodge—he might be basically immortal now, but he didn’t fancy spending eternity locked in ceaseless combat with an unkillable sand monstrosity.

He reached deep, for the spark of *Yig* the horcruxes had given him, and ripped it to the forefront with none of the caution or hesitation he used when he tried to assimilate new bits of physiology to himself. There just wasn’t the *time*.

It was like opening his eyes and realizing until that moment he’d been blind.

Reality *cracked*. Alex felt his human body simply shatter like glass, unable to withstand existing in the same place as the eldritch horror that abruptly resided there. Limbs unfolded from his sides and torso like grasping arms the length of skyscrapers, a serpentine body miles and miles long crashing into the sand and glassing it. Everywhere his scales touched, the world died. Eyes, thousands and millions and dozens of eyes opened all along his sides and head, each one filled with the lethal stare of a basilisk and none of them shielded.

He opened his mouth to laugh, to scream to cry to *roar*, and a sound poured out that was a single, liquid tone that rippled around him and visibly fragmented reality. Hair-thin cracks opened up in the air surrounding his new form, and within those cracks Alex-Yig could see things looking back at him without eyes at all.

He ignored them. They weren’t important. He lashed forwards towards his target, which had recoiled in shock at his sudden explosive transformation, and hooked the claws of six of his limbs into the now vastly-smaller Shukaku and *pulled*.

Shukaku, composed of sand and not anything actually physical, should have simply dissolved or reformed or turned permeable to let Alex-Yig’s claws pass unhindered.

What actually happened was Alex-Yig decided *that could not be borne*, and simply rewrote reality to
make his will known. Shukaku came apart in his hands like a house of cards. The sand demon was reforming beneath him even then, too strong and durable to fade so easily, so Alex simply bent over and closed his manifold teeth around the largest concentration of sand and swallowed.

He ripped the soul out of the sand like a fish on a hook, batting aside the panicked struggles of both sand and some metaphysical energy he wasn’t familiar with, resolutely pulling the soul into himself and refusing to let go of his death-grip on the flailing Shukaku’s body.

Eventually he succeeded, his will to devour greater than Shukaku’s ability to resist him, and the sand collapsed around him for miles, lifeless and inert once more.

Alex-Yig reared up and coiled in on himself as he screamed his triumph, outright killing the humans gathered relatively nearby as their heads simply exploded.

He slumped forward, exhausted to his bones, and dragged the form of Alex Mercer back to the forefront of his biomass, letting Yig fall away in flakes of mirror-like scales. He hit the dead sand on his knees, and knew if he’d still been human he’d have been gasping for breath.

He felt like he’d run a marathon with the entire population of Earth strapped to his back, backwards and on one foot.

So. Guess his Yig body had some drawbacks after all. He had the feeling he wouldn’t have been able to hold it much longer anyway; not without compromising his already fragile sense of self. It would be too easy to get lost in the sort of power Yig wielded—the ability to remake reality to suit his whims? That was a very dangerous thing to give to something like Alex.

He staggered upright, staring out at the mound of sand that had once been Shukaku, and finally—finally—let himself relax.

And then his vision was awash with red as the game agreed that he was now out of combat.

[Quest: Here There Be Monsters] Complete!

Rewards: 1000 gold, Skill: Allspeak, Skill: Chakra System

Allspeak: Allows instant comprehension and fluency of any spoken language.

Chakra System: Allows the formation of a fully functioning chakra system.

[Enemy Consumed!]

+10 Status Points

Skillset: Ichibi Added!

Gene Sample: Ichibi Added!

[Skillset: Ichibi]

+1000 STR
+1000 DEX
+1000 END

Ability: Sand Manipulation Unlocked

Ability: Magnet Release Unlocked

Ability: Fuinjutsu Unlocked

Sand Manipulation: Allows total manipulation of all sand within one kilometer of your physical location.

Magnet Release: Allows the user to generate and control magnetic fields for various purposes.

Fuinjutsu: The ability to seal objects, living beings, and chakra within another object. Can be used to restrict movement or unseal objects.

Gene Sample: Ichibi

Consumable

The genetic blueprint of the Ichibi.

Gives: Sand Armor, Ultimate Defense, Heightened Senses, Heightened Reflexes, Bloodlust, Tanuki Physiology

[Tailed Beast Consumed 1/9!]

+100 Status Points

Perk: Chakra Beast Added!

Chakra Beast: The lifeblood of the world is chakra, and you’ve got a lot of it. Your body is no longer a physical construct; you do not take damage until your chakra is totally depleted. One point of chakra is equivalent to 100 points of END.

Alex was glad he was already kneeling, because he would have fallen over if he’d been standing up. He hadn’t seen so much pure, beautiful bullshit since he’d eaten his first horcrux. He’d assimilated all of Shukaku’s stats. All of them. All 1000 of them. He’d more than doubled his stats with one enemy. Holy shit.

And apparently the game was adding in a ‘chakra’ system, now? Alex pulled up his stat page to take a look—and to marvel at the numbers he was expecting to see there—hoping maybe he could get some more information on that.

Alex Mercer

Title(s): The Prototype, Blacklight, ZEUS, The Soulhunter, The Black Huntsman
STR: 1740
DEX: 1800
END: 1800
INT: 200
CHA: 100
LUK: 100
Chakra: 10,000/10,000
Unspent Status Points: 110

Alex couldn’t physically faint anymore, but the idea was there. 10,000 points of chakra? Fuck, the Ichibi must have been an absolute beast. If Alex hadn’t decided to risk whipping out Yig, he would never have won that particular battle of attrition. And if every point of chakra was equivalent to 100 END…

That was one million points of endurance. Assuming END scaled exponentially instead of linearly (like he was pretty sure stats did)… someone would have to hit him until they literally died of old age before they broke through the chakra shell. And that wasn’t even counting his passive regeneration or his already bullshit ability to just shapeshift any damage away.

Alex started laughing. He couldn’t help it. First the Harry Potter world makes him fucking immortal, and now the—he did a quick scan of the Ichibi’s memories (if they could be called that)—the ‘Elemental Nations’ had made him almost literally invulnerable.

And speaking of memories…

Alex took a closer look at what the Ichibi had given him, mentally speaking. It hadn’t been very intelligent, but it had been sapient. That made its lack of an INT or CHA score kind of odd, but maybe the game just classed it as a ‘monster’ and didn’t consider it worthwhile to add. The most important thing to note was that, while relatively stupid, the Ichibi had been old. Several hundred years old, in fact. And it had been the weakest of its kin.

There were, apparently, nine of these fucking things just waiting around for someone to stumble over them and die immediately. If any human had ‘woken up’ the Ichibi like Alex had, they would have been utterly fucked.

Alex could postulate that every ‘tailed beast’ was stronger than the last, which meant the next-weakest—the two-tails—likely had its stats set at 2000, with each tail being worth 1000 points in stats. The three-tails likely had 3000, the four-tails 4000, and so on and so forth.

And while that seemed daunting at first, Alex did some quick math in his head. If he managed to consume the two-tails, and assuming it transferred its full stats to him like the Ichibi did, that would put his stats over that of the three-tails. And after that, he’d be progressively stronger than every subsequent tailed beast he fought thereafter. By the time he got to the last one, the nine-tails, his stats would be over 36,000.

Holy Christ.
He couldn’t even comprehend that level of power. What would he be like at that strength? Would he be shattering worlds with his fucking footsteps? What kind of monstrous hell dimension was the Spectator setting him up for if it drops him here beforehand?

Fuck, he was almost afraid to think about using the Blindstep after this, especially after how this world tossed him directly at the fucking Ichibi right out of the gate.

He supposed he could just… not go after the tailed beasts. The Ichibi had stalemated him until he’d pulled out Yig, and the two-tails wasn’t going to be any easier. But the potential. If he could defeat and consume the two-tails, he’d be set. Plus he was getting the nagging feeling that the Spectator had ‘randomly’ chosen this world for a reason, and he probably wasn’t getting out of here without eating all nine.

[Quest: A Nine-Course Meal]

Consume all nine tailed beasts.

Success: 10,000 gold, ?, ?

Well now it was official. Alex sighed, eying the red words resignedly. It was obvious which direction he was being steered, but for all his mental griping he didn’t really mind. He was actually pretty eager to go hunt down the two-tails and get started. It wasn’t like he could just… stop at this point. Restraint had never been one of his strong suits.

With a hungry grin, Alex stood up and let The Black Huntsman hone in on the two-tails, spotting the bright blue line painted over the sand within seconds. Excellent. He pushed off and started running and then immediately tripped, digging a trench three miles long as his massively-enhanced speed took him off-guard and sent him face-planting into the sand.

He lay where he stopped for a long moment, coming to terms with the fact that he was going to have to seriously retrain himself so he didn’t just… accidentally break everything he touched. Again.

What a pain.

Matatabi, Blazing Monster Cat

Title(s): The Nibi

STR: 2000

DEX: 2000

END: 2000

Alex considered the sleeping, humungous fire-covered feline from where he was letting Jumpscare Champion keep him concealed. The fact that someone had built a fucking temple to this thing to live in sort of implied that these chakra beasts weren’t really as… monstrous as he’d been expecting. People didn’t build houses for monsters. Alex considered the grand building, the way it was mostly just one huge room with a sloping roof, and couldn’t help but compare it to a doghouse.
So someone had built the Nibi a doghouse. Like you’d do for a pet.

Alex wondered if their ‘owner’ still existed, and what kind of stats you’d need in order to treat these creatures like pets. He also wondered if that person would be eatable.

Shaking those thoughts off, Alex swiftly scaled the temple and perched on the roof, peering down at the massive sleeping head of the Nibi. It was literally enshrouded in flames, which would ordinarily make close-combat difficult, but thanks to that dragon he’d consumed in the last world he was immune to fire altogether. He did hope the Nibi had an actual body underneath the flames, though, because the Ichibi with its sand body had been hard enough to damage. He didn’t want to try his luck against living flame.

Although… why try to damage it at all? It was asleep. Sure it wasn’t sporting to kill a sleeping target, but Alex hadn’t played fair a day in his life. Why start now? He hadn’t successfully killed the Ichibi until he’d gone directly for its soul, which—considering the perk it had given him—made some amount of sense. If these creatures didn’t have physical bodies, but were instead ‘chakra constructs’ like he presumably now was…

Well, going right for the metaphorical jugular was probably the best (and only) option for defeating them.

Alex let the claws spread from his hands, mentally flipping on his Soulhunter switch. His claws immediately began sucking in all light, turning an inky black. Neat. He hadn’t ever done this on purpose before—normally he just consumed things the regular way, and got the souls as a sort of side-effect. But he highly, highly doubted his ability to consume actual fire.

He let himself drop, soundlessly, and kept Jumpscare Champion active until the last possible second, striking out with his now-black voidclaws as he fell. They phased right through the Nibi’s sleeping head, trailing blue fire and sparks of negative light as they went.

That woke it up.

The Nibi jerked upright, yowling and screaming in anger, and the entire temple suddenly imploded with fire and concussive force. It lashed out in all directions, confused and disoriented, leveling the building and the surrounding forest in seconds. Alex weathered the attack without flinching, one of his many eyes keeping watch on the notice in the top right of his vision tracking his ‘chakra’ levels.

The Nibi’s flailing panic had shaved it down to 4000/10,000, which was beyond impressive, but not impressive enough.

Alex pulled, ripping the Nibi’s soul—still connected to his claws from his initial strike—out of its flame-construct body. It thrashed, jumping away from him and accomplishing nothing but further separating its physical self from its spirit as Alex stubbornly stayed nailed to the spot.

It had time to clap eyes on him, widen in surprise, before its entire body fizzled out, banked into nothingness as Alex finished devouring its soul.

[Enemy Consumed!]

+10 Status Points

Skillset: Nibi Added!

Gene Sample: Nibi Added!
[Skillset: Nibi]

+2000 STR
+2000 DEX
+2000 END

Ability: Fire Manipulation (Dragon) upgraded to Fire Manipulation!

Fire Manipulation: Allows control, generation, and manipulation of all flames and fire types.

Gene Sample: Nibi

Consumable

The genetic blueprint of the Nibi.

Gives: Flame Armor, Death Sense, Heightened Senses, Enhanced Reflexes, Enhanced Strength, Nekomata Physiology

[Tailed Beast Consumed 2/9!]

+100 Status Points

Perk: Chakra Beast Increased to Rank 2!

Alex glanced up at his chakra meter, unsurprised to find it had risen up to 20,000 in the wake of his perk being upgraded. If every tailed beast he consumes was going to add 10,000 chakra to his total, he might as well forget what pain feels like since he’d be beyond untouchable.

He couldn’t help but laugh, though, because the way this was going it made his stats feel sort of… unreal. He couldn’t wrap his mind around the numbers he was gaining with every tailed beast he defeated. They were almost fake-seeming; it was like asking a kid how much something costs, and they’d say something like eleventy gajillion because they had no idea how numbers worked.

He reached out and tapped a foot lightly to the ground.

The earth buckled around him for four miles.

He threw his head back and cackled.

Alex had… a slight problem.
Isobu, The Giant Turtle

Title(s): The Sanbi

STR: 4000

DEX: 4000

END: 4000

It seems he may have miscalculated the way the tailed beasts’s power levels measured up to one another. Rather than simply increasing by 1000 for every additional tail, they seemed to be doubling every time. So the Nibi had looked like it was just increasing per tail, rather than doubling the Ichibi, which is what actually happened.

That was going to be very irritating, very quickly.

If the Sanbi was at 4000, that meant the four-tails was going to be at 8000. Alex’s own stats were sitting around the upper 3000s, which meant he was going to be constantly behind every beast he goes after. So far sneak-attacking seemed to be his best bet, but the Sanbi was both awake and currently actively in combat, so stealth probably wasn’t going to work.

A bunch of native humans were assaulting the Sanbi for some reason—as far as Alex could tell it had been chilling relatively peacefully in its doghouse until a few hours ago—and doing something squiggly with what his Ichibi-memories identified as Fūinjutsu.

Were these idiots trying to seal the Sanbi?

Well Alex certainly couldn’t allow that. Without the Sanbi, Alex would have no chance at all against the rest of the tailed beasts. He had to consume them in the correct order if he wanted to stand on even footing with them down the line.

So the first thing he had to do was kill these humans, or at least kill the ones using Fūinjutsu. Easy enough. But there were enough humans there that he couldn’t be guaranteed to kill them all, not while also contending with the Sanbi. The best solution would be to kill the humans in a way that ensured the Sanbi didn’t attack him until the humans were dead, which meant attacking in a body the Sanbi wouldn’t automatically classify as hostile.

Good thing he had two of those.

Alex knew more about how the Ichibi fought than he did the Nibi, since he’d actually fought the former and just sneak-attacked the latter, so that was the form he chose. With a single thought, he let his biomass reconfigure itself into the Ichibi, using his control over sand to make him appear to materialize in the way he’d seen the Ichibi do. Luckily they were on a beach, and there was plenty of sand around to make a ‘body’ with.

Much more conspicuous, but it sold the deception he was wearing better than appearing fully-formed.

“ISOBU!” Alex wailed, thrashing around and ‘accidentally’ crushing a dozen humans underfoot as he finished materializing. “YOU STARTED WITHOUT ME!”

“Shukaku?” the Sanbi shouted back, surprised but not alarmed. It lashed out with some kind of massively destructive spherical attack which erased several battalions.
The humans, predictably, panicked at the sight of him. One tailed beast had been bad enough. Now a second one had materialized literally underfoot and started crushing people to death with sand. And they were on a beach.

Between the two of them they made quick work of the attacking humans, Alex being doubly sure to target all the ones with special tattoos or Fūinjutsu designs laid out before them. It was really something to be so huge for a change; when he was wearing his Yig form, he didn’t really take things like ‘size’ into consideration. He had the feeling Yig could be whatever size it wanted to be.

When all the humans were dead (or stealthily dragged into his main body by sand to be consumed), Alex did a quick scan with the minimap for reinforcements before turning to the confused-but-rolling-with-it Sanbi.

“Thank you for helping,” the Sanbi murmured, seeming to shrink in on itself a little. It was beyond weird to see this huge-ass turtle acting timid. “I don’t know why the humans attacked me.”

“WHO CARES?” Alex shouted, staying ‘in-character.’ “FIGHT ME, ISOBU!”

It had been beyond amusing to Alex that the Ichibi quite regularly attacked its kin to try and ‘establish its strength,’ considering how vastly weak it was in comparison. It worked in his favor now, though, because the Sanbi would not be surprised if Alex suddenly attacked, nor would it take his assault at all seriously (having become accustomed to the weak version of the Ichibi with only one fourth of its power).

The Sanbi sighed, closing its eye in exasperation even as it kept itself hunched over a little. “I don’t —”

Alex lashed out with sand, forming claws and grasping tentacles in the way the Ichibi preferred, but laced every grain within five hundred meters with Soulhunter. The Sanbi ducked inside its shell, having predicted the attack, but Alex’s void-infused sand phased right through it and latched onto its soul. Not expecting that at all, the Sanbi recoiled in surprise, but Alex had lurched forward and collapsed into a mountain of dense sand directly on top of the shocked beast, pinning it down beneath his weight.

The Sanbi didn’t have the first idea how to combat an attack like this. For one thing, Alex had let his entire Ichibi shell collapse into void-laced sand and was thus unable to be affected by physical attacks. Plus he had trillions of grains already embedded in the beast’s soul and was pulling it out into the mountain weighing it down.

This tactic wasn’t always going to work, Alex acknowledged. Any beast who kept him at range was going to be a handful to work around, but the Sanbi had no reason to suspect the Ichibi of possessing an attack which targeted the soul.

It didn’t take more than a few moments to consume it, and the Sanbi turned into coral beneath the sand and ground away into nothingness. Alex pulled his body back together inside the sand and dug his way out, letting his idle Sand Manipulation move dunes aside until he was once again in open air.

[Enemy Consumed!]

+10 Status Points

Skillset: Sanbi Added!

Gene Sample: Sanbi Added!
[Skillset: Sanbi]

+4000 STR
+4000 DEX
+4000 END

Ability: Coral Generation Unlocked
Ability: Hallucinogenic Mist Unlocked

Coral Generation: Allows the rapid creation of coral.

Hallucinogenic Mist: Allows the generation of a hallucinogenic mist which exploits the victim's insecurities and forces the victim to face them.

Gene Sample: Sanbi

Consumable

The genetic blueprint of the Sanbi.

Gives: Coral Armor, Speed Swimming, Waterbreathing, Enhanced Strength, Turtle Physiology

[Tailed Beast Consumed 3/9!]

+100 Status Points

Perk: Chakra Beast Increased to Rank 3!

Alex was about to pick up and start heading for the next beast on his list when he felt a lifeform approaching. He quickly ducked behind a sand dune and let Jumpscare Champion hide him, peering curiously at the impossible pace the human-shaped lifeform was maintaining. Very quickly the figure appeared at the edge of the sand, fast enough that a normal human wouldn’t have seen him moving at all.

Senju Hashirama

Title(s): The God of Shinobi, Shodai Hokage

STR: 4987

DEX: 5013

END: 4365
Alex’s eyes—all of them—went wide with shock. That human had absolutely bullshit stats. How did a human even reach levels that high?! Alex was stronger now that he’d consumed the Sanbi, but if this guy had turned up even ten minutes earlier… And what was up with that huge charisma score? And that luck? This guy probably hadn’t lost a game of chance in his fucking life.

“I know you’re there,” the man called, staring at the massive sand dunes that were very out of place on an otherwise flat beach. Well he was obviously lying, since Alex was undetectable while actively hiding, but Alex was sure anyone who didn’t have that particular ace up their sleeve might have given up the ghost.

He thought quickly. This guy had stats higher than the fucking three-tails. And with an INT score that high he was undoubtably a genius of some kind and therefore should be considered way higher a threat than his already-bullshit stats might attest. All the power in the world was useless if you didn’t have the capacity to utilize it properly, a problem this guy obviously didn’t suffer from.

Alex decided to treat him as if the nine-tails had just popped up out of nowhere, with its potential 256,000 stats.

“Come out, now,” the man demanded, voice firming, and some kind of visible aura started up around his hands and fucking tree roots broke out of the dirt at his feet.

Alex considered his choices. If he kept hiding, this guy was going to just start indiscriminately attacking the sand and would eventually hit him, especially with a luck score like his. Not that anything this guy could do would likely hurt him, but… why risk it?

And if this man gave Alex even a fraction of those stats upon consumption…

Alex stood up, and stopped hiding.

Senju Hashirama had seen a lot of odd things over the years. Being friends with an Uchiha was a sure-fire way to inure oneself to hallucinations and vivid nightmares, because Madara did not believe in things like moderation or not using genjutsu on allies.

The creature standing up from behind a conspicuous sand dune would not have been out of place in one of Madara’s more twisted illusions.

Standing upright like a man, the creature was covered in sharp, chitinous armor with a ruff of fur around its throat and a pair of huge wings folded at its back. Its head was simply a skull, fleshless and bloodless, crowned with long spiky horns not unlike a deer, and he could spot twenty-eight eyes on its torso alone—all yellow and all covered in a milky film.

Was this some new sort of Summons creature? Hashirama kept a vicegrip on his chakra regardless, ready to pin the monster down with Wood Release the second it made a hostile movement.
Whatever it was, it was where the three-tails should have been. He’d already apparently missed whoever was stealing the one-tails and the two-tails, and to think he’d been too late to this one as well—!

Then the creature opened its mouth—to speak, to roar, to spit fire, Hashirama didn’t know—and he was taking no chances. Roots burst from the sand underneath the creature, ready to ensnare and contain it before it could attack or escape (if it was friendly, he’d apologize later), but it vanished in a flicker of movement too fast for him to even track, let alone compensate for.

This was bad. Hashirama cursed himself in his mind even as he pulled up a shield of trees around him, thorns and spiked branches pointed out in all directions even as he wove a network of roots beneath him to protect from an underground assault. He’d escalated the situation and was paying the price; if the creature could move that fast, it was likely strong as well.

A grim thought took root. What if the biju weren’t being stolen before he got to them, but being slain? What if he’d stumbled over some kind of biju-killer right after it had taken out the three-tails? This was very, very bad.

And then, suddenly, the world was on fire.

His trees withstood the brunt of the attack, but the heatwave that followed was brutal. Burns cropped upon exposed skin as he cursed aloud, shoving out with his chakra and massively expanding his network of trees to try and find the attacker. He couldn’t sense a single living thing inside his new forest, which was worrisome on several levels.

He strained to hear any sort of sound, but the crackling of his burning trees drowned out anything he could have heard. Strangely, a follow-up attack did not occur. He’d expected to be inundated with fire again—surely that was its primary method of attack, if it had jumped right to trying to burn him to death?—but there was nothing.

And then the sand beneath him leapt up at his face with spikes and knives and tried to rip his eyes out. He leapt back, out of the shield of trees, dancing away from tentacles and spikes that rose up right out of the ground above his roots and below his trees doing their best to take his damn head off.

Sand and fire control? Hashirama was no fool. Those were the hallmarks of the one-tails and the two-tails. That had very ominous connotations for the creature attacking him (that he’d attacked). All that was left to watch for was—

The tree nearest to him suddenly sprouted a coating of razor-sharp coral, spiraling out in fractals as it raced across his creations like a lightning-fast fungus.

There it is. So the creature could use sand, fire, and coral. All things the tailed beasts could do. Was it some sort of chakra-assimilator? Could it assume the natures of the things it kills? Hashirama decided grimly that he could not allow the creature to kill him. If there was one thing this world did not need, it was a creature capable of killing tailed beasts in control of his Wood Release.

And then something crashed right through his wooden barrier with a flash of steel and a wide, rictus grin. Hashirama leapt backwards, barely dodging the impossibly-fast slash of what looked like a gauntlet with swords pasted to its fingers. From then on there wasn’t time for thought—it was just an unbroken litany of dodge dodge counterattack dodge run attack dodge deflect deflect dodge strike miss dodge attack PAIN—

Hashirama froze, coughing up blood as the creature suddenly, abruptly deviated from its previous
attack pattern and somehow managed to *teleport behind him* with the sound of a breaking branch. Three long blades protruded from his chest, hefting him off the ground entirely as if he weighed nothing, and he could see the fanged muzzle of the creature out of the corner of his eye as it leaned closer, inhaling deep.

Then it scowled, an impressive feat for something with only bones for a face, and flung him away with an irritated snarl.

Hashirama smiled, and his body dissolved into wood.

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Several miles away, Hashirama stumbled and grimaced as his clone was abruptly—brutally—dispelled. He thanked Kami that he hadn’t actually stuck around after it had proven capable of moving faster than he could follow, and doubled his pace. He’d be back in Konoha by nightfall; Madara and Tobirama needed to know about this, *immediately*.

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Chapter End Notes

I'm not *overly* familiar with the Narutoverse. I've read hundreds of stories about it, but haven't watched the anime or read the manga for myself. My solution to this was to make Naruto a world that did not exist as a work of fiction in Alex's original world (or in a form where a wizard might have gotten a hold of it in the HP world), therefore I can stomp all over canon events without hesitation.

Alex’s stats so far:
STR: 7740
DEX: 7800
END: 7800
INT: 200
CHA: 100
LUK: 100
Chakra: 30,000/30,000

Unspent Status Points: 330

Also, I am aware that I spelled "Fuinjutsu" two different ways here. For some reason any time I tried to write it in bold it put a space between the F and the ū anytime I previewed it, so I didn't bother fixing it.
Chapter Summary

Jacob stirs The Pot, feeds the Asset chocolate, and accidentally gets promoted. As one does.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The power was on the fritz again. Jacob watched the way the agents were buzzing around like anxious bees even as he kept leisurely stirring the pot of goop the ‘head cook’ insisted was chock-full of all the vitamins and minerals an active soldier would need in a day. It was more efficient, the man had explained, to just feed the agents once, and make sure they got all that they needed out of it, than bother with multiple meals in a day.

Jacob kind of hated the guy a little bit. Because, sure, the goop was thick enough and dense enough to serve as several meals’ worth of food, but it also tasted like a literal horse’s ass.

Don’t ask him how he knows that. That event never happened.

But the power being on the fritz was honestly the most interesting thing to happen to him in weeks. You’d think a shadowy organization like the one he was ‘employed’ with (as if anything having to do with Hydra was voluntary) would have the wherewithal to fix their stupid wires once in a while. But no. The base had been having flickering lights and random power outages for almost a week, now.

Ordinarily that wouldn’t really hinder progress much. From what he overheard in the caf—Hydra technicians were some of the worst gossips Jacob had ever seen—most of the science types had their data on paper and in hard copies (something about Stark poking his nose in SHIELD’s business?), so it wasn’t like a power outage would really bother them beyond vague inconvenience. But it wasn’t the eggheads that were milling around anxiously in his usually-empty caf as if they were hiding from the boogeyman.

No, it was the regular run-of-the-mill agents that were in here acting like spooked cats. Jacob watched them curiously as he kept stirring the goop. If it sat too long it would congeal, and he wouldn’t feed the resulting concoction to rats. So his job was basically to stand here stirring this huge-ass pot for hours on end, until the agents came in for their daily dosage of pure suck.

Jacob could complain, but he wouldn’t. For one thing, complainers tended to ‘go on vacation’ a lot, and then never come back. He wasn’t stupid. He knew what that meant in spy-speak. So he’d stand here, stir The Pot, and accumulate idle gossip and hearsay that the higher-ups would likely literally kill him for if they knew.

The agents never really settled down, but they trickled out in ones and twos until Jacob was alone in the caf again. As one does. Momentary excitement over with, Jacob let his attention zone back out and kept stirring.

When he came back to himself, he realized he wasn’t alone anymore. There was an agent he didn’t
recognize standing shockingly close to him (his situational awareness was actually pretty good; it had to be, working in a place like this) and staring at the pot he was stirring with blank incomprehension.

“Yeah, I know it looks gross,” Jacob explained patiently. The guy was probably new, and this was his first visit to The Pot. “But it has everything a growing boy needs in one bowl, so it’s all efficient and shit.”

The man looked up at him and woah okay, the lights are on but nobody’s home. This guy looked like he was fresh off a battlefield, like maybe Hydra had plucked him right out of World War II or some shit and plopped him fully-armed in the cafeteria for shits and giggles. A lot of the Hydra goons tried to hide their PTSD, but this guy wasn’t even making an effort. His emotions were almost childlike in how blatant they were, as if he had no real knowledge on how to conceal them properly.

And boy, was that a shit-load of trauma in those eyes. The rest of his face was pretty blank, but Jacob had gotten to be pretty good at reading people at a glance (to judge who it was safe to be sarcastic with and who needed to be addressed as sir) and this guy just reeked of a Tragic Backstory.

Which was kind of weird, because this guy was built like a tank, tall and wide and armed to the fucking teeth. Jacob could count six knives and four holsters and those were just the ones his untrained civilian eyes could see at a glance.

“You look like you need some chocolate,” Jacob blurted. Internally he was giving himself side-eye, because fuck no that chocolate was his. He’d been hoarding it for weeks, hiding it underneath things and being excruciatingly careful that none of his stupid coworkers caught wind of it and stampeded all over him to get it.

But damn it, this guy had sad puppy eyes and Jacob felt inexplicably like an older brother for all this guy looked like he had a good decade and a hundred-fifty pounds on him.

“Chocolate,” the man repeated, blankly as if he’d never heard of something so ridiculous. Or, more likely, that he didn’t know what chocolate even was. Well that just wouldn’t do. Jacob wasn’t the head chef (his actual title was something closer to “shit-stirrer,” ironically), but he tried to take pride in doing what he could to make the goop taste less like ass.

Some of the agents appreciated it. Most of them didn’t.

Jacob felt like the ghost of his nan was possessing his body, urging him to feed this nice young man and wrap him in blankets. Fuck.

He kept stirring The Pot with one hand as he began fishing around under the counter for the half a chocolate bar he’d stuffed back there. He produced the crumpled thing with a noise of muted triumph, breaking off a few precious squares and offering it to the guy with the miserable eyes.

“Here, on the house,” Jacob said, trying to make it seem like this wasn’t a big deal, that he wasn’t sacrificing almost a month’s worth of subterfuge just because this guy had a sad face. The man stared at the chocolate and made no move to take it. “It’s for you,” he added on helpfully, in case this guy had a few screws loose in addition to his puppy eyes.

“This is… acceptable rations?” the man asked carefully, eyes flicking around the empty caf as if a bunch of agents were going to pop up from under the tables and shout sike! at the guy.

Ok, so he was one of those types. The kind that spent so long as an agent they forgot how to person properly. Well no matter. Jacob was tops at talking to those types. Hell, they were the fucking bomb. The pure soldier types were always super polite and never taunted him about his job as shit-stirrer,
and all he had to do to communicate with them was pretend he was their superior for a bit. Easy.

“This is a supplementary ration for good behavior,” Jacob replied easily, still proffering the chocolate. “Eat it at your discretion, soldier.”

Some of the tension eased out of the man’s shoulders, and he reached out and took the little bit of chocolate with a fucking rad prosthetic hand that Jacob shamelessly ogled. That was one sick robot arm this guy was sporting, and wow how sad was this guy’s face that Jacob was only just now noticing it?

The man put the chocolate in his mouth sort of hesitantly, resigned almost to being poisoned or some shit, only for his eyes to blow wide in shock. Jacob grinned because, honestly, that reaction—the taste of something like milk chocolate after years and years of only goop—never got old.

The guy didn’t even chew. He just sort of stood there, letting it melt on his tongue, and Jacob got that. He did that too, honestly. Made it last longer. Then the guy’s focused arrowed in on Jacob and hit the brakes there, pal those eyes were no longer sad. They were fucking intense. It was like being raked over by razor wire while somebody pointed a rocket launcher at the back of your head in case you twitched too much.

“This is a reward,” the man said with the grave tone of someone announcing that someone had just shot the president. Jacob nodded slowly, because, yeah, sure, a reward for being sad. “For good behavior,” he parroted, as if the words weren’t quite computing right.

“Yeah,” Jacob replied uneasily, not quite sure what had triggered this but willing to play along. “You did… real good on your last mission, so you deserve a reward?” He didn’t mean to make that sound like a question, but really he didn’t know anything about this guy. Surely he went on missions? The agents were always complaining about being sent here or there and doing this or that. And it was a bit of a gamble that the dude had ‘done well’ on whatever his last mission was, but if he didn’t call Jacob on it then everything would be peachy.

The man stood there in complete silence for a long minute, apparently thinking over Jacob’s words. Fuck that was unnerving. The guy was like a statue. Was he even breathing? Jacob kept stirring his pot, resisting the urge to check.

“Understood,” the man finally said, nodding sharply and turning on his heel to leave. Jacob watched him go, baffled but feeling kind of accomplished regardless. The new guy was kind of weird, but he was polite (if a tad slow).

“Nice talk,” Jacob muttered to himself, staring into the pot of goop. It burbled ominously up at him, and wasn’t that just his life?

“I’m goin’ right round baby, right round”—” Jacob sung under his breath as he stirred The Pot, quietly tapping his foot and trying to pretend like twelve different agents weren’t snickering at him from their spots in line. Like they had any place to judge. He’d caught that jerk Rumlow humming the Mission Impossible theme in the hallway the other day, and he knew for a fact that Johnson sung K-pop songs in the shower.

“—like a record baby, right round round r-fuck!” Jacob jerked backwards, only his long-honed shit-stirrer reflexes keeping The Pot upright as the agent with the miserable face materialized out of
fucking nowhere about three inches to his left like a glitch in reality. “Cripes, dude!” Jacob sputtered, leaping forward to steady The Pot from where it had been wobbling ominously when he jerked the ladle out of it so abruptly to keep from capsizing it. “That’s some Solid Snake-level bullshit stealth right there,” he told the man in blatant appreciation. Heart attack or not, that was some serious skill to just up and pop into existence like that.

“The Asset has completed its mission,” the man said, ignoring Jacob’s praise entirely. Well, okay then. His stare was razor-intense again, and it was making Jacob kind of squirmy.

“Congrats man,” Jacob finally replied when it became apparent that was all sad-eyes was going to say. He figured referring to oneself in the third person as an inanimate object wasn’t the weirdest coping mechanism the agents around here had.

Sad-eyes faltered, just a touch, those huge shoulders seeming to tense minutely as his namesake tightened infinitesimally. If the man hadn’t been seriously inside his personal space bubble Jacob likely would have missed all of it. This guy had micro-expressions down to an art form.

“The Asset… did well?” the man asked, leadingly and haltingly, as if he was expecting Jacob to whip out a water bottle and spray him in the face for being bad.

Oh. Oh. Sad-eyes was here for his reward for doing a good job. Back on steady ground, Jacob let his muscles unwind and smiled easily at the big guy. Inside, Jacob felt the ghost of his nan rear up in rebellion at the sad, sad life this man must be living to have come to give Jacob, the shit-stirrer, his after-action report in the hopes of getting a little chocolate. The urge to smother him in blankets returned with a vengeance.

It sure as fuck was a good thing Jacob still had some of that bar left, having not had an opportunity to sneak some since the last time this guy had been in the caf almost a solid week ago.

“I’m glad to hear it!” Jacob replied truthfully—when missions in Hydra went bad, they tended to go tits-up for all of planet Earth remarkably fast—as he began fumbling around under the counter again. Sad-eyes perked right up like a puppy offered love and affection (well, ‘perked up’ inasmuch as his eyes widened a small amount and he tilted fractionally forwards eagerly). “Here you go, soldier. For a job well done.”

The man took the squares of chocolate offered with all the solemnity they deserved and ate them with the same gravitas as the first time. The visible enjoyment was muted, but Jacob could see it in the tilted shoulders and the relaxed lines of his face.

“Keep up the good work,” Jacob offered when the man was finished and standing around as if waiting to be dismissed.

“Sir,” the man replied with a curt nod, almost a salute, before he turned and prowled out of the caf.

The caf which was ominously silent.

Jacob looked up from The Pot and froze like a startled hare as every single eye in the room nailed him to the spot with horror. The expressions on the agents around him ranged from horrified to morbidly impressed, several pale with stark terror and others frowning in suspicion.

They were acting as if he’d just hand-fed a rabid bear or something. Maybe New Guy wasn’t well liked? Maybe they were hazing him, and were upset that he’d broken the conditions of whatever they were doing to him?

He ducked his head and put his full attention on stirring The Pot. He wasn’t nearly high enough on
the totem pole to question anyone in the room about what had their hackles up, but until and unless someone came up and took pity on him, he’d just have to live with the mystery.

“...round round round round,” he sung under his breath petulantly.

“The Asset has completed its mission.”

Jacob blinked blearily up at the ceiling of his quarters, perhaps only 10% awake and 100% not prepared for this conversation. For one thing, why was Sad Mystery Agent in his quarters at—Jacob squinted at the nearest clock dimly illuminating the room—1:34 in the morning?

“Congrats,” he croaked regardless. His nan would tan his hide from the fucking afterlife if he was rude to this sad, sad travesty of a person, no matter how ungodly early it was. It was just too bad this guy probably wanted chocolate, since he wasn’t stupid enough to keep contraband in his fucking cell. “This isn’t the caf,” his traitorous mouth said next, brain-to-mouth filter nonexistent.

“Correct,” Sad-eyes confirmed, as if perhaps Jacob was merely questioning his current location instead of trying to explain complex thoughts at 1:34 in the morning.

“Rations are in the caf,” he went on groggily, stubbornly clinging to this thought. “We are not in the caf.”

_I am not on duty_, Jacob thought blearily. _I am not awake._

Sad-eyes mulled this fact over long enough that Jacob almost managed to fall asleep again with the dude looming over him like a miserable gargoyle. “The Handler should relocate,” came Sad-eyes’s distorted voice, muffled as if from deep underwater. Jacob made an affirmative humming noise in reply. Sure. The Handler can relocate and New Guy can come back at a more reasonable time of day like a regular human being.

“Sir,” Sad-eyes prompted, from about six million light-years to the galactic north-northwest.

Jacob made a noise in reply that would have been derogatory had it been in any way intelligible. There was blessed silence for about two minutes, during which Jacob became convinced that New Guy had gotten the memo and stealthed out of his room.

And then Jacob was in the air. He blinked at the ceiling. The moving ceiling. His brain struggled, synapses firing uselessly, as he tried to rationalize what was happening. There was a metal arm under his knees. His cheek was squished against a tac vest. Was New Guy fucking carrying him like a fucking bride down the hallway?

Was he still dreaming, maybe? That would make way more sense than New Guy deciding to take a fucking trip across base with Jacob in his fucking arms like a fucking damsel.

Jacob stayed limp and counted ceiling tiles, absently mapping where New Guy was taking them. He could have recognized the path to the cafeteria with his eyes closed, _like they should have been 1:34am holy fuck._

Jacob was unceremoniously deposited in front of The Pot, empty as it was at the moment, and he spent several long moments just staring at it. Then he turned and stared at New Guy, who was giving
him that razor-stare that belied the killer hiding under the sad eyes and trauma.

“Did you just carry me across the base?” Jacob asked, hoping to confirm that he hadn’t just hallucinated the past several minutes.

“The Handler needed to relocate,” was all New Guy said in his defense, not really sounding defensive about it. It was more like a statement of fact. Jacob had a sinking feeling that he was supposed to be ‘The Handler.’

Christ, if any of the agents caught New Guy calling him that—

“My proper station’s a secret, dude,” Jacob rushed out, eyes flickering around the empty room. “Don’t let anybody hear you calling me ‘Handler,’ all right? It’s beyond top secret. Nobody here except me and you has the clearance to know. Understood?”

New Guy nodded gravely. “Understood.” And then New Guy uttered a stream of incomprehensible Russian that seemed to make his next nod even graver somehow. Jacob kept his face blank and tried to not let on that he was so lost he might as well be in Narnia.

“Right. Great. Good job,” Jacob stammered, mind clicking back onto the reason he’d been carried here. “Great job on your mission,” he said, as if he had any idea what the mission had been or how it went. He figured New Guy wouldn’t be reporting to him about it being complete if he didn’t think he deserved chocolate for it. He awkwardly jogged around the counter to The Pot and began digging around. He’d used up the last bar, but he’d had a feeling this was going to become A Thing, and had managed to squirrel away some spares.

He now owed the Janitorial Staff three favors, which sucked major ass, but beggars can’t be choosers.

He handed Sad-eyes three Hershey Kisses, and preempted the confused sad-face with an explanation on how to unwrap them, because that seemed like the kind of thing Sad-eyes wouldn’t know.

The expression he made when he saw there was chocolate under the silver was far too adorable for his own good, considering the man wearing it looked like he routinely wrestled bears.

“Next time,” Jacob began once the dude had gotten his ‘reward’ (and slipped a Kiss into a pouch, which Jacob pretended not to see), “don’t wake me up until it’s at least five o’clock. Please.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir,” a reedy voice was saying. Jacob kept his eyes on The Pot, watching it to make sure it didn’t boil over. He didn’t know what the fuck the chef had put in it that morning, but it was about two unattended seconds from achieving sentience. “Sir,” it said again.

Jacob glanced up and around, wondering who Sir was and why they were ignoring this poor pencil-pusher weedy agent guy. The only people nearby were the weedy guy trying to talk to his superior, two eggheads bent over some ominous papers at a table, and Sad Eyes, who had become a near-permanent fixture near and around The Pot in the past few days.

No one had complained or come to whisk him away yet, so Jacob figured maybe Sad Eyes just lived
so sad a life that he was using his (apparently copious) free time hanging around hoping for chocolate. Joke’s on him, though, because Jacob was going to blow his fucking mind next time he gets back from a mission.

He’d scored a whole Snickers bar the other day and couldn’t wait to see the look on Sad Eyes’s face.

“Sir?”

Jacob made accidental eye-contact with weedy dude and the guy fucking straightened up expectantly. He stopped stirring for a crucial half-second and only caught himself when The Pot honest-to-God snarled at him.

He didn’t dare look down at it in case it had started looking back.

“…sup?” Jacob finally replied, taking a stab in the dark that this weedy guy was also new, like Greener Than Grass new, and still in the ‘call everybody Sir just to be safe’ stage. Jacob had been in that stage himself for three solid months after he’d accidentally referred to Director Pierce as my guy and almost gotten shot.

“Sir, I need you to sign this,” Weedy said, proffering a clipboard and a pen. Jacob leaned back a little, not wanting to be handed anything that smelled like responsibility so early in the morning, and Sad Eyes took an ominous step forward in reply. Weedy squeaked. “Sir! Please! It’ll only take a moment!” He said all of this to Jacob while his terrified gaze was locked on the approaching form of Sad Eyes.

“I can’t stop stirring this,” Jacob explained irritably. “Put it on the counter.”

Weedy dropped the clipboard as if it had caught fire, gingerly putting the pen down on top of it and throwing his hands up in the universal symbol of ‘I’m unarmed please don’t shoot me.’ What a weirdo.

Jacob leaned over to see what Weedy needed the shit-stirrer for, keeping The Pot in motion through pure muscle memory. Jacob squinted.

The fuck was this? It was written in incomprehensible legal jargon, but it looked like a munitions request of some kind for The Asset. Jacob looked over at Sad Eyes, since that was how he referred to himself, and wondered why the fuck Weedy had brought this to him. Maybe Weedy had actually brought it to Sad Eyes, but Jacob had just preempted him and Weedy didn’t know any better? That made sense.

“You need a…” Jacob squinted harder at the tiny lettering, “…a fucking rocket launcher for your next mission?” He was impressed. Sad Eyes got the coolest missions, apparently. Jacob had certainly never gotten to use a rocket launcher for anything before.

“Affirmative. Intensive structural damage required.”

“Coolio,” Jacob nodded, trying not to think about the kinds of missions that required ‘intensive structural damage’ and mostly failing. “Sounds good,” he said for lack of anything else to add. Weedy seemed to take that as encouragement, sidling forward and pushing the pen closer to Jacob.

“Please sign here, Sir,” Weedy wheezed, sweating copiously as his eyes kept rolling over towards where Sad Eyes was now standing at attention.

Maybe Weedy needed a witness to sign it? A rocket launcher was no joke; maybe even Hydra needed some sort of accountability for their munitions requests? Jacob snorted at himself as he
reached out with one hand and scrawled an illegible scribble where Weedy indicated. It didn’t help that he’d had to sign right handed (not his dominant hand), which made his already incomprehensible signature into something totally alien.

“Thank you, Sir,” Weedy squeaked, hugging the clipboard to his chest as he saluted smartly and almost ran out of the caf. Sad Eyes resumed his place a few feet away, watching everyone in the room at once.

Maybe twenty minutes passed before some sort of high-pitched alarm bleeped exactly twice, making Sad Eyes start silently heading for the door. “Good luck on your mission, soldier,” Jacob called after him, thinking about rocket launchers and explosions. Sad Eyes nodded in response and stalked out, leaving Jacob alone with his potentially-sentient goop. “Just you and me,” he murmured to the goop with narrow eyes.

Jacob almost thought it was narrowing eyes right back.

God he hated this job.

Chapter End Notes

I don't even know. I just thought it would be funny to have some low-level cafeteria worker wind up as the Asset's Handler entirely by accident.
Irae was very lost.

She could see Suramar City in the distance, tall and grand and not covered by a massive arcane shield. She could even see the spires of the uncorrupted portion across the intact bridge that should have led to the Broken Shore. There were no Withered scrabbling at the edges of the city, no huddled, miserable outcasts scratching at their own flesh to try and claw the hunger out.

There was only Suramar, in a form it hadn’t taken in thousands of years.

Irae was lost. Oh she knew where she was—she’d trudged all through Suramar only months ago on Thalyssra’s orders—but that did little to change the fact that she was hopelessly, hopelessly lost. She looked up at the night sky again, shivering her feathers uncertainly, at the unfamiliar stars, at the utter lack of Argus hovering menacingly overhead.

Yes. Irae was very lost.

She could see Suramar City in the distance, tall and grand and not covered by a massive arcane shield. She could even see the spires of the uncorrupted portion across the intact bridge that should have led to the Broken Shore. There were no Withered scrabbling at the edges of the city, no huddled, miserable outcasts scratching at their own flesh to try and claw the hunger out.

There was only Suramar, in a form it hadn’t taken in thousands of years.

Irae croaked miserably, the sound low and soft in deference to her precarious place in the world, and hid inside her own feathers again. She had a sinking suspicion as to what might have happened, and where—when—she might be. As an adventuring druid, Irae had plenty of experience with different types of magic. She’d been exposed to the arcane, to corrupted fel energies, to the Light and the Void and everything in between.
The magic that had crashed into her when Khadgar was attempting to teleport them to safety as Sargeras was dragged away from the wounded Azeroth was… old. Titan-old. She had been busy staring in a mixture of grief and empathy at Illidan’s back—understanding his decision and respecting it, even if she personally disagreed—when a combination of energies had struck her.

There had been Khadgar’s teleport, of course. Arcane and kind and powerful. Then there had been the idle ambience of the Titans, ancient and unforgiving and merciless. The distant malevolence of the far-off Sargeras, strong enough and evil enough to be felt through all of space. The cool, slightly numbing Light wafting off Prophet Velen. Even the fel that constantly pulsed off Illidan like a heartbeat, wild and ravenous and feral. Any or all of those could have contributed to the way Khadgar’s teleport had felt… wrong.

It was a mixture that could only have happened at that particular instant in time, with that particular group of people gathered, in those specific circumstances. It was also a mixture that could never be recreated.

Which meant that here, now, Irae was stuck. She warbled, her flight form’s vocal chords not structured for actual mourning, as she forced herself to accept her new reality. She had no family to miss her, but there had been a handful of friends across the years. None of them had been terribly close, but she’d taken their existence for granted somewhat. Now that they no longer existed, she was… very much alone.

Irae cooed at herself, trying to distract her from her own thoughts. She couldn’t really afford to drown in sorrow or grief at her misfortune. She was here, she was alive, and she needed to stay that way. She’d only just recently reached her hundredth year—the thought of enduring thousands just to get back to what she knew and loved was…

Well. As a kaldorei she was uniquely equipped to survive those years, at least, especially here and now. The Well of Eternity might even still exist, and if it did. If it did.

Irae was potentially before the Sundering. She didn’t know what to do with that. She couldn’t change the future (well, she could, but Fate had a way of getting its due no matter the actions of individuals) for fear of making things infinitely worse. If she was remembering her history right (never her greatest concern, or her best subject), she might even be present in the world before Malfurion first learned druidism from Cenarius.

That wouldn’t be such an issue, if she hadn’t been a fully-fledged druid.

She might be a druid in a time before druids were a thing. Irae had never thought of herself as extraordinary, or anyone of particular note. She’d been a very powerful Feral in her younger years, and an even greater Guardian when the schools of druidism branched out some more, but now she was—effectively—one of a kind.

She knew all too well what people tended to do to unique things.

She would have sighed if she’d been in a form that allowed it. As it was, she exhaled heavily. There was no way for her to hide her druidism. It was woven so deeply into her magic that any practicing mage could spot it at a distance. And here, before the Sundering, there were likely more than a handful of practicing mages among the kaldorei.

She would just have to take things as they happened. She didn’t have nearly a certain enough picture of where she was in the timeline to be making any plans, or the knowledge of history required to effect beneficial changes. The world had managed to hold itself together well enough without her input the first time around; if she saw something she could help or do, she’d do so, but she wouldn’t
cripple herself in grief trying to save all of Azeroth on her own.

Decision made, Irae spread her wings and glided away from the city on the horizon. She had a very long time to wait, and it would be best to not pull the curiosity of her kin until after Malfurion started taking students.

She laughed to herself in her head. When had her plans ever gone well?

Irae watched the elflings from her perch in what she’d come to consider her tree, somewhere deep in what she thought might be Val’sharah. It was difficult to wrap her mind around the current world’s geography, considering the Sundering hadn’t yet happened and thus the different continents were more or less all stuck together. In fact, she could actually still see Suramar if she flew above the treetops—which she certainly couldn’t have done before.

Elflings, even in her time, were so rare that to see two of them was almost miraculous. She’d been the only elf her age in Kalimdor, and the first elfling born in hundreds of years. Immortal races often had difficulty procreating, and Irae could count the number of elflings she’d seen in person on one talon. There’d only be two of them, and they were both in front of her.

She wasn’t a complete fool, and willful ignorance had never been her forte. The Stormrage twins were easily recognizable even before they both grew horns; if their habit of calling each other’s names hadn’t clued her in, Illidan’s bright golden eyes would have.

Malfurion had spent the past half an hour trying to coax her out of her tree, offering various fruits or nuts and growing embarrassed the longer Irae simply stared at him in return. Illidan had spent that same amount of time blatantly laughing at him.

“You’re doing it wrong,” Illidan pointed out amusedly, the ringing tones of what would one day be Darnassian almost foreign to Irae after going so long speaking only in Common. It was probably good that kaldorei culture changed so slowly, else the language might have been unrecognizable to her. “You can’t tempt a bird of prey with nuts.”

Malfurion sent his twin a withering look. “If I’m doing so poorly,” he drawled, a sound Irae would never have imagined the future Malfurion to have ever made in his life, “why don’t you give it a try?”

Illidan’s eyes widened a little, obviously put on the spot. Irae knew teasing when she saw it, and felt Illidan hadn’t really had any more confidence in pulling her out of the tree than his brother had. But even as she watched, Illidan narrowed his eyes in focus and turned up to her. It was very bizarre to see such a familiar expression on such a young, uncorrupted face.

She found it unexpectedly adorable.

Instead of offering any of the basket of fruits or various treats Malfurion had been using, Illidan’s eyes and hands lit up with arcane magic and he reached.

Irae fluffed her feathers in surprise, not expecting that level of control from someone so young. She’d met Archmages who couldn’t have controlled their magic that well without the use of a focusing staff. She braced herself, but when Illidan’s magic reached her it… waited. She eyed the strands of arcane magic woven in a loose net around her, wings tensed to break it apart at the slightest hint that
it might be trying to cage her in.

When it did little else but sit there and look pretty, Irae turned her full attention towards it and cautiously reached out her own magic. Illidan’s arcane felt young and exuberant, but she could taste hints of the iron will that had made him so fearsome later in life. It was protective, and possessive, and lonely, and probably said a lot more about Illidan’s inner personality than he really wanted to be showing to a random bird in the forest.

It was also the most powerful bit of magic she’d felt since she’d last battled Medivh.

Curious, Irae let her own nature-flavored magic reach back with a general feeling of query. Illidan twitched at the feeling, brows furrowing, and his response was slow and choppy when it came. He was obviously not used to using his magic this way, which was kind of amusing for her. For her, the ability to communicate using only one’s magical aura was a lifesaver on the battlefield. She could trade strategies and thoughts with the mages and priests and even the warlocks around her on the fly, which had let her survive things that would have otherwise slaughtered them all.

She was rather impressed he’d caught on so fast, with only a few stutters in the net around her as he tried to figure out how he was supposed to impress thoughts and emotions onto something he’d only ever used as a blunt instrument.

His magic conveyed a desire to impress his brother, to prove himself, to show Malfurion that he was just as smart, just as gifted, and that wild animals would like him just as much even if he wasn’t Elune’s gift to the forest. He tasted jealous, and a little angry, and very embarrassed that he felt either of those things.

Again, probably more than he wanted to be sharing with a bird.

Irae studied Illidan through the net of magic, considering. She’d never had a sibling, so couldn’t relate to the need to prove oneself, but she’d always felt a quiet sort of empathy for the Betrayer that she hadn’t been willing to tell a single soul. That was a good way to get exiled fast.

She spread her wings and easily drifted down from the tree, cutting through the net of magic that didn’t quite get out of her way fast enough, and made her intentions known. Illidan flinched a little in surprise as she rapidly floated down to him, and clumsily held up a small arm. How cute. She was way too heavy to land on his arm without bringing him to the ground, plus he had nothing to protect his skin from her formidable talons, but since he was offering…

She alighted on his arm with a ruffle of feathers, infinitely gentle, not at all surprised when Illidan squawked in alarm as he stumbled, other hand flailing forwards to try and support her heavy weight somehow, before failing as they both crashed to the ground.

She hopped away from their collision, mantling her wings for balance and tilting her head at the groaning elfling in the grass. Malfurion was too busy laughing his head off a few feet away to be of any help, so Irae easily stepped forward and crouched down to settle on the grass beside him.

Illidan’s face was tight with embarrassment, but his magic seethed around him in anger and mortification and a helpless sort of sadness that abruptly fizzled when he looked up and saw her settled near his head. She considered him and the state of his uncontrolled magic, and reached out a wing to cover his fallen form. Malfurion’s laughter petered out, and Illidan stared up at her with wide eyes.
Protection, Irae projected onto Illidan’s wild magic. The boy blinked rapidly in surprise. Safety.

Illidan’s magic was a whirl of confused emotion, but he eventually managed to send a semi-coherent friend? at her.

Friend, Irae easily confirmed. The happiness that blossomed in his magic was not reflected on his face, but Irae felt warm regardless. Illidan sat up carefully, dislodging her wing, before he cautiously reached out and began petting through her feathers.

Irae tolerated the innocent fumbling, not complaining when he ruffled her primaries the wrong way or bent back the delicate secondaries. It hurt, but it was nothing a quick regrowth wouldn’t heal, and it wouldn’t cripple her. She’d had far worse.

Illidan was quiet with an intent sort of fascination as he studied her, taking in the glowing kaldorei eyes and the thick, dark purple plumage. He seemed especially interested in the collar she wore with its enchanted protection charms, along with the sharpened bronze armor protecting the bones of her wings. All of these things made it obvious she was not a regular bird, even if her communication via magic with him hadn’t sent that same message.

She felt movement from nearby and sensed Malfurion’s already nature-flavored magic coming closer. She spooked, fluttering up and away from his questing hand, not daring to let him touch her. It might have been a bit paranoid of her, but Malfurion was the most powerful druid she’d ever known. She had the feeling that even now, before he was officially taught, he’d somehow peg her for what she was if he touched her.

Malfurion’s magic flatlined with a deadpan sort of exasperation at her quick escape, but Illidan…

Illidan’s magic had gone still, like deceptively deep waters, and trembled with a fragile sort of hope. She didn’t quite understand either reaction, but she’d had enough interaction for one day. With a flit of her feathers and a quick farewell to Illidan’s magic, she soared off to forage something more palatable than crushed up berries and dried nuts.

As thoughtful as Malfurion was, she was a fully grown kaldorei who needed a bit more substance in her food than that.

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Illidan knew he shouldn’t be out here. Malfurion and Tyrande would likely worry if they were at all aware of how often he snuck out to this clearing to see his bird, but he couldn’t help it. Ever since that day years ago when Malfurion had actually failed at something—and oh he knew he shouldn’t cherish that thought nearly as much as he did—Illidan had been, frankly, obsessed.

The bird was clearly not a normal bird. Normal birds didn’t wear jewelry, or armor, or possess magic. It was not the arcane he was familiar with, but a more… natural magic. Which made sense, considering it was a bird and not a mage. The bird was also highly intelligent, able to understand spoken language just fine, and it always, always came when Illidan called for it.

Illidan paused in the clearing near the tree the bird liked to roost in, just marveling. This was something Malfurion couldn’t do, something Malfurion had utterly failed at. The bird actively avoided his brother, and while that was slightly worrying it was far more gratifying than he’d expected. Malfurion had always had a way with animals and plants; wild creatures would calm if he
brushed them with his magic, so to have one that actually chose Illidan over his perfect brother…

It was… good.

He reached out with his magic in the way the bird had taught him (he laughed to himself at the thought that a bird had taught him magic, but there was no escaping the way his control had increased in leaps and bounds in order to communicate with it over long distances) and waited until he felt the familiar nature magic a few trees over. He got the impression of a large monolith turning in his direction, the weight heavy and considering, before it recognized him and turned warm and welcoming and Illidan quickly clamped down on his own emotions before he became maudlin. Again.

His bird glided out of the trees towards him, and this time when he held out his arm it was with a practiced, easy motion that did not send him crashing to the ground under its weight. It landed gently, careful with its talons in the way no regular bird would be, and studied him out of glowing silver eyes. He was not the young, naïve child he’d been when he’d first met this creature. He was taller, stronger, more powerful than any mage he’d met, and yet… when the bird looked at him, he felt like an elfling again.

He carefully shuffled over to lean against the tree trunk as he slid to the ground, the bird braced on his arm as he stroked through its magnificent plumage.

“You need a name,” Illidan mused to the bird. It ruffled its feathers and sent a pulse of dubiousness caution trust agreement at him, which made him smile. He considered the bird mostly in his lap, the way it trustingly let him run his hands over it despite knowing how very dangerous those hands could be. He thought on the way it reacted to his magic, the way not even his twin could do—with trust and affection and a feeling of your destiny is heavy, let me lighten your burden for a moment.

He couldn’t have explained what that made him feel if he’d honestly tried.

He stared thoughtfully at familiar eyes, eyes he’d seen on any number of his fellow kaldorei, and wondered if there was a way to curse an elf to take the shape of a bird. This avian had heard more of his ranting than Malfurion and Tyrande combined. He’d come here to scream at it, at the forest, at life and the naivety of his kin, at the stifling his magic felt surrounded by all this disapproval, at how he simply felt different from them. He didn’t experience the same emotions as them, or think like them, or feel content to stagnate like they did.

There was something wrong with him. Something that flavored his magic and made others wary, but had drawn this bird out of its tree to his arm when he was a small child. Something about him made this bird like him, when it didn’t even like Malfurion.

In light of that, there was only one thing he could really call it.

“Dalah,” he said to the bird, which tilted its head and stared piercingly at him. “You are Dalah.”

Mine, his magic hissed/whispered/sang. Dalah blinked slowly at him, a shiver of something over her— and he could feel that, now, the feminine tang of her magic—aura that he couldn’t place, before amusement sadness agreement washed over him. Illidan couldn’t fight the wild smile on his face, or the way he felt like he might float away.

Dalah was his bird, the only thing he really owned that he didn’t share with someone else in some fashion, and she’d agreed. When he stood again, recognizing that it was late and that someone would come looking for him soon, he held his arm out straight and prodded Dalah to roost on his shoulder. She shuffled obediently towards him, hunkering on his left with an aggravated sort of
amusement, and cuffed him with a massive wing.

He chuckled all the way back to Lorlathil.

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Irae was in thought. She couldn’t really call what Illidan had named her a name. She already had a perfectly good name, anyway, but had no feasible way to communicate that to him. Names were words that did not generally come with emotional impressions, which made it difficult to translate via magic. Illidan’s own name, ironically, did not have that problem for her. His name felt like sorrow affection grief respect, which was why she was very careful to never try and use it when he was around. It would be hard to explain.

Dalah, as Illidan called her, was more a statement of fact than a name. She couldn’t go around introducing herself as Mine without getting some very strange looks, so figured she’d just keep Irae and let Illidan call her whatever he wanted. If there ever came a time when she felt confident showing her kaldorei form to him, maybe she’d correct him.

Maybe.

As Illidan ambled back towards the village he lived in—Lor-something—Irae studied him from her perch on his shoulder. Staying with Illidan was guaranteed to cause problems later on. He was a massive influence on the way Azeroth’s future would turn out, and a major player in several key parts of history.

The Illidan in her past-turned-future did not have a druid riding around on his shoulder. Dalah did not exist in the future-Illidan’s past. Irae could take that to mean she simply wouldn’t survive the ten thousand years between now and then, but…

She felt how strong Illidan’s magic was, even now. She felt how it had started reaching for her on instinct, wrapping around feathers and sinking into her bones and imprinting itself on her. The future Illidan would have had some remnant of her magic sticking to him, even after all that time, if his magic had gone out of its way to claim hers like this.

He hadn’t.

Which meant she’d done more than just travel back in time. She’d likely slid sideways through it, too. Anything she did wouldn’t affect the future, because here the future hadn’t happened yet.

She warbled in concern, making Illidan pause and turn his head to look at her with a flat query hovering in his magic. He still wasn’t that great at purposefully sending messages, and the ones he managed lacked real emotion, but he was leagues better than he’d been only a few years ago.

Loss, she easily sent back. Homesickness.

Illidan’s expression smoothed back out into somewhat misguided understanding. As far as he knew, her ‘home’ was the forest, and she was leaving it to go with him. Well, she guessed he wasn’t wrong. She had no home. Wouldn’t have one in the future, either, if she’d really traveled dimensions like she was thinking she had.

She could see the frustration on his face even as his magic bristled in agitation. He likely wanted to
say something in particular but couldn’t figure out how.

“I’ll make you a new nest,” he finally said aloud, voice soothing, even as his magic took initiative and said something else entirely. *I am your home,* his magic insisted, clinging tighter. She felt that if she tried to take flight at that moment his magic would simply jerk her back down without Illidan’s input at all.

She considered what Illidan had said, and what he apparently really felt. Illidan wasn’t… terrible to be around. She liked him. Liked his sense of humor, his honor, his loyalty, and somewhere in the dark, near-feral part of her that she’d never quite shaken she even liked the way he didn’t form attachments—he formed *obsessions.*

What would it have been like, she’d often wondered, to have been where Tyrande was? What would it feel like to have someone so devoted to you that they’d endured ten thousand years in solitude on your orders, only to *still* love you when you deigned to free them? It would be a heady thing, to have someone like Illidan Stormrage utterly *obsessed* with you.

But of course, Irae was currently a bird. Illidan only knew her as a bird. One did not form obsessions with *birds.* She turned her eyes off his face to stare ahead, not answering.

*She wouldn’t always be a bird,* her magic whispered. Illidan’s magic spiked in answer, but without true understanding. Hers was a disguise that would not last forever. She shifted forms in the forest to hunt and forage, often to her saber form for ease of movement. Eventually she’d run into something that made her do so in front of Illidan, and if that happened before Malfurion learned druidism…

She huffed in exasperation, easily accepting the fingers that came up to idly preen at her feathers. Well, she’d slay that dragon when it found her.

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Irae did not like Tyrande. This was actually pretty surprising, since she’d held nothing but respect for the High Priestess in the future-that-wasn’t. Maybe it was just Irae holding her up to a set of expectations that were, frankly, unrealistic. This Tyrande wasn’t even an adult yet, not even by *human* standards, and yet Irae was measuring her to her ten-thousand-year-old future self?

That was a very long time for someone’s personality to remain unchanged. Why was it so shocking that Tyrande might not have always been a bastion of temperance and wisdom? Why did it keep surprising her to see Malfurion scowling or arguing with Illidan or frowning in condescending disappointment anytime Illidan’s magic reached for his?

It was *astonishing* the amount of prejudice and holier-than-thou that the kaldorei of this time emitted. These might have been her people, but they weren’t her *kin.* Even when dependent on the Well of Eternity for their power and immortality, most of these elves all but *disdained* arcane magic—*Highborne magic*—as something *less than.*

Irae realized that she’d been a bit misled about what sort of society the kaldorei had once enjoyed. Druidism might not be present in its future-recognized form, but there was no mistaking the turn the kaldorei’s general magic had taken. Almost every magic-user she’d seen so far except Illidan himself was on the very cusp of druidism, just by merit of how their magic interacted with nature. The ones that weren’t tended to be priestesses, communing with the Light via Elune, or warriors without any care for magic at all.
Illidan was very alone in this village, she understood. His magic was constantly reaching out, trying to make connections and form attachments with those he considered friends or family, and equally constantly being rebuffed at every turn. That much outright rejection at this early stage of his development would have been torture on his magic and soul. Irae’s empathy grew, as did her sharp, cold anger at every kaldorei she sensed metaphorically slapping his reaching hand away.

Druids as she knew them—as these elves were almost outright mimicking—did hold a small aversion to non-nature based magics. They felt unnatural (amusingly enough), like petting a nightsaber and feeling the texture of scales where there should have been fur. A sort of metaphysical disconnect between what they expected to feel, and what was actually there. The druids she’d trained with often compared the magic of a mage to be like a sinister illusion; the magic looked the same on the surface, but it felt nothing at all like the magic the druids had grown up surrounded by. The fel-tainted magic of warlocks was even worse.

Irae had spent years of her life forging connections to any magic user she could get her claws on, forcing her magic to adapt to warlocks and mages and priests and shamans and all manner of magical beings. In that way, she’d become something of an anomaly. It had been necessary, though, as a druid most inclined towards sabers and bears, to be able to connect to her teammates and keep an eye on enemy movements and snapshot strategies presented in the heat of battle.

A bear whose magic refused to listen to her comrades was a bear who did not live a very long life.

So when Irae saw Illidan’s magic reach out for his brother’s, or Tyrande’s, only to get rebuffed, she made sure to smother him with her own before hurt could set in. Any time his magic twisted in on itself—why won’t they accept me what’s wrong with me I’m a freak—she wrapped him up in her metaphysical wings and fanned the feathers of her magic around his soul, sheltering and protective and You are not alone.

Illidan melted every time, even if his face grew proficient at not displaying it.

Soon enough, Illidan stopped reaching for them at all. Instead, whenever his magic sought companionship or reassurance, it bypassed the kaldorei around him altogether and swept straight for her, ruffling through her feathers and all but rejoicing in the way she always—always—welcomed him.

Irae watched the kaldorei, saw the way they subtly relaxed when the oppressive weight of Illidan’s magic focused on his weird bird, and judged.

She shouldn’t judge them, really. They had no way to know how a mage’s magic worked, how crucial for mental development these innocent connections were. They couldn’t possibly know the torture they’d been inflicting on Illidan for years upon years, until a timewalking druid had stumbled upon him and took it upon herself to help.

Irae worried for him. And for herself. She was a strong druid, but her magic was nowhere near the strength of Illidan’s. The connections he wasn’t being allowed to forge were supposed to share the weight of his magic, stretch it amongst them to lighten the—not burden—duty of carrying it. One link in a chain did not an anchor make.

But she endured it. She embraced the thick, heavy weight of his power and did not resist, did not fight it. She let it crush her lungs and melt onto her bones, subtly brushing it aside and redirecting it to places that wouldn’t crack her in half if she let it. Illidan was a quick leaner. He might not know exactly what was happening to him, or to his magic, but he knew he was too strong to keep leaning
on her like this. He was always so gentle, his magic as featherlight as he could make it, whenever he touched her.

He knew it was a problem. It wasn’t one he was in any position to fix.

Irae cooed to him when he stewed in concern and aggravation, warbled to distract him from his worry, smoothed out the rough edges of his magic with her feathers and took the searing-lightning-ozone-power into herself without complaint. Tyrande congratulated Illidan for finally *keeping his magic to himself*. Malfurion grunted something to the effect of *good job finally learning some control, brother*.

Illidan smiled back at them, feeling nothing at all, while Irae, ever-present on his shoulder, *seethed*.

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Illidan was not a fool. He knew the magic he practiced was not the same as what Malfurion preached, or even the sort of thing Tyrande took interest in. But he’d thought they were at least supportive of him, or would be willing to *indulge* him. He hadn’t even been aware of how very much they did *not* support him or the magic he practiced until Dalah had returned to Lorlathil with him.

Reaching out for her, learning how to tell her apart from the trees and other forest dwellers, had made him more in-tune with his magic and how independent from him it was. She’d all but taught him how to connect with it, how to feel how it moved and control it so that *it* did not control *him*.

That had been a double-edged blade.

Now, he felt it when his magic—when *he*—reached out for Malfurion, or Tyrande, or any number of kaldorei he’d thought he could call friends. He felt it when his magic sought acceptance, sought connection, sought family, to *claim* and *imprint* and *possess*. He also felt it when he was rejected. Every. Single. Time.

No one in Lorlathil would accept his magic. They flinched from the very feel of it, some looking around wildly, not in touch enough with their own magic to see where it was coming from or what it was doing. Others sneered and outright turned their backs to him, slapping him down with the absolute refusal to allow him that connection that his magic all but *craved*.

Even Malfurion, his *twin*, his *blood*, looked down his nose at him from his high-mount and bade him *control himself*. Like his magic wanting to touch him was somehow *childish*, or *wrong*.

He felt the exact moment when Dalah had raised her metaphorical hackles and said *enough*.

When his magic reached for Tyrande yet again, and was rejected *yet again*, he felt the comforting press of Dalah all around him, feeling like soft down and acceptance and *home*. That had been… that had been a *revelation*.

That moment when his magic had reached out, and *been accepted*… Illidan had actually had to excuse himself from the conversation and hurry out to the forest and sit down, overwrought and not understanding why this had affected him so badly.

His magic had *clung*, for lack of a better word, to Dalah for *weeks*. Like a needy elfling. He hadn’t
felt so weak in years, yet, paradoxically, his control over his magic had never been better. Like Dalah’s welcoming of his magic had been the signal his own had needed to finally step it up, to wake up from a deep sleep, to stop responding sluggishly to his spells and simply come when he called it.

He’d, rather naively, gotten his hopes up. If forging this connection to Dalah, who was an animal, could do so much for his magic, what would a connection to a fellow kaldorei do? How powerful could he make himself, just by letting his magic do what felt natural to it?

The next time he’d eagerly reached for Malfurion, with his newfound control and a sense of giddiness to show his brother how well he was doing—look brother, look at what I can do, isn’t it neat—Malfurion had done more than just reject him. He’d been attacked.

Malfurion hadn’t even turned to look at him, not once, but the nature magic clinging to Malfurion had sprouted thorns in reaction to Illidan’s sudden advance—in unrecognition had grown claws and teeth and bit back.

Illidan had recoiled, physically and magically, and quickly left, not letting his brother know he’d been there at all.

It felt like a line had been drawn. A wall built up between them that Illidan couldn’t break down, couldn’t climb over or circumvent. His magic felt ashamed, wounded and hurting and confused. Wasn’t Malfurion his blood? His kin? His brother? His own blood turned from him, attacked him when he reached out in friendship. If Malfurion reacted that badly, how would Tyrande? How would Arladan, or Fanrius, or Carya? How would any of the kaldorei?

A weight shifted on his shoulder. Dalah, forgotten, pressed her feathers to his face and sang. She was no songbird. Her voice did not lift or fall pleasantly to the ear. But her magic wrapped soothingly around him in time with her song, feathers smoothing down the jagged edges of his soul, even as he felt her pull him in, pull him closer, wrap her wings around him to shield him from everything.

He sank into it gratefully. Dalah wouldn’t betray him. Dalah wouldn’t push him away. He was Dalah’s world. His magic latched onto her with the sort of strength and desperation he had tried so hard to hold back. He knew he was powerful, far more so than she was, and had been so, so careful not to hurt her. His magic often trembled on the edge of violence, one twitch away from simply detonating into fire and lightning and death; he didn’t want to touch Dalah with that, to let her know how unstable he felt most days.

It was too late for that now, he supposed.

Everything he was, all the bitterness and hatred and sorrow and loneliness, everything that made him Illidan, sank hooks into Dalah’s magic and refused to let go. And she held fast. She didn’t buckle under its weight, or even falter in her singing. She simply widened her wings and let him in, let him wrap around her spirit and weave himself through her bones, welcoming all that he was and is and would ever be with the sort of patience and love and understanding he’d only ever expect out of Elune Herself.

When he came back to himself, minutes or hours or days later, his face was wet with tears.

“I don’t understand,” he confessed to her as she sat, crooning in his ear, rubbing her head along his temple. “But thank you,” he whispered desperately, truthfully, feeling somewhere in his heart—in his
soul—that she’d done something crucial tonight.

She cooed back at him, magic warm and welcoming and soft on the sharp edges of his own, and said nothing. His magic never reached for anyone else again.

Irae endured. It certainly wasn’t easy bearing the weight of Illidan’s magic alone, but it wasn’t as if there was a multitude of takers willing to help. So she planted her heels and threw back her shoulders and endured.

It eased, with time. Her magic grew accustomed to holding up what felt like the entirety of Azeroth, forcing itself to stretch and grow and adapt—to if not match him, at least come close. She’d never be his equal, but every day she spent anchoring that massive magic she felt herself growing just a little bit stronger. A little bit better equipped to keep him down, keep him sane, keep him safe.

She couldn’t exactly use any of it, though. For every step forward she took in power, she had to immediately take two steps back as the weight Illidan felt safe putting on her grew that much heavier. Even subconsciously he knew better than to drop all of his magic on her at once—that first night notwithstanding—but that didn’t mean he didn’t tire of holding it all alone.

That was what connections were for.

Irae did what she could, kept an eye on Illidan’s magic for any trace of instability or insanity, and welcomed him with open arms anytime he needed to set down the weight he carried for a while.

She’d been Khadgar’s anchor for a time, in the future-that-wasn’t. The Archmage had been powerful, but nowhere to this extent. It had been good training, at least, for bearing the weight of a mage on her shoulders by herself.

It was a state of affairs that might not have been sustainable, if not for Illidan himself.

The young man was different from the other kaldorei in the way he was always reaching for more. He was always experimenting, searching for new knowledge, trying new spells and inventing others if the one he wanted didn’t exist yet. And, as the only being in his immediate area who didn’t seem to instinctually loathe the touch of his magic, Irae often found herself his mostly-willing test subject.

At first, his feverish studies and experimentations were aimed at strengthening Irae herself. Making her stronger, faster, better—instinctually trying to make sure she wouldn’t simply break under the weight of all his magic when his control inevitably failed. She appreciated his efforts, if not the actual steps required to get there.

Lacking a true teacher in the ways of the arcane, Illidan wielded his magic in a manner Irae was simply not familiar with. He treated it like an extension of self rather than the tool most mages saw it as. And, as a result, it reacted very differently than she’d ever expect the arcane to. It moved with him like another limb, with the precision of fingers and the strength of a curled fist. It unfolded like wings—likely mimicking the way her own magic felt for lack of any other suitable templates—and sharpened like fangs. In that way, his arcane was nature-flavored in a way the almost-druids around him likely would have been scandalized by, had they ever actually reached out and felt him.

Illidan took very well to druidic magic, Irae found. He could watch the way her magic moved and
adapt it for his own use without losing any crucial components. She rather thought that if he put his mind to it, he might even manage to somehow twist his arcane magic into shapeshifting. Not that the thought would ever cross his mind, lacking in knowledge about actual druids as he was.

So Irae taught him what she could. She let him watch her magic move to sense her surroundings, let him listen in with her as she paid attention to the grass and the trees and look out of her eyes as she watched the skies for the weather.

It was this last that sparked Illidan’s current project.

He seemed oddly intent on making her useful somehow, in the eyes of the other kaldorei. He wanted there to be no doubt as to her worth. Illidan saw her as a crucial part of him, an extension of his magic made manifest, and wanted everyone who looked at her to know her intrinsic value.

It was sweet, in a socially-stunted, awkward kind of way.

So, logically, Illidan wanted to make her into something irreplaceable not just to him, but to the elves as a whole. In that regard, he set about trying to ferret out some function of their bond that he could present to any who had doubts as evidence of her use.

Irae, of course, knew she was already useful to just about anyone. She could shapeshift, she could heal, she could raise the dead if she caught it fast enough. But she let Illidan fiddle with her magic, with her very soul, longsuffering and indulgent, trusting him not to crack her into pieces because he might not love her yet, but she belonged to him. And Illidan treasured the few things he owned with all the ferocity of a black dragon.

Eventually, he worked out how to see out of her eyes and direct her movements with subtle nudges even over long distances. As a scout, she was undoubtably fantastic. She could fly, and blend into trees and dark shadows, and relay exactly what she saw to Illidan without a second of delay. That alone would justify her usefulness to anyone who cared to ask.

If he spent a long time winding protective enchantments onto her wing armor, trying to find a way to deflect spells and arrows, well. She left him to it. He’d learn one day how fearsome she could be on a battlefield. And on that day, she’d prove her use to all of Azeroth.

Dalah was tense. That tension in turn made Illidan tense, which made Malfurion curious, which made Tyrande wary, which made Cenarius wary, which was not helping anything at all. Illidan tried to relax, tried to smooth down the bristled feathers of Dalah’s magic, but she wasn’t having it. Something about this situation, or about Cenarius himself, set her absolutely on edge.

The way Cenarius kept blatantly staring at her where she’d hidden herself in a tree probably wasn’t helping. Illidan had actually caught the demigod reaching out to her once or twice with his own immense well of magic, and had found himself metaphysically shoving himself between them like a wall of teeth and knives on pure instinct.

Cenarius hadn’t reacted outwardly, but there had been a knowing, slightly amused tinge to his magic that made both Dalah and himself even more tense.

Things weren’t going very well, to say the least.
He couldn’t blame Dalah for any of it, though. Not when it was spelled out so plainly for all to see how Cenarius simply *would not* teach him. *Him.* Because he did not understand *sacrifice.* And how, precisely, did *Malfurion,* his twin, know sacrifice better than Illidan? They, who had suffered the *same,* been together more than they’d been apart? How had Malfurion learned this mysterious *lesson* where Illidan had failed?

Cenarius, like so many of his elven brethren, had looked at Illidan and recoiled from his magic. From his *sorcery.*

Illidan shuddered to think what the reaction might have been if he’d still been reaching out to all and sundry with magic, longing for acceptance. What would the rejection of a being like Cenarius have done to him, when simple rebuffing from his brother all but crippled him?

Illidan stood back and watched as Cenarius agreed to take on Malfurion—and only Malfurion—as a student. To teach him how to be a *druid.* Watched perfect Malfurion succeed, yet again, at something Illidan simply *could not do.* Watched Tyrande watch him, with pride and affection and something that looked a little like love, and felt a vice close around his chest.

He wasn’t… *in love* with Tyrande. He wasn’t sure he even knew what that emotion felt like. But he’d thought there might have been… something, someday. They were close, he’d thought. Friends. Maybe more than friends. She’d never shied from his physical touches (for all that her magic treated his like a plague), and there’d always been a ready smile for him whenever she lay eyes upon him.

He remembered long nights under the moon, listening to Tyrande wax poetic about Elune, not especially caring but *riveted* because it was *Tyrande* talking, and her voice had sounded so excited, so rapturous, that he’d found himself thinking *maybe I should be a little more pious,* myself.

He remembered swift, fleeting touches to his arm to get his attention, light purple skin flushing darker when he grinned at something she’d said. He remembered racing through the woods around Suramar as they learned to hunt, the three of them, laughing and pushing each other around and being *happy.*

(Even as his magic curled in on itself in misery, one too many rejections teaching it that it was better to suffer in silence than reach out again.)

Illidan had thought that, maybe, the affection he felt for Tyrande might be returned. That perhaps the pain in his chest when he looked at her, the almost-ache when she laughed, might have been what love was.

But as he looked at her, watching his brother with the same expression he’d often worn himself…

Illidan turned away and started walking. No one stopped him.

He didn’t look back as he lifted one arm, hearing the wingbeats that followed as Dalah swerved out of a nearby tree to alight on his outstretched limb, her magic reaching out to brush feathers across his soul and warm him from the inside out. Just having her nearby eased the ache in his chest, let his breathing slow, and Illidan found it within himself to muster up a smile.

So he’d never be a druid. *So what.* So what if Tyrande preferred his twin brother? (Why hadn’t she picked *him?* It couldn’t be their looks, they were *twins.* Was there some flaw in him that made people shy away? Was there something *broken* in him that they could somehow sense like a rotten smell?) So what if Cenarius, a *demigod,* proclaimed him *too arrogant* to learn from him?

“To walk this path requires sacrifice, Illidan. Something… you have yet to understand.”

There were other teachers. Better suited ones, teachers who wouldn’t push him away or look at the
Stormrage twins and go yes, this brother is superior.

He had a destiny out there, somewhere. The gold in his eyes confirmed it. He was meant for greater things than this, than druidism. Let Malfurion have his teacher. Let Tyrande have his perfect brother.

Illidan had Dalah, and he had his magic.

He needed nothing else.

(Illidan had always been a spectacular liar.)

Ravencrest was good for Illidan. Irae might not entirely approve of the way history seemed to be repeating itself, but there was no doubting how good it was for Illidan to have someone who wasn’t a bird approve of what he could do. Someone to praise his efforts and reward sacrifices and not shy away from his magic.

Illidan didn’t reach, not anymore, but that didn’t mean his presence was any less intense to those with the sensitivity to feel it. Kur’talos was one of those. The man had felt the massive, immense weight of Illidan’s magic and hadn’t recoiled, hadn’t lashed out or shied away. Kur’talos was no mage, and lacked the training required to manipulate his own aura, but he was experienced enough to know power when he saw it.

And if there was one thing Illidan was, it was powerful.

Irae dutifully obeyed orders from Illidan, scouted enemy movements and let him piggyback on her magic to look out of her eyes and relay positions to his current master. She used her years of adventuring and dungeon-diving to pick out ambushes and warned Illidan of them, proving her usefulness time and time again, until not a single member of Ravencrest’s army questioned her presence on Illidan’s shoulder.

“I never would have thought to use a familiar as an anchor,” one of his fellow mages remarked one day during a lull. Illidan made an affirmative humming sound even as his magic roiled in confusion. “How many do you burn through a year?”

“There has only ever been Dalah,” Illidan replied, frigid. “There will only ever be Dalah.”

The mage blinked rapidly several times, looking back and forth between Irae and Illidan. Irae smothered her amusement. Illidan had no idea how unlikely this looked from the outside. These mages he worked with would be able to sense the way Illidan had hooked his magic into her, and the lack of any other connections beyond that. They’d be able to feel how heavy that weight was, and would marvel at the callous ingenuity of dropping it all on a simple, disposable animal.

“How do you keep it alive?” she asked, fascinated.

Irae could feel the way Illidan’s magic was curling in like a whip, ready to crack out at the slightest provocation. He did not like being questioned, especially not when the question wasn’t one he knew the answer to. For all his power and magical might, Illidan was still not formally trained. No one had taught him about anchors or connections. He might subconsciously know what he was doing was dangerous, but it would never occur to him to try and reach out for anyone again. Not after the
damage done in his childhood by ignorant would-be druids.

“Dalas is special,” was all Illidan would say in response. Irae turned her attention to the curious mage and fixed kaldorei-silver eyes on her until she shuddered in unease and quickly excused herself. It didn’t take a very large leap of the imagination to put two and two together; druid forms were not meant to mimic animals so closely that they were indistinguishable, and by now some of Cenarius’s teachings had spread enough that the idea of elves turning into animals wasn’t entirely farfetched.

Only Illidan, who’d known Irae since before druids were a thing, thought differently.

That night, however, Illidan pulled her to him and his magic sparked anxiously in the air without touching her. He was holding back from connecting, trying to anchor it to nothing at all.

“That mage thought I would kill you,” he confessed quietly, sounding confused and worried and more than a little angry.

Strong, Irae sent back encouragingly, reaching out and pulling his magic forcibly to her when he resisted. He buckled easily, and she enfolded him in her wings soothingly. After all this time she barely felt the strain of holding all that power alone. She’d officially been living with Illidan longer than she’d been alive in the future-that-wasn’t, and wasn’t that a kick?

Illidan spent a while preening her feathers—after so many years he’d learned just how she liked it—as he was lost in thought. “If I ever threaten you…” he began haltingly, searching for words. His magic roiled like a storm. “If I… if my magic ever hurts you, you’ll… you’ll leave, won’t you?” It sounded like he was asking for reassurance, for her to assure him that she’d leave before he let him hurt her.

His magic, though, felt dark and heavy and somber.

You’ll leave, won’t you, his magic said. Like all the others.

Irae looked up at him, at this elf she’d lived over a century with, the one she’d watched grow up from a gangly elfling into the tall, handsome male he was. She looked at him, and tasted his fear and uncertainty and the sheer loss already surrounding him, as if she’d already flitted her tailfeathers at him and left.

Illidan was a genius, a magical prodigy, but he had a sense of self-worth that was utterly abysmal. Here she was, for all intents and purposes a bird, and Illidan was crushed at the idea that this wild animal might leave him if he hurts her. To be fair, an ordinary bird would leave if he hurt her somehow with his magic.

An ordinary bird would have abandoned him decades ago.

There was really only one thing Irae could do to prove to him that she was strong enough to hold up his magic, that she was more than her instincts, that she trusted him with all of herself in a way she hadn’t for anyone else in her life.

She pulled her own magic up, and for the first time in his presence, she shifted.

Feathers melted away to thick black fur, talons reshaped into hooked claws, as an immense saber lounged upon him like a throne. Illidan yelped and leaned back, flailing a little, at the sudden materialization of a huge cat in his lap where before there had been a bird of prey. Her magic cracked and shifted with her, going from feathers and wings to fangs and fur, but she wrapped him up in it all the same. She rubbed her face over his chest, up to his head where she licked a wet stripe up his jaw
and began purring like a gnomish war machine. In this form, his magic was more manageable; the agility of her cat form was better suited to holding power than her fragile flight form. If she pulled on her bear skin, she might not feel the weight at all.

*I am strong,* her magic insisted, backed by the rolling growl of a great hunting cat. *I am yours. I will not be moved.*

She couldn’t leave him now if she honestly tried. Their magic was so intertwined that to leave now, to sever that bond, would likely kill them both with the backlash.

Slowly, Illidan reached up and set a hand on her head, rubbing behind her ear. She purred louder, pushing into his space until he fell to his back, laughing in disbelief.

“I knew you were more than a bird,” he confessed, still laughing. “But this. Dalah…” *You are a druid,* his magic admitted where his mouth could not. He recognized the shape of the spell she’d used, the turn her magic had taken.

*You are kaldorei,* he felt but did not say.

“You are Dalah,” he finally decided, heaving himself up and leaning over to press his forehead to hers. She closed her eyes, still a bright kaldorei silver, and kept purring.

The demons were *endless.* Illidan whipped around and bathed a group of felhounds in fire, unable to take the time to appreciate their howls of agony, even as Dalah wheeled overhead like a star, barking out locations of portals and the status of Malfurion over their bond as she went. As high up as she was, most of the initial wave of demons hadn’t even noticed her. That had changed when the first demon caster—hooved and red-skinned with tentacles on its face—had emerged from a portal, looked directly at Illidan and seemingly followed his magic up to Dalah with laughable ease.

She’d been dodging felfire ever since, weaving out of the path of spells and projectiles and tangling with the corrupted bat creatures the demons had brought with them. Illidan almost wanted to call her to ground, to have her take on her more combat-suited nightsaber form, but she was just too valuable as a scout to do so. Without her they’d have no eye on the enemy movements, or any reliable way to track where portals were opening around them on this hellscape.

“There’s no *end* to them!” Malfurion was roaring. Illidan could only spare half his attention for his brother’s ranting, too busy shoving back a pile of sentient rock and flame away with a blast of power.

He had barely recognized his brother when Malfurion had shown up at Black Rook Hold, spouting warnings about demons invading and portals opening and Queen Azshara’s betrayal. His magic was completely different, wilder and looser and there had been *feathers* growing out of his *arms.* Illidan liked Dalah, loved her as much as someone like him could love, but that didn’t mean he wanted to look like her.

*Was that what happened to powerful druids? Would he grow antlers next?* Illidan wondered somewhat wildly, casting fire and frost and lightning and shoving power out in massive shockwaves whenever something got too close. Somewhere far above, he could feel Dalah laughing at him.
And to make matters even more complicated, the red-skinned demon caster had been reaching for Illidan’s magic ever since he’d emerged. The creature’s magic was awful, twisted and sharp and jagged and fel, but it was also completely self-reliant. It was pure in a way the kaldorei’s nature-tainted magic, or even his own Highborne magic, simply wasn’t. That demon could cast forever, no matter what was destroyed or what attacked him. It wasn’t reliant on a Well or on a goddess or anchors or on the whims of nature.

Illidan wanted that. He wanted the security of knowing that he would never be defenseless, that no one could take his magic—his very soul—from him against his will. It was only Dalah, who wheeled between he and the demon any time it reached for him, screaming her denial at the red-skinned beast and feathers of magic turning razor-sharp betwixt them that kept him from reaching back.

Dalah had never steered him wrong. If she thought reaching for the demon would be a terrible idea, then it likely was. To be truthful, she had a point. The middle of a life-or-death battle was not the right time to be making connections with the enemy. Illidan shook off the thoughts that had overcome him like cobwebs, and turned his full focus back on the fight at hand.

He could speak to Dalah about his thoughts later, at length, when they were safe. She would understand. She was older than he was, and more knowledgeable about his own magic than anyone he’d met. Now that he knew she wasn’t just a bird, but a druid who was somehow a druid before druids even existed, he felt far more comfortable relying on her. He could put more weight of his magic on her shoulders, no longer fearing that he might crush her into pieces beneath it.

When she’d showed him her saber form, he could feel the lightening of his magic on her bones. She could hold everything he gave her. He needed no other anchors, no matter what his fellow mages told him.

“We must fall back!” Malfurion shouted, sounding enraged and afraid. Illidan began retreating, bathing the air in front of him with fire to keep the demons back. Somewhere to his left a kaldorei took a blade to the throat and fell, choking on blood, to the dirt. He was trampled by some kind of monstrous hellbeast immediately, and Illidan didn’t have a thought to spare for mourning him.

Come, he sent up to Dalah with a whipcrack of magic. She whirled immediately, locking her wings in a dive straight for him, easily hitting his arm when he lifted it and mantling her wings, all but hissing at the closest demon. With Dalah on his arm, Illidan ran much quicker to catch up to Malfurion and the dragons that had entered the battle with him.

As Cenarius lifted his arms and began transporting them off that killing field, Illidan locked eyes with his brother and saw the despair hidden there. Malfurion truly did not think this was a war they could win. It shook him, a little, to see his brother in such misery. Malfurion had always seemed so unshakable, so certain in his destiny, that to see it undermined…

Dalah curled her talons into his arm, pulling him out of his thoughts in time to hear Malfurion say something completely ridiculous.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” he asked, mind reeling. Surely he’d misheard. Surely—

“We must destroy the Well of Eternity,” Malfurion sighed. And, yes, Illidan had been afraid of that.

“Are you mad?” he demanded, but Malfurion went on as if he had not heard him.

“If we can destroy the Well, the portal the demons are using to invade will have nothing to power it,” Malfurion insisted, sounding grave. “It will close, and we can stop them at the source. Look around you, Illidan! Look at what they’ve done already, so soon after they first emerged from that other
world!

Begrudgingly, Illidan did glance around and felt his ears lowering in disbelief at the cracking, crumbling ruin Cenarius had brought them to. *This* was supposed to be a safe place? Why hadn’t the demigod brought them to Suramar, or literally *anywhere else?*

“We can’t just destroy the Well,” Illidan pushed on, turning away from the ruined landscape and back to his delusional twin. “In case you’ve somehow forgotten, the kaldorei *need* that Well. We would die without it.” The Well had long been theorized to be the source of the elves’ immortality. Not to mention it was where they *drew their magic from.* Illidan could not, *would not,* give up his magic just to stop a couple of monsters from using a portal. There had to be another way to close it that wasn’t so *final.*

He could read in Malfurion’s face that his mind was made up. There would be no swaying him from this fool’s act. “Sometimes… sometimes sacrifices have to be made,” his brother said, placating, even as he was turning away to discuss something with his mentor.

Illidan reined in the magic that wanted to lash out, to let itself be known, to shout to the heavens that *you will not take my power from me,* and turned to walk away.

That was becoming a bit of a theme with Malfurion, he recognized.

If Malfurion thought the only way to close the portal was to destroy the Well, then Illidan would just have to prove him wrong. He’d find a way. He’d grow strong enough to close it on his own if he had to.

Dalahl curled her talons lightly into his arm again, peering at him out of the corner of her eye, and Illidan easily acceded to her prodding.

*Not alone,* his magic whispered.

*Not alone,* Dalahl agreed. Never again.

Irae had fought the Legion, before. She’d been hip-deep in demon corpses, shouldering aside bones and felhide as she roared defiance at some distant, unseen enemy. But she’d never fought the Legion like *this.*

Black Rook Hold was lost. She could see it, feel it, and although she’d shared what she could see with Illidan, he was stubborn in the belief that the day could still be won. *Somehow.* Demons poured out of portals by the hundreds. For every dozen Illidan put down with a flash of spellfire, thirty more took their place. His Moon Guard were flagging, and Irae could feel his magic trembling on the edge of shock as he began to see that this was simply not a fight they could *win.*

She’d accompanied him on dozens of battles against the demons prior to this. She’d seen the razed villages, the slaughtered innocents, the ravaged remains of the corpse of her world. She’d seen children ripped open and half-eaten, women raped and ripped apart over the bodies of the men who’d died protecting them. Temples desecrated, forests burned, magic corrupted.

She’d fought the Legion before, but it had never been *personal.*
It was now.

Irae ducked low and took a swipe at a felguard who’d gotten inside Illidan’s guard, clawing out eyes and sending the beast howling back as it swung wildly towards where she’d been moments before. Illidan tugged on her magic and she gave him everything she could spare, as she always did, seeing more than feeling the Moon Guard flagging with her as he ripped all he could out of them, infinitely less gentle with his subordinates than he was with her.

It wasn’t enough. Illidan could rip apart this army in moments if he had enough magic, but he simply didn’t. Even if Irae gave him every scrap of mana she had it still would not be enough.

She knew how this battle would go. She landed heavily on Illidan’s armored shoulder and turned her head towards the exhausted Moon Guard, bracing themselves on staves and spears. She’d fought beside them for months. She knew their names, the names of their families, which ones had mates and children waiting for them to come home.

Her Illidan was not the same man she’d once watched wage this war, all those years and lifetimes ago in the future-that-wasn’t. He would never reach the conclusion he needed, not anymore, and not on his own. Irae kept her eyes on the Moon Guard, wanting to scream out in sorrow and anger but not wearing a body that allowed it.

Fate would always get its due, in the end.

The next time Illidan’s magic reached for her, desperate, she redirected it towards the exhausted Moon Guard. He didn’t stop fighting, but his magic pinged a query that was so reminiscent of his youth that she almost started crying.

Like this, she told his magic, hooking her own onto the scraps of a Moon Guard she refused to think the name of and ripping it free. The guard died screaming as his soul collapsed without his magic there to fuel it, and Irae shoved the overflow into Illidan without daring to think too hard about what she’d just done.

Souls, after all, were a great deal more potent than the magic that pulsed from them.

Illidan, locked in battle, barely batted an eye at this new tactic. His magic, vicious and wild and heavy, followed her lead. The rest of the Moon Guard hit the ground with simultaneous thuds, without even time to scream, and Illidan wiped out the three demon battalions nearest to him with a single blast of the arcane.

Five kaldorei lives for the deaths of over two hundred demons.

Irae closed her eyes briefly, feeling the way Illidan’s magic had shifted, eager and renewed at this evidence of success, and the next time he was backed into a corner he didn’t even hesitate.

To walk this path requires sacrifice, she recalled Cenarius saying. She shoved herself off of Illidan’s shoulder and hit the ground on four paws, baring massive fangs and snarling a challenge. She leapt into the nearest group of demons and began tearing out throats and disemboweling anything that got too close.

She’d seen what the Legion would do if left unchecked. Both here, and in the future-that-wasn’t. In the wake of that, what were the lives of a few kaldorei, really? Better to sacrifice a dozen here so that later, thousands might live.

Irae clung to this thought, ignoring the blur in her eyes as she fought with claws and fangs, and prayed to Elune to forgive her.
Predictably, Elune did not answer.
Gameshark, Part 2 (Prototype x Gamer x Naruto AU)

Chapter Summary

He heaved a silent, rattling sigh through his teeth. There was nothing for it. He couldn’t take any chances with it escaping, and he still wasn’t ready for a full-out fight. The risk of it getting away and being sealed by the humans on his tail was too high. No, he’d have to save the fun fight for the nine-tails. He was so close he could taste it.

So despite how much it felt like cheating (as if anything he did could be considered fair anymore), he stepped off the cliff and—for the second time—called on Yig.

His eyes opened. All six thousand seven-hundred and thirty-four of them.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Character Deaths (it's Alex, what did you expect?)

"Canon? What's that? Can you eat it?" - Alex, At Some Point, Probably

Wherein I decide that lightspeed is too slow, and go right to ludicrous speed.

Disgruntled, Alex studied the wooden fragments Senju had turned into upon death. They still smelled like the man, and had his energy clinging to them. Curiously, he picked one up and put it in his mouth. Unsurprisingly, it tasted like bark.

Surprisingly, Soulhunter latched onto the energy in the bark and drank it down like wine. Alex watched as his Chakra meter ticked up by 1 out of the corner of his eye, and a pop-up briefly covered his field of vision.

[Quest: The Root of the Problem]

Assimilate 200 units of the Shodai’s chakra. [1/200]

Success: ?, ?, ?

[1/200] Units of Mokuton Chakra Assimilated!

Alex considered that. He’d never really thought that ‘chakra’ might be the soul-equivalent in this reality. If that was so, it made a lot more sense that Soulhunter was so effective against the tailed beasts. He idly drew another piece of wood fragment to his mask and swallowed it. His chakra meter ticked up by another unit of 1, and the pop-up window updated itself automatically to [2/200].

He looked around him at the huge outcropping of trees that hadn’t existed until about five minutes ago, every branch and twig full of ‘Mokuton Chakra,’ and grinned.
If Blackwatch could see me now, Alex mused as he bit through a thick branch with fangs like blades. Gnawing on trees.

Fortunately there was no one alive to witness this, or else he might have had to get creative with his deterrents. He’d quickly noticed that there was far more than ‘200 units’ worth of chakra here to consume. Alex was curious as to what would happen if he just… didn’t stop? If he consumed all of it, instead of the fraction that the quest demanded… would he be rewarded?

And would that reward be worth the indignity of eating trees?

Alex thought it might be. So far the Spectator had been beyond generous with this reward system, and Alex doubted the number 200 was arbitrary. It might be a test of resolve. Chewing on bark wasn’t exactly something he enjoyed doing; the taste of the chakra itself was not all that different from chewing on leaves, which meant he’d physically eaten the equivalent of several bushes just because some glowing red words told him to.

200 units seemed like a pretty small amount when one considered the veritable copse of trees left behind from their scuffle, but that still meant he had to eat or bite two hundred trees. The fragments of the human’s clone(?) had netted him 65 units on its own, but after that he had to go around eating the actual trees instead. And he couldn’t just cheat and eat the leaves—he had to consume the entire tree before they gave him any chakra. The trees gave him anywhere from 10 to 50 units each, though, which was nice.

At the rate he was going, he would reach 200 units after the next tree. Which made him think about whether or not he should stop. He didn’t know what this quest was going to give him, or why it required such a specific number of units (what constituted a unit of chakra anyway? With a chakra pool measuring in the tens of thousands, the tiny increase these wood fragments were giving him was laughable).

But, well. He supposed there was no way to find out but to simply do. He’d be burning with curiosity if he let this chance slide, so when he bit down on the final part of the next tree and saw the notification appear out of the corner of his eye he… just kept going.

[201/200] Units of Mokuton Chakra Assimilated!

Huh. He didn’t get a ‘quest complete’ notification, which meant the Spectator had either heard his thoughts or sensed his decision. He likely wouldn’t get one until he actually stopped eating, which doubled his determination to simply devour the whole forest. That the quest was actually letting him go on without just completing automatically was a good sign. It meant this was not a game-breaking sort of idea, and was something the Spectator had compensated for when the quest had started.

Alex firmed his resolved, and moved to the next tree.

With a sort of hysterical triumph, Alex bit down on the last fragment of the final tree with a sharp crack. With the sort of immediate gratification that let Alex know the Spectator was paying him very
close attention, his vision was awash in red.

[Quest: The Root of the Problem] Complete!

Rewards: Ability: Mokuton, +5000 Chakra, Title: Forest Lord

Mokuton: Allows the creation and manipulation of trees for various purposes. Constructs have a base END stat of 3000 that can be increased by channeling chakra into them.

Forest Lord: You possess near god-like control over plant life, and can directly manipulate anything that falls under the category of “flora” down to the genetic level. You have total sensory perception of everything touching a plant within five kilometers of you.

[Hidden Quest: No Kill Like Overkill] Complete!

Devour Senju’s entire Mokuton forest.

Rewards: Fragment of Yggdrasil, Perk: Habitual Herbivore

Habitual Herbivore: Your connection to Mokuton Chakra has given you an increased understanding of the biological makeup of plants. You can now consume plant matter and absorb traits, energy, and life-force from flora. Traits absorbed from plants can now be incorporated into your Armor.

Alex eyeballed the ‘rewards,’ a little disappointed that nothing extremely world-shattering had come of him eating a damn forest. Well, at least Mokuton was pretty strong. An END rate of 3000 as a base was nothing to sneeze at, and if chakra worked at a 1:1 ratio, that meant he had 35,000 potential points he could add to the END score of his constructs. That would, effectively, allow him to create literally impenetrable tree fortresses. Hell, if Mokuton persisted (like the existence of that forest hinted it might), that meant he could create entire cities made out of unbreakable wood. He could think of worse rewards.

That title was going to be helpful when he was somewhere with more trees in it, he could feel it. His Minimap already let him know everything within a kilometer of him, but ‘total sensory perception’ within five kilometers… fuck, if he could find somewhere with grass he’d be beyond untouchable.

The perk was kind of… weird, though. He’d just spent hours eating a forest, and now it gives him a perk letting him, what, eat trees? What kind of traits could he really absorb from plants to make that perk the reward of a hidden quest?

He peered into his inventory at the ‘fragment of Yggdrasil’ the quest had given him, and Observed it curiously.

Fragment of Yggdrasil

Consumable [Habitual Herbivore]
A tiny cutting of the World Tree.

Gives: ?, ?, ?

Alex would have raised his brows if his current form had any. Well, that explained the perk. Without it that might as well have been a piece of bark for all the good it’d have done him. But now it was ‘consumable,’ and didn’t list what it’d give him when he ate it. Normally that kind of thing was only hidden for quests he hadn’t completed yet, which was very curious. Intrigued, Alex put the fragment in his mouth since his feeder tendrils didn’t seem to be on board yet with the whole ‘consuming plants’ thing.


[Fragment of Yggdrasil Consumed!]

[1/10]

+1000 Status Points

Title: The Prototype upgraded to Title: Fleshcrafter!

Skill: Blindstep upgraded to Skill: Planeswalking!

Fleshcrafter: Your unparalleled understanding and control of organic biology has long since transcended mortal limits. You can create, shape and manipulate everything and anything organic, both organisms and organic matter. You can create, manipulate, shape, transform, heal and/or destroy everything that lives, has lived or comes from either of the above.

Planeswalking: Allows travel to other planes of existence, myriads of different realities all simultaneously coexisting within the same expanded cosmology.

[Quest: Tree of Life]

Consume all ten fragments of the World Tree scattered throughout the multiverse.

Rewards: ?

Progress: [1/10]

Alex just stared, speechless, in reply.

Because really—what was there to say?

It took Alex approximately forty-three seconds to realize how absolutely fucking bullshit Planeswalking was. If he split his attention enough times, he could use it in conjunction with the Black Huntsman and apparition to effectively teleport at will. Which meant it took him half a human heartbeat to lock onto the four-tail’s location and simply appear there instead of actually running across the entire continent.
That Habitual Herbivore perk was actually pretty badass, since it let him turn his Armor into a Mokuton shell. He’d dumped 20,000 units of chakra into it (since he wasn’t using it for anything else), and now had a base END stat of 30,800. At this point, nuclear warheads might as well be paper airplanes. He couldn’t fucking wait to see the look on the Yonbi’s face when it tries to attack him with an END stat that fucking high.

And speaking of the Yonbi…

**Son Goku, Handsome Monkey King**

*Title(s): The Yonbi*

**STR:** 8000

**DEX:** 8000

**END:** 8000

Another fucking doghouse. Alex was really curious who was building those for these things, and what his stats had to be like if he was treating them like pets. Normally, he’d take a few moments to consider his plan of attack when approaching something with stats like that. He was under a bit of a time-crunch though; Senju had obviously escaped him earlier, and since the man wasn’t a fucking idiot he was probably going to sprint back to mommy and tell all his friends about being attacked on the beach. It was safer to assume that he and everyone he knew had stats just as bullshit as his own, and just crash through as many tailed beasts as he could before they caught up to him.

With that in mind, there wasn’t time for a drag-out deathmatch like he sort of wanted. He’d save that for the nine-tails, since at that point he’d be way too fucking powerful for any human on this planet to threaten him even en mass.

The Yonbi was physical in a way the Ichibi and Nibi hadn’t been, but it was also flame-natured in a way that would make his new go-to method of *burn it with fire* kind of redundant. Sand control wouldn’t help either – they were in a rocky region somewhere, and the only sand he’d have access to here was the stuff stuck in the grooves of his Armor.

The way he’d taken out the Nibi was probably his best bet. The Yonbi wasn’t sleeping, but even hypervigilant giant monkeys could be ambushed when you were running on bullshit gamer powers.

He crept as close as he could manage under Jumpscare Champion, and carefully pulled *Soulhunter* into his claws again. He double-checked that the Mokuton shell he’d layered over his Armor was still holding strong, and waited for an opportune moment to strike.

*There.* The Yonbi blinked, and in that millisecond of inattention, Alex struck.

His voidclaws cleaved through the Yonbi’s throat before the monkey had a chance to do more than jerk in surprise, but its reaction time was vastly superior to the Nibi’s and it struck back before Alex could even complete the follow-through.

Chaos. The world *bucked* as a volcano abruptly tore itself into being around them, spewing molten lava in all directions as the Yonbi simultaneously planted a massive fist in Alex’s center mass, all within the span of half a human heartbeat.

The Yonbi’s bones *crunched* when they came into contact with Alex’s absolutely bullshit 30,800 END score in the Armor, making it howl in disbelieving rage as it leaped back to start spitting lava at
him. Alex pressed the attack, pushing his speed to its limit to harry the Yonbi around the volcanic arena suddenly in existence around them, ignoring the heat just like his opponent was. The Nibi’s Fire Manipulation didn’t let him jerk control of the lava away from the Yonbi, but it did let him mostly ignore any damage it tried to do to him.

To the beast’s credit, it was faster than him even when he pushed it. To its detriment, it was three times as prideful. It didn’t even try to disengage, simply lashing out where it could and pounding uselessly away at his Mokuton shell as Alex chipped at its soul with his voidclaws. Interestingly, Alex noticed his chakra meter ticking up incrementally every time the Yonbi touched his armor, which had fascinating implications for how Mokuton would react to biju chakra, but that was something he’d have to focus on later.

It was a battle of attrition the Yonbi simply couldn’t win, not with Alex cheating with Mokuton. Eventually he got in one final strike, and ripped the Yonbi’s soul from its body as it bellowed in agony. Cracks formed all along its body before it simply exploded, showering the area in cooling, molten rock.

Alex slid to a stop amidst the still-erupting volcanic activity around him, and let himself appreciate how utterly fun it was to go all-out against things that didn’t simply die if he breathed on them funny.

On cue, his vision was flooded with the familiar, beloved red.

[Enemy Consumed!]

+10 Status Points

Skillset: Yonbi Added!

Gene Sample: Yonbi Added!

[Skillset: Yonbi]

+8000 STR
+8000 DEX
+8000 END

Ability: Lava Release Unlocked

Ability: Taijutsu Unlocked

Lava Release: Allows the generation and manipulation of lava, and the creation of volcanos.

Taijutsu: A series of body techniques that involve martial arts or the optimization of natural human abilities.

Gene Sample: Yonbi
Consumable

*The genetic blueprint of the Yonbi.*

Gives: Lava Armor, Enhanced Strength, Enhanced Speed, Enhanced Reflexes, Monkey Physiology

[Tailed Beast Consumed 4/9!]

+100 Status Points

**Perk: Chakra Beast Increased to Rank 4!**

Nothing ground-breaking there, except for those sweet, sweet stats. He marshalled his will and crushed the volcano into inactivity, smothering it and forcing the lava around him to harden and cool into solid stone. He peered curiously at the cooling rock around him, and experimentally fiddled with the Earth and Fire Releases that allowed him to control lava. He had some nice ideas for increasing his intimidation factor, if he could only find a way to treat his Armor like a bit of earth chakra…

There.

He could feel the tiny streams of lava carving down the skull of his helmet from his eye sockets like molten tears, settling in the grooves of his face and harmlessly (to him) pooling there. As an added bit of whimsy, he made some channels in his Mokuton shell to let the lava move around under it like veins. It’d be so fun to pretend to have lava for blood if anyone managed to damage him enough to crack the shell.

With a wide, sharp grin that had molten drool dripping from his teeth, Alex set The Black Huntsman to tracking down the next beast on his list and vanished in a warp of Planeswalking.

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He took down the beasts like clockwork. With his unparalleled ability to simply teleport at will to places his tracking led him, he could carve through the beasts faster than his pursuers (who he had only caught glimpses of twice) could even travel. Hell, at the speed he could move even without Planeswalking, he could cross the continent twice over before the humans chasing him had gone a mile.

He was moving faster than word could spread about what he was doing, too, which avoided any problems like someone sealing something before he could get to them. The Gobi, Rokubi, and Nanabi fell to him before they even really registered he was there. The collateral damage he was accruing as the beasts flailed at him in reflexive alarm was growing, leaving larger and larger spheres of destruction around their once-pristine temples.

They had put up much less of a fight than the Yonbi, even combined, which he found quietly disappointing. The only interesting thing they even netted him (beyond the fucking 112,000 point stat increases, that is) was his first bit of Water Manipulation, even if it was mostly centered around turning liquids corrosive.
At this point Alex wasn’t even bothering with Planeswalking. He moved fast enough that it would only save him a few seconds of travel, and moving that fast was great training for his reflexes to keep up with his new capabilities. He was so fucking thankful that the tailed beasts’ innate control of their strength passed on to him when he consumed them, because it seriously cut down on the amount of time it took him to acclimate to not simply destroying everything he touched.

He actually found it kind of depressing to look at his stats now. His INT, CHA, and LUK scores were absolutely abysmal compared to his physical abilities, which was making him feel kind of… lopsided. He’d make a point to go around and liberate those bullshit humans of their stats once he was done here to make himself feel better.

With that in mind, Alex let himself fall into a much less-conspicuous speed to approach where The Black Huntsman had led him towards the eight-tails, ready to continue his win streak.

And then paused.

**Gyuki, The Giant Ox**

**Title(s):** The Hachibi

**STR:** 128,000

**DEX:** 128,000

**END:** 128,000

**INT:** 1,000

The Hachibi was intelligent. Alex crouched up on a rocky cliff above the oblivious eight-tails, incredulous with bafflement. This was the first tailed beast to have an INT stat, which set it apart from its seven predecessors, and this had Alex extraordinarily wary. Even if it was something comparatively low (considering its other visible stats), it was still 800 points higher than him, and almost 400 higher than Senju.

How should he approach this? If it was intelligent to that degree, he doubted dropping down from above and ambushing it would be nearly as effective as it had been against the others. Hell, Senju hadn’t been that smart and he’d managed to bail in the middle of their fucking fight without Alex noticing.

He shuffled through his available abilities and skillsets, but didn’t find anything that would give him an obvious edge. Pretty much all of his skills were physical-based in some way, except for magic. If the killing curse hadn’t done much against the Ichibi, he highly doubted it would be any more useful here.

He heaved a silent, rattling sigh through his teeth. There was nothing for it. He couldn’t take any chances with it escaping, and he still wasn’t ready for a full-out fight. The risk of it getting away and being sealed by the humans on his tail was too high. No, he’d have to save the fun fight for the nine-tails. He was so close he could taste it.

So despite how much it felt like cheating (as if anything he did could be considered fair anymore), he stepped off the cliff and—for the second time—called on Yig.

His eyes opened. All six thousand seven-hundred and thirty-four of them
He came to a gentle stop, casually ignoring things like gravity and physics, and roiled in the air like a snake in the water. Jumpscare Champion was still active, he noticed dimly as he unfolded his impossibly-long limbs and the hooked voidtalons on the ends of them. His joints didn’t crack, his teeth didn’t chatter, because those were things you needed bones to accomplish and he didn’t have those. He barely even existed in the context of reality. He was only even visible in this dimension because he wanted to be.

He drifted gently down to rest in front of the oblivious eight-tails, bracing on four of his arms and delicately raising the remaining two to hover on either side of its head. His skull warped into a wide, fanged grin, bone moving like flesh, and let Jumpscare Champion fail.

The Hachibi froze, staring at his grinning skull, and Alex let himself unfold into a few extra dimensions, warping into fractals and angles that were physically and literally impossible. While the Hachibi began to seize up as it attempted to comprehend the incomprehensible, Alex whipped his poised hands together in a *clap* that popped the eight-tails’s head like a grape.

The corpse dropped, dissolving into ink that seeped into the ground even as its soul was dragged into Alex’s Yig body almost without his input. He carefully dismissed Yig, letting his scales flake off in sparks of negative color until he could hit the ground on his knees, drained but wildly triumphant.

[Enemy Consumed!]

+10 Status Points

**Skillset:** *Hachibi Added!*

**Gene Sample:** *Hachibi Added!*

**[Skillset: Hachibi]**

+128000 STR
+128000 DEX
+128000 END
+1000 INT

**Ability:** Ink Generation Unlocked

**Ink Generation:** *Allows the creation and generation of ink and animate ink clones.*

**Gene Sample:** *Hachibi*

**Consumable**

*The genetic blueprint of the Hachibi.*

**Gives:** Ink Armor, Enhanced Strength, Enhanced Speed, Enhanced Reflexes, Ushi-oni Physiology
Alex took a moment to just let his eyes close and basked in that fucking stat increase. He rose up and let his Armor pull back over his body, more comfortable in it than without it now, and took a careful, satisfied breath. Lazy eyes peeled open on his shoulders and back, swiveling to face the group of humans he’d been tracking since he’d dropped into Yig. He doubted they’d seen anything really incriminating—when he’d flipped into multiple dimensions earlier, that would have simply erased the minds of anything less than a tailed beast that set eyes on him.

He recognized Senju out front, tense and visibly uneasy, but not his companions. Alex turned his head to face them, enjoying their reactions to the sight of his ‘improvements’ more than he’d expected, and let Observe click on.

**Senju Hashirama**

**Title(s):** The God of Shinobi, Shodai Hokage

**STR:** 4987  
**DEX:** 5013  
**END:** 4365  
**INT:** 651  
**CHA:** 905  
**LUK:** 350

**Uchiha Madara**

**Title(s):** Second Six Paths

**STR:** 5023  
**DEX:** 4997  
**END:** 4218  
**INT:** 664  
**CHA:** 354  
**LUK:** 132
Alex mostly skipped over the other humans that were crowded around—they were nowhere near as impressive, even though they all had stats in the upper hundreds. Alex felt none of the trepidation he’d held for this confrontation even hours before. As he was now, these humans had literally no chance to defeat him no matter what they did. He wondered how many of those stats would transfer when he consumed them? He wouldn’t get them all—that had only ever happened for the tailed beasts—but even just the CHA increases alone would be worth it.

He wondered with idle amusement if Senju would try the root trick on him again. It would be funny to see him try.

Hashirama felt his heart sink into his sandals as the monster turned to look at them. If he’d needed confirmation that the swaths of destruction they’d run into at each of the temples where the biju should have been were its work, well… one look at the molten cracks running down its skull like tears would have cinched it. Oddly, the area directly around them where the eight-tails should have been seemed pristine. The temple didn’t even have any dust on it.

“What have you done with the biju, creature?” Tobirama demanded. Hashirama had filled them both in on his own suspicions, but there was no harm in getting clarification outright. Even if he would have picked a much less accusatory tone himself.

Instead of answering them, the creature simply tossed its horned head and snorted steam in their direction. “You are not the challenge I seek, but who am I to turn away prey when it comes to me so willingly?” Its voice was a deep, rolling growl, echoing into timbres he’d only ever heard on the tailed beasts themselves. The implications—and confirmation—were not reassuring.

“You want a challenge?” Madara goaded, readying his gunbai. Hashirama took that as his cue to begin seeding the rocky ground with Mokuton, quietly agreeing that this was going to turn hostile no matter what they tried. “Then come and get one!” Madara launched forwards, blurring through handseals and spit our a huge dragon of flame directly at the creature.

Hashirama knew that wouldn’t do anything to a creature running on the Nibi’s control over fire, so took that chance to try and ensnare it again—hoping that maybe it would be distracted by Madara and not escape like it had last time. If they could pin it down where its speed wouldn’t help it—!
His roots broke the earth just as the fire dragon engulfed where the creature had been standing, and were abruptly ripped from his control altogether. Horror snapped down his spine like ice. Loud, genuinely amused laughter rang from the inferno before them where he could even now feel his roots being rotted away by a power greater than the Mokuton could hope to be.

The monster stepped out of the fire absolutely spotless, not even pretending that the attack had fazed it. The fire at its back warped around, twisting into spirals before banking immediately, crushed into nonexistence by the Nibi’s godlike control over flame. They didn’t give the creature a chance to attack, pressing grimly forward and throwing everything they had at it.

Only… nothing worked. It laughed off Tobirama’s water attacks and hijacked control of them with casual ease, shrugged off fire and earth and lightning like bug bites. It spat lava at a shinobi who got too close, searing off the flesh from their ribs and face as they screamed in agony before being bisected by the—not a gauntlet—sword-length claws replacing its entire hand.

“Hold!” Hashirama called suddenly, leaping back as his loyal shinobi followed on his heels. Madara and Tobirama were slower to obey, but soon they had put some distance between them and the creature as they waited for his order.

The creature let them go, watching with a rictus grin as molten saliva dripped from parted jaws to hiss and eat away at the rock below. Hashirama stared at it with a grim frown, understanding that it was simply toying with them. They hadn’t so much as scratched it yet, and it hadn’t even bothered to move out of the way of a single attack. They might be able to seal it, but a seal like that would take time and preparation that the monster likely wouldn’t give them.

This was not a winning battle.

“You want a challenge?” Hashirama parroted, resigned. “Let our shinobi go. We cannot give you a real fight while handicapped with them.” He hated to say it, but it was true. They couldn’t afford to hit the monster with all of their strength while they were trying to watch out for their less-skilled allies. And it might be cruel of him, but if his shinobi could escape with their lives… if he could buy them time…

The monster scraped its claws together with a metallic rasp. “You cannot challenge me,” it refuted in careless dismissal. “You amuse me, but you are not a threat.” It tilted its head at them, bird-like. “…but your ‘shinobi’ do not interest me. That they remain to face me is their failing, not mine.”

Hashirama would take that, for whatever it was worth. “Retreat to Konoha,” he ordered in his Hokage voice. “Fortify the walls and be ready to evacuate. Tobirama…” he turned, helplessly, to his younger brother. Hashirama knew he was going to die today. If it bought his people time to escape, time for his brother to get home and lead them…

“Not him,” the monster growled suddenly, claws flexing. “No. You three interest me. You die today, no matter how fast or how far you run. There is nowhere in this world you can go that I cannot find you.”

Tobirama was coiled like a spring, eyes fixed on Hashirama with resigned acceptance. They both knew one of them had to make it back to Konoha—the village would fall apart without leadership, and if both Senju died out here… if Madara died out here… who would lead them?

What would happen to their dream?

“You will not bargain?” he asked one last time, resigned but desperate. It was an unwinnable fight
they were in, here. If he could eke out any scraps of compassion from this monster, he would do anything.

The creature was quiet as it considered, motionless like a statue. Its head turned to track all the gathered shinobi, tilting, and then back to Tobirama. It did this a few times, as if weighing them against one another.

Finally, its jaws parted as it answered. “You may make a choice. The Senju, or your men. One may leave. The other will make up for the lack.”

Hashirama let his eyes flutter closed, trusting briefly in the monster’s willingness to wait for him to make such a horrible decision. In the end… the needs of the many outweighed the needs of the few. The shinobi who’d followed him were loyal, and they’d known the risks of coming. The innocent civilians back in Konoha though, who would flounder if all of Konoha’s leaders died here…

He opened his eyes and turned to give Tobirama a nod. His brother nodded stiffly back, face expressionless. “Farewell, brother,” Tobirama murmured gravely.

“Be safe,” was all Hashirama could say in reply.

Tobirama turned and was gone in an eyeflink, running as fast and as hard for Konoha as he could. At top speed, it would take him three days to get there. By then, Hashirama expected to be long dead.

His heart clenched, but he felt a weight lift from his shoulders that at least his brother would live. Konoha would endure.

Madara, silent throughout all of this, met his eyes in a moment of brief understanding. There was no recrimination there, or disgust. The Uchiha had always been willing to make the hard choices for the good of the many, practical to a fault. No, he’d find no arguments from that quarter.

Hashirama turned back to the monster, who’d patiently waited, and readied his chakra. He’d condemned thirty good men to death today. May Kami-sama forgive him in the afterlife, but he couldn’t regret it. Madara stepped up to his shoulder and pressed reassuringly against his side for a brief moment.

A grim smile curled at his lips. At least he’d get to die how he’d always wanted… Side by side with a friend.

Alex let the brother Senju leave his sensing range before turning his attention back to the small group of humans. Letting the one interesting human go wasn’t a hardship—in the end, the stat increase would be negligible, and he could always track him down later if he felt like it. That could be his one good deed of the year.

He’d gotten a pretty good handle on their relative power levels when they’d been flinging themselves at him earlier, and he’d been right. No one here could hurt him. They couldn’t even break through his comparatively weak Mokuton shell. He figured he’d let them go ‘all-out’ on him for a while before—
Something cracked into his ribs with impressive force, rocking him where he stood but ultimately failing to move him. Alex whipped around in reaction, but saw nothing. His eyes narrowed as he stilled, focusing his senses on his surroundings. Everything seemed normal. The humans were still tensely grouped on a nearby hill, waiting for him to strike. Then who…?

Another attack from the other side, that time a bolt of lightning. He looked behind him with three different eyes, but saw no one who could have attacked. Attacks rocked him from all sides; crushing tides of water, rockslides, infernos, anything and everything that could be thrown at him, was.

But no one was attacking him.

With a guttural snarl, Alex whipped towards the gathered humans and snapped towards them, appearing amidst them almost instantaneously. But when he lashed out, they wavered like mirages instead of dying messily in several chunks.

All of his eyes narrowed sharply. Illusion. Somehow the humans were using illusions.

His mind raced. None of the tailed beasts could use illusions (unless he counted the Sanbi’s mist), so that was one area the humans had him beat in. He hadn’t consumed any humans here and paid any mind to their memories, infinitely more focused on the tailed beasts. He’d eaten some, sure, but more for their biomass and because they were in his way.

No matter. He didn’t know how the humans were tricking him, but they couldn’t possibly account for the senses he possessed beyond human ones. He let all his eyes close, blocked out all sound, and stopped breathing. Then he turned on The Black Huntsman, aimed at Senju, and saw the blue line glow in sharp relief on the back of his eyelids. It was pointing at an empty patch of ground to his left.

Got you.

He was across the canyon in a single step, cratering the ground and lashing out with the full force of his absolutely bullshit 255,800 DEX score. His claws hooked in something meaty, and a terrible grin peeled his jaws apart as he felt something important tear loose. The human vanished, but he left behind a large chunk of meat and what felt like an arm. Alex consumed those hungrily and turned sharply to face the man’s new position across the arena. He didn’t give the man a second to breathe, already on him again and lashing out where he thought he might be. He clipped him that time, shearing through bone and something hit the ground with a quiet thud as the man vanished again.

The absence of screams and sounds was really irritating; this illusion was really fucking with his enjoyment of battle.

He absently scooped up the thing that fell—three fingers, turns out—and consumed them as he kept leaping after the mortally injured human that was somehow still on his feet. And vanishing again. And again. Now the man was doing it the second he landed, split-second reflexes that worked just a shade faster than The Black Huntsman could reliably follow.

He cautiously peeled open a single eye. Six copies of Uchiha surrounded him, pelting the area around him with attacks since he was moving too fast to actually hit. He closed the eye. So he was the likely illusionist. He bared his teeth in annoyance. He couldn’t afford to let up on Senju in case he died without Alex noticing—he’d get none of his stats if he fucking dropped dead halfway across the landscape.

Fuck this. Alex slammed to an immediate halt, ruining the ground beneath him at the abrupt drop in speed, and reared back. His Armor cracked and deformed as he lashed out with one of his trademark abilities from his original life, biomass warping and striking out with an explosion of barbed tentacles in all directions, sped up to his new maximum speed.
He felt them impact bodies from all corners. He coiled around everything he touched with every drop of speed and precision he had, lightning-quick, and consumed anything biological touching any particle of his questing tendrils. [Enemy Consumed!] notifications streamed down from one corner of his vision, but the only one he cared about was fucking missing.

He twisted, keeping his tentacles out like the spines of an anemone, and struck out again. And again. And again.

He filled half a kilometer with spikes and death, ripping through the earth and shearing through the rock face. The only reason he knew the humans were even still there was the occasional attack that shoved one tentacle off-center or glancing blows from the attacks even now continuing to rain down on him.

In frustration, Alex ripped into his previously-untouched chakra pool and started throwing around the things the beasts had given him. He boiled the atmosphere until the air steamed. He flash-fried the surrounding area until he could smell the smoke through the fucking illusion. He magnetized any metal in six miles to the earth (earning a satisfactory clang of a huge war fan), and began indiscriminately bathing the area in lava.

Until finally, finally, a questing tentacle hit flesh. Sixteen others immediately surrounded the figure and hauled it in, Alex not willing to waste a fucking moment, and ignored the sudden attacks trying to destroy the tentacles holding his bleeding prize. He was comprised mostly of tentacles and mouths at that point, so unraveling further to pull the human into him was a thing of simplicity, where he could finally rip it open and swallow it down.

 Fucking finally.

[Enemy Consumed!]

+1 Status Point
+500 STR
+500 DEX
+500 END
+300 INT
+300 CHA
+100 LUK

Alex didn’t even bother wondering at those arbitrary limits on stat gains and simply kept lashing out, trying to find the fucking illusionist. The death of Senju must have shaken him, since it only took another eight seconds to find the guy. He wasted no time, ripping the Uchiha into his component parts and consuming him before the man could somehow fuck him over even more.

[Enemy Consumed!]

+1 Status Point
+500 STR
+500 DEX
+500 END
+300 INT
+300 CHA
+100 LUK

Ability: Mangekyo Sharingan Added!

Mangekyo Sharingan: Allows access to “Eye of Insight” and “Eye of Hypnotism,” allowing for instant memorization and perfect recall, as well as access to the ability to cast Genjutsu with eye contact.

There it was. So Uchiha had some kind of fucking eye-illusions, huh? Alex huffed a laugh. Figures all those eyes all over his body had a weakness somewhere. He let his own eyes finally peel open and turned his sense of hearing back on, repressing the urge to whistle. Man, this area was wrecked. He didn’t know what those two had been doing while he was stuck in the fucking illusion, but the landscape was unrecognizable.

Those two humans had put up more of a fight than any of the tailed beasts so far. Just went to show that power really was nothing without cunning to back it up.

So, ignoring the seemingly-random limits the Spectator had put on stat gains from humans, that had been a relatively productive time. Sure the numbers were pretty low, but this was the first CHA and LUK increase he’d had in a while. He’d take it. And thanks to them, his stats had finally pushed over the limit of the nine-tails.

Things were finally coming to a head. With another cleansing breath, Alex turned on The Black Huntsman for the final time in this world, aimed at the only real challenge left for him here.

The Kyuubi.
Indominus (Jurassic World AU)

Chapter Summary

Animal minds aren't meant to hold the consciousness of humans. They aren't built for it.

It's just a shame the reincarnation roulette didn't get that particular memo.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cold cold cold wet air air need air where is the air the air is cold it is cold the cold has teeth teeth like me

It blinked, once and then again when a set of eyelids it didn’t expect to have (what were eyelids? Why did it have them?) shuttered closed on the heels of the first pair. It tried to heave in a breath but choked on thick not-liquid, heart stuttering in panic (is this what fear tastes like) as it snorted not-liquid out of its nostrils and throat and hacked and coughed and coughed and coughed—

Then it could breathe. It collapsed boneless to the ground, panting and wheezing and listening to the funny little whistle it did when it breathed, and tried to understand. Its thoughts were muzzy and a little sharp around the edges and for some reason that felt wrong even though that’s how it had always thought (for all two minutes of its existence).

Its eyes skittered around, trying to locate something, anything, there was something that should be here but wasn’t, where was it, why was it alone, and couldn’t help the odd-sounding warble that croaked out of its throat in its distress.

Why was it so afraid?

Nothing answered it. Nothing could have—it was alone in the room (room?), so of course nothing answered it when it called out. It cheeped again before it could stop itself, clacking teeth together and then doing it again when the shape of them registered. It kept clacking its teeth, and ran its (very long) tongue over the backs of them. They were shaped like tiny fangs. Why did it have fangs? (Why wouldn’t it?)

Its head felt funny, thin at the nose and broad at the temples, like it had a snout. Of course it had a snout. What else would it have? It snorted out a bit of not-liquid and bit back the warble that wanted to escape. There was no point calling out. Nothing was here. It was alone.

It shouldn’t have been.

It shouldn’t be alone. There should have been something. Someone. A someone? It was a something, so maybe there should have been a something with it instead of a someone. It didn’t know why it made the distinction. It also didn’t think it should be a something. It should have been a someone. Why wasn’t it a someone? Why was it a thing?

(It had never been anything else.)

It tried to stand, flailed a leg and then another leg and then two arms (yes, that was right, that was
good), and then flailed something else (a tail) and found balance. It froze on wobbly legs, afraid to topple back to the ground, and tilted its head as it tried to peer around.

It couldn’t see much. Its eyesight was not very good (what was it comparing it to?). It sniffed the air, but could only smell something sickly and sharp and not-good coming from behind it, so it shuffled forwards away from the bad smell. It bumped into an invisible wall (glass) and barked in alarm. A muffled bark answered it from somewhere to the left.

It turned, peeping and leaning up on its tiny clawed toes as it tried to see what had answered it. It had sounded quiet and thick and just as distressed as it was, which meant it might be friendly. It wobbled forwards until it found its gait, walking with its hips like a bird (what was a bird?) and headed towards the noise. It didn’t get far before it found another glass wall (what is glass?) and it hissed in aggravation.

It settled down on the hard ground, accepting that it wouldn’t be able to find the other thing with the wall in the way. The other thing kept making noise, barks and whines and cheeps and warbles, all of them distressed and alarmed and asking for help and it could do nothing, say nothing, because it was in a glass cage (it knew this word) and there was nothing here to help it.

The other thing kept making noise for a long time, growing hoarser and hoarser, and it sat and stared into the darkness and said nothing, did nothing, was nothing.

After all, there was nothing here.

There is grass now, and plants and rocks and a little pond of water that it shouldn’t know the names for, but does. It had fallen asleep in the hard cold place and woken up here, where it was still cold but the air tasted like air and not stale death (like copper on the back of the tongue).

The other thing is there with it, and it is weird and ugly and vaguely discomforting to be around. It has a large bobblehead and stick-thin bones, with patchy white hide mottled with grey. Its teeth are sharp-looking and it whipped it with its tail once (a whine of apology like nails on glass) and that had hurt, so it kept its distance from the other thing and tried to ignore it.

The other thing wasn’t cooperating. The thing trailed it around the enclosure (a slice of paradise with steel on all sides) and kept making noises at it and begging it for something. It didn’t know what it wanted. It didn’t know how to get it to stop making noises. The noises hurt, sharp like spikes in its head, and the thing didn’t stop making them even if it bit the thing on the tail.

Everything was too loud. The grass was too loud (shuffling footsteps and wind howling through the blades like canyons) and the pond was too loud (like the crashing thunder of waves breaking on the shore) and sometimes it could hear other things making noises outside the walls and they were loudest of all.

Its eyesight was still awful, but it could see a little farther than it could in the white place. It couldn’t always tell when trees were in its way or when it was too close to the pond and fell in, but it could track the motion of the other thing with alien, crystal clarity. Movement, it noticed. Movement it could see.

The other thing was even blinder than it was, stumbling into bushes and cracking its skull on tree
trunks and constantly falling into the pond with alarmed squalls. It tried to ignore the thing, tried to
focus, to strain its eyes and make things make sense, and slowly... things got better.

It learned to treat wind through leaves the same way it treated the other thing’s clumsy motions,
learned to see ripples on the pond and shuffling blades of grass. Movement was still the only thing it
saw—tree trunks were mostly tall looming blocks of black and rocks were all but invisible against
the whitewashed ground, but movement... movement was iridescent. Pearly whites and greys and
blues, greens and reds and splashes of violet. It didn’t know how it knew those words (why does it
know the word for color?), but it knew them and so it thought them.

Suddenly, the world became beautiful. The grass was like tiny prisms, refracting light with motion
and breaking on the mirror of the water. Even the other thing became beautiful, a thing right out of a
painting (art?) made of whorls of impossible colors that slid like oil on water over its body. It took to
watching the other thing, mesmerized by the colors of it, and learned to block out its loud noises in
favor of staring.

Sometimes a very loud noise made its ears ring, and it would run and hide in the undergrowth, and
then there would be things on the ground to eat that did not move. Chunks of meat, old and half-
frozen. Eating made its headaches go away, made the noises and the bright lights less overwhelming,
so it hoarded the meals the noises left behind and guarded them without pity. The other thing grew
skinnier and weaker, and it made loud wails and calls and once attacked it with teeth but it bit back
twice as hard and sent the thing squealing away.

Eventually the other thing stopped moving so much and quit making loud noises, which brought it
nothing but relief. It would miss the pretty colors, but not the noises. The other thing was still for a
long time, and then it started to smell bad, like meat, old and half-frozen.

The other thing had scales where the noise-food did not, but the food under the scales was a
thousand times better than anything it had ever tasted.

It wished there had been more things with it in the enclosure. Its headache stayed away for two
whole days.

It grew, and it grew, and it grew some more until it could almost see over the walls if it stood up tall
on its toes. It was much quieter without the other thing to make so much noise. Much less interesting,
too, without the oil-slick painting moving through the world. It took to picking up rocks in its flexible
fingers and tossing them at trees and the pond to make things move, so it could watch the prisms and
the lights.

It looked at its hands. They were many-jointed and scaled and clawed, but weirdly flexible and if it
squinted it almost looked like it had thumbs. It no longer questioned where this knowledge came
from, merely accepted that it had it and would use it if it served it to do so. It ran its long tongue over
its teeth and felt the many fangs, all different shapes and sizes, too many for its mouth. It shed them
every day, gnawing on treebark and bones and leaving a litter of fangs in its wake like petals. They
grew back almost faster than it could lose them.

It learned that if it stayed still enough and quiet enough, it could change the color of its skin to match
the tones of the world around it. It could blend with the trees and the grass and even the steel walls if
it focused enough.
It could smell things and hear things with frightening accuracy, even if its vision failed to improve any further. It could feel vibrations in its toes when it walked and taste things on the air that it didn’t have words for, and it spent many nights staring up at the moon and stars and noticed they moved just enough throughout the night to glimmer like pearls.

It was peaceful, and boring, and maybe a little lonely, but it was quiet, and good, and predictable. It never made a play to leave the walls, or tried to lure the noise-makers out of their walls to get a look at them.

It was content.

It saw its first noise-maker on an otherwise unremarkable day. The noise-maker was paradoxically quiet, small and weak and toothless as it stood behind the glass way up high on the walls where it couldn’t reach even if it stood on its toes. It did so, peering into the glass at the noise-maker and flicking its eyes around as it tried to map out its edges. It was so still it was having trouble focusing. All it could see was a blob of not-glass in greys and blacks.

The hated food-noise cracked from overhead, making it flinch back and bare its teeth in futile annoyance before it covered them again and turned away from the quiet noise-maker in the glass. Food dropped to the ground, a brief flicker of prisms and pearls, just enough for it to see where it had landed and wander towards it. It sniffed about for a while until it found the food it was given and ate quickly. The headache was not so bad today, but food would make it even better.

When it was done it turned back to the glass, and saw the noise-maker moving as if to leave. As it did so, it finally saw the noise-maker's true outline and a bolt of recognition spiked up its spine.

Human.

It didn’t know how it knew that word.

But it made it uneasy.

The humans were everywhere. Now that it knew what to look for, what to listen for, it could make out voices and noises and sounds and all of it was suddenly sinister in a way it hadn’t expected. The knowledge of what the noise-makers really were was frightening. It was frightened. It didn’t know why. The humans had never been mean to it, or hurt it, or starved it. It didn’t know why it feared them so much, without knowing a thing about them.

It just did.

A human appeared at the glass every day now. Likely the same one—outlines were difficult to tell apart when all humans were shaped generally the same, especially when they were predisposed to stillness like this one. It made an effort to peer up at the human anytime it visited, inhaling and trying to smell through the glass and mostly failing. Sometimes it caught a whiff of something vaguely
familiar, cold and reptilian and like the other thing but better somehow, because this smell was healthy and non-threatening in a way the other thing hadn’t been.

It didn’t know why the human visited it so often. It didn’t do anything particularly interesting, it thought. It walked around the enclosure sometimes, threw rocks at the pond to watch the pearlescent ripples. Sometimes it would gnaw on tree branches to dislodge cumbersome teeth in the hopes they’d finally grow back in straight. But mostly, it spent its time waiting for nightfall, where it could stare up at the stars and the moon and watch them drift slowly across the sky like drops of oil—rainbow pinpricks on a sheet of blackness.

The human wasn’t always there, of course. And it rarely came at night. But when it did visit, it would sit against the glass and watch it watch the stars, an almost-invisible outline of grey and blacks in a greyscale world.

It was a little nice, to not be so alone.

There was a human in the glass room, but one of the glass walls had slid aside. It reached up to stare, still a full head’s height beneath the lip of the glass, and sniffed quickly as it tried to memorize this new scent.

The human smelled like earth and mud and sweat, and a little like something with teeth and claws and familiarity family not-a-threat. It parted its teeth and tasted the air, eyes swiveling around the outline it could barely see. The man’s scent tasted sweet (what did sweetness taste like) and homey (it had no home) and safe. Something this man spent time around, lived with, smelled almost like family.

It didn’t know what family was, only that it didn’t have one.

It pulled a warbling bark from its throat, the first sound it had made since the other thing stopped moving. The outline jerked in shock at the sudden noise, and it crooned quietly in apology. Loud noises could be so alarming.

The human was still for a long moment, before it made some quiet noises back. It tilted its head in curiosity, because while it sounded like the noises the other humans made outside the walls, the tone was all different. It was low and soft and calm, not at all like the hurried, frenzied barks of the other humans.

It was almost familiar, in the way words were familiar and colors had names and the stars could draw pictures if you traced them. The human made a sound then, a not-human sound. It was a hum, lifting into something almost like a warble. It was almost like a friend-noise. A please-noise.

Friend? the human warbled, jagged and rough and almost intelligible. It tilted its head the other way. The human wanted to be friends? None of the other humans had ever asked it anything, or given away that they could actually speak instead of just make noises at each other.

Friend? the human asked again.

It blinked up at the human, feeling its eyelids click against rough scales, and warbled hesitantly back. Friend.
Friend hummed again, tone pleased, and it tried to strain closer to see it better. Friend obligingly shifted a little in response, bringing its details into sharp relief, and it memorized Friend’s face.

Friend’s mouth was curling into something it recognized but didn’t know. It had never seen a smile before.

It peeled up its own lip and smiled back.

Friend visited more often after that, and always left the glass open so it could smell it. Friend sometimes brought small foods with it that had fur and bones in them, and threw them to it after it made a pay attention noise. Its pay attention noise was not the same one it used—it was three nonsense sounds that had, at first, been accompanied by a sharp click. When it had flinched back at the sudden click though, that sound had never been repeated with the other three.

When Friend made the pay attention noise, and it looked up at Friend, it was given the small food. Friend always smelled pleased when it looked up at the pay attention noise, obviously glad they could communicate.

Friend was much smarter than it had thought the humans were able to be. It had a language—just not one that it knew or understood. It had emotions and thoughts and did more than just yell loud noises all day. Friend didn’t express emotions the same way it did, or talk like it did, but that didn’t make it any less intelligent.

Slowly, it began piecing together Friend’s expressions and mannerisms, trying to relate them to things it understood. Friend had a hello and a goodbye noise, a calm noise, and the pay attention noise that it had found so far. There were likely other noises, but it couldn’t connect them to anything, so figured they were just filler sounds. Friend always greeted it with the hello noise, and then the pay attention noise, and then there were lots of unfamiliar sounds that were all low and soothing and didn’t hurt its head to listen to.

Friend was never loud or sudden in movement or noise, and after the first few times never visited when the sun was behind it so it wouldn’t have to squint up at Friend through the light.

It thought Friend was being very nice to keep visiting it, and to keep bringing it the small foods. The small foods tasted much better than the old half-frozen ones the noise-maker dropped into the enclosure, much like the other thing had tasted. It rarely had a headache when Friend visited.

It wished it had something to give back to Friend, but it couldn’t give it food because it couldn’t hunt (a vaguely nebulous desire) and had nothing to offer it but rocks and twigs. Maybe Friend would want to throw a rock at the pond? It was the only fun thing to do in the enclosure, so maybe Friend would like to try? The pond wasn’t too far from the glass—if it threw the rock very hard Friend might even be able to hit the water.

It waited impatiently through the night for Friend to visit again, almost forgoing watching the stars, and perked up when Friend appeared. Friend made the hello noise, and the pay attention noise, and it made sure to look at Friend because that made Friend happy. Then before Friend could give it a small food, it quickly bent and picked up a smooth rock between two claws that it had found earlier in the night.
Then it paused. How was it supposed to get the rock up to Friend? It lifted up on its toes and considered the distance. It could throw the rock through the open glass, but it might hit Friend. Friend was very small and fragile-looking. Maybe if it…

It dipped down to carefully take the rock between its teeth on one side and then pushed up to its full height, straining on its toes. It was still too far down to reach the glass. With a huff through its nostrils, it tried to think of something else. Friend was making noises, and was not as close to the opening in the glass as it usually was. If only Friend could make sense, they might be able to plan together.

It rumbled in frustration, wanting to share this fun thing with Friend but not able to. It shook the rock in its teeth and blinked quickly in anger, unable to really growl and throw things like it wanted to, because the only thing it had to throw was Friend’s rock, and it had taken a very long time to find a rock small enough and smooth enough for Friend to throw.

It turned to look around the enclosure, hoping for inspiration. There was a tree nearby that was mostly all twigs and sharp edges, and it remembered seeing one branch that was curved and hooked weirdly. It shouldered into the trees nearby, watching the vibrating colors, until it found the right one. It dropped Friend’s rock and reached up to bite into the branch, pulling it off the tree with a loud crack that made it flinch and snarl. It bit down harder, punishing the tree for being loud, and then swung it a few times to get a better picture of the hook on the end.

Carefully, it maneuvered around and lowered its tilted head to try and hook Friend’s rock on the end of the weird branch. It took a few tries, but eventually it lifted the branch and the rock was stuck in the twisted end. Success.

Its lip peeled up in the smile Friend had taught it, and it carefully stood back on its toes and angled its head so the branch’s crooked end would poke through the hole in the glass. It shook the branch inside the glass cage a little until Friend’s rock fell out, and then it pulled the branch back and dropped it, satisfied.

Friend carefully stepped up to the rock and stooped to pick it up, turning it over in its hands quietly. Friend looked down at it and made an unfamiliar noise, but it smelled worried and pleased and a little flattered, so maybe that was Friend’s thanks noise. Friend was so weird, to be thanking it for a rock. That wasn’t even the fun part!

It stooped to pick up a bigger rock, making sure Friend was looking, and then threw the rock into the pond. It stopped to stare at the beautiful patterns, and then looked up eagerly at Friend. Friend didn’t seem to get it.

It threw a few more rocks into the pond before Friend finally looked at its own rock, at the pond, and then back at its rock. It lifted up and made an encouraging warble, making Friend take a sharp breath.

Friend stepped back, hefting the rock in one hand, firmed its muscles and then stepped forward and hurled the rock at the pond. It hit somewhere in the middle with a faint splash, and made some very pretty rainbow ripples.

It bobbed on its toes a few times, excited and happy that it could share this with Friend, and a throaty bark wobbled out of it without its consent. Friend echoed the noise back, a little weirdly, but recognizably an actual sound instead of one of Friend’s nonsense noises.

*Happy*, said Friend.
Happy, it barked back, showing off all its teeth in a smile.

Other humans visited it sometimes now. It would always lift up to peer at them, but when their outlines didn’t match Friend’s, or they smelled different, it would always turn away and ignore them. It didn’t smile at them or make happy welcome friend noises at them, because they were not Friend and therefore unimportant and uninteresting. None of them ever had the glass open when they came by.

One time a very round outline made a pay attention noise, the same one Friend used, but it refused to look at it. That was not Friend, and it didn’t need to look up at it. It kept making pay attention noises even when it tried to scare it away by leaping up at the glass and scraping chunks out of the walls. The round one persisted, smelling aggravated even through the glass, until it got fed up and hid in the bushes and stayed still, shifting its skin to match the world around it. It stayed like that for hours, not moving, effectively invisible, hoping the round human would leave it alone and stop yelling loud noises at it.

And then a very loud noise grated through the enclosure, from one of the walls, and it flinched back and bared its teeth as a headache spiked between its eyes. It turned to snarl at the noise, only to stop in shock because…

Because one of the walls was opening.

It could see unfamiliar trees beyond the walls.

It stood up.

While the humans tromped through the enclosure for whatever reason, it took the opportunity to leave out the still-open wall. Keeping its skin matched to the world was harder while moving, as it had to constantly readjust, but it was not impossible if it moved slowly enough.

There were other humans outside the walls, and small objects they were hiding behind and inside, but it ignored them. The humans weren’t why it was out here. It slowly made its way to the trees, big and unfamiliar and waving in a breeze it hadn’t felt inside the walls, and then wandered off into them.

There were so many smells out here that it hadn’t been able to scent over the enclosure and the humans. Smells that made it salivate and want to rip tear hunt kill eat, but also smells that made it think of family nest pack please Friend.

Friend’s smell was in the forest, too, if faintly. It followed Friend’s smell backwards through the woods, curious to see where Friend lived, and ignored the sounds of humans making loud noises near its enclosure. They weren’t important.

Friend had taken a very winding route through the woods towards its enclosure. Sometimes Friend’s
smell was overlaid by something thick and metallic and not safe, and Friend made very odd tracks in the wet earth (a single unbroken line), but at least following it was easy enough to do.

Eventually it exited the trees and found another enclosure, one that had Friend’s scent hanging all over it—a very blatant claiming of territory that made it feel a little bad about visiting unannounced like this.

But then it heard a bark from inside the enclosure, behind the walls, a firm caution noise aimed not at it but at somewhere else. Three other barks answered it. Caution warning threat.

Friend, it warbled back.

Friend? the first voice repeated, surprised. The other three picked up the chorus. Friend friend friend?

It poked its head over the wall of the enclosure (much smaller than its own), and saw four jittery faces staring up at it. They were very pretty—all iridescent scales and artwork motions like the other thing, but better, because these were Friend’s friends and they smelled like family pack friends and not like threat threat threat.

Caution! one of them snapped, sounding afraid, as the four scattered at the sight of it. It warbled back in apology. It was very big, and they were very small, and that might have been alarming.

Apology, it warbled, contrite. Friend.

Caution friend threat, they barked back, agitated but curious.

Friend, it repeated, firm. They chattered amongst themselves in a language just dissimilar enough from its own that it couldn’t quite keep up. In that way, Friend’s friends were just like Friend itself.

One of them stepped forward, peering up on its toes. It studied it for a long moment, nostrils flaring, before it settled back on the balls of its clawed feet. Friend, it decided. Caution friend.

Happy, it warbled back, excited to have so many new friends.

Happy happy happy, the others echoed, hopping lightly on their toes.

It was feeling very pleased with itself. It had four new friends! It couldn’t wait to show Friend how well it was doing.

So of course that was when the humans roared up in their noise-making devices, shouting and yelling and being generally very loud.

The humans were hurting it. They were loud and giving it headaches and there was so much movement going on that the usually-pretty patterns were almost nauseating. They were throwing things at it that stuck in its scales and yelling nonsense words at it and puffing themselves up to look intimidating.

It didn’t know why they were attacking it like this. It hadn’t hurt any of them, or threatened them. Maybe they were mad that it had trespassed on Friend’s territory? But Friend’s friends didn’t seem to
mind—they were kicking up a huge fuss in their enclosure, barking threat threat threat and caution warning friend at it from behind the walls, very firmly on its side of this conflict for all their powerlessness.

Why would the humans choose now to turn hostile? It had been trapped in that cage for a very long time—surely that would have been a better time and place to kill it? Not out here, in the open, where it had the freedom to move?

It didn’t necessarily want to kill them. They weren’t hurting it too much (the other thing’s bites had hurt more), and it still felt a vague bone-deep aversion to humans in general, but they weren’t leaving it much choice. Lacking a means to communicate with them, it was going to have to fight back if it wanted them to stop.

It lowered its shoulders and bared all its teeth, slamming its forearms into the earth in an unmistakable threat display. Just in case they didn’t catch on, it opened its mouth and roared at them, loud and angry and upset and threat caution defend.

Defend defend defend, its new friends chorused from behind the walls.

And then Friend was there, roaring up on the thing that smelled like thick metallic notsafe, and it was shouting too, at the other humans, in noises it didn’t recognize but knew the tone of.

The other humans stopped throwing sharp things at it, focusing on Friend, and it was afraid they were about to hurt Friend for getting in their way. It was kind of stupid of Friend to interfere against a pack that large, but Friend had never come across as terribly bright.

One of the humans, with a familiar round outline, swiveled to face Friend, pointing its sharp-thing-thrower at it. It was threatening Friend! The small sharp things didn’t hurt it much, but it had scales and thick hide and was very big. Friend was small and naked and fragile!

It screamed out in defiance, lurching forwards with a clawed hand outstretched. Protect protect defend!

It curled its fingers around Friend like a wall, hunkering down over it as Friend dropped into an alarmed crouch, and screamed at the human threatening Friend. It twisted its skin into void-blacks and bone-whites, pasting itself with the colors of nonmovement and notlife, and hurled threats and promises at the humans pointing sharp-thing-throwers at its delicate Friend.

Friend protect defend! it screamed at them. Caution threat warning!

Warning! the others barked and snarled in near-unison, clued in on what was happening by its threats. Warning alpha protect!

The humans were yelling, its new friends were yelling, and it had a headache that was like nails behind its eyes, but it could not move. If it moved it would expose Friend, and Friend was delicate and weak and toothless. It thought quickly, desperately. It had to get Friend to safety. Friend was not safe here, with all these hostile humans around who would attack it if it stopped protecting it.

This was Friend’s territory. Were the humans invading? Its fingers twitched from where they blocked access to Friend. Challengers? it warbled over the chaos towards the enclosure, anxious and uncertain.

The others chattered, increasingly alarmed at the thought. Challengers? they repeated nervously. Challengers hostile threat?
It blinked over the screaming crowd of humans, attacking Friend on Friend’s own claimed land, and curled its lip in a snarl. *Challengers,* it decided firmly, throwing its shoulders back and tensing as it prepared to burst into movement. *Protect friend threat,* it barked at the enclosure, hearing affirming barks as the others ran around in preparation.

The safest place for Friend right now was with Friend’s friends, in their nest. It waited and watched, tense, for an opening. And found one. A group of humans shifted to a new location, further away from the enclosure and the barking others, and it launched into motion.

It scooped up Friend as it ran, curling fingers securely around it, hearing it yell out in surprise, and bolted for the enclosure, roaring threats the whole way. The humans threw themselves out of its way—smart, it would have gladly trampled them—but they were not its target. It hit the wall with two legs and one arm, hurling itself up and over with the sort of dexterity granted it by merit of having almost-thumbs on both its rear legs and its forepaws.

One beat, two, and then it was over the wall and in the nest. It hit the ground hard, quickly depositing Friend in the undergrowth as it whirled to face the humans congregated outside the enclosure. Their noises had jumped up in volume and intensity, and it had a permanent snarl on its face at the spikes of pain that brought.

*Defend hostile threat,* it roared out over the walls, incensed at the sheer *audacity.*

A chorus of *attack protect alpha* picked up around it, the four new friends surging up around it and bristling with teeth and claws and ready to defend their home. The friends were itching to get out and fight back, it could smell it, but they couldn’t get over the walls.

It had to keep its own head ducked to stay beneath them.

*Wait signal attack,* it warbled sharply, getting four immediate barks of agreement in easy reply. It stepped up until its snout pressed up against the top of the wall, keeping its head and shoulders ducked under so they couldn’t hit it with their sharp-thing-throwers, and crouched down.

*Go attack protect,* it hissed. Four sets of claws immediately latched onto its thick hide and hauled themselves up and over, leaping the fence with screams of attack and using its spine as a bridge.

Friend made a very weird noise from the bushes. It cooed back to reassure it, because surely this was frightening to Friend, who was so defenseless, but that was all right. It ducked back to crouch over Friend, who was being very still except for the small trembling. It crooned to reassure it even as its new friends went to war.

*Safe,* it cooed.

Friend gibbered nonsensically in reply. Poor thing. They would keep it safe, and when everything was over, Friend would have its land back.

All would be well.

Chapter End Notes

Owen: *Mimics a happy raptor noise*

Indominus:
Indominus: This is my new friend. I haven't known it long, but if anything happened to it I would kill everyone in the room and then myself.

Works inspired by this one. Fanart of Nightmare Mode by Molte27

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