Bitter Protocol

by TheSolarSurfer

Summary

After two years in the Crucible, Amelia Fletcher thought she’d seen the worst in life. But in the wake of her 16th birthday, she learns that there is more in her story left to uncover. A well-needed father-daughter bonding experience in D.C. becomes a living nightmare when both Steve and Mia's past comes back to haunt them. The game of survival never ends. Sequel to Rebel Columbia.
Cold. So cold.

"Желание."

Longing.

Sleep pulling at eyelids. Heavy. Tired. No more, no more please. Distant dreams call. Fade.

"Ржавый."

Rusted.

Ice, frosting breath. Cracking over clenched fist. A yellow light flickering overhead, darkness blinking. Watching, savage anticipation. Unknown chills go up his spine, then disappear before they reach his head.

"Семнадцать."

Seventeen.


God, to be clean again. To wipe the ledger clean.

"Рассвет."

Daybreak.


A friend. A brother.

A hope.

"Печь."

Furnace.

Slipping away. Cold hand clenches around metal bar. Broken, dangling. A train. No, a bridge. A train... Reach out. Try to catch the hand offered.

To catch her.
Inches away. So close. Don't die. Don't die.

_I don't want to die._

"Девять."

_Nine._

Then falling.

Falling away.

"Добросердечный."

_Benign._

The face — faces — disappear. Sucked away, a cruel wish. They are nothing. They are nothing. He reaches for them, but they are gone.

He can't hear their words anymore.

"Возвращение на родину."

_Homecoming._


Found. A trail of blood. A broken piece left behind.

A metal table.

A metal hand.

"Один."

_One._

Alone.

"Грузовой вагон."

_Freight Car._


To know. To hunt. To kill.

To teach.

Gray eyes burning.


But not a friend.

The soldier looks for the second face. The younger one. The girl. The one who must learn.
But she is not here.

He cannot remember why.

Then he doesn't remember her, either.

The soldier looks again, and all he knows is that something is missing.

The man in the suit tilts his head. Friendly face, cold eyes. Shrewd. Too shrewd. In a tongue that does not fit his mouth, the man asked, "Are you ready to comply, soldier?"

The soldier scans the room one last time, before settling on the man in the suit.

There is nothing there.

Nothing but the objective.

His own voice, cold, hard, unyielding.

"Ready to comply."

Brittle.

The man in the suit smiles. "Good. I have a mission for you..."
“Hey there, birthday girl!”

_Thwap!_ A bright wrapped little box dropped down on my desk, and I looked up to see MJ’s self-satisfied smile as she plopped down in the seat next to mine. Glancing at the gift, I laughed a little and said, “It’s not my birthday for another two days.”

February was in full swing. Outside, the windows revealed a minor flurry taking place, what would turn into a bigger snowstorm this evening. Homeroom was covered in Valentine’s Day decorations, pink and red hearts and cut-outs of chubby cupids and their little bows. It made me itch a little just looking at them, but another part of me was nostalgic. I hadn’t seen a corny school Valentine’s Day in two years. I wondered if being in high school would make it any more extra than it was in eighth grade.

“I know.” MJ shrugged, lounging back against her chair. She wore a massive red wool scarf that scrunched up all her curly hair around her face like a halo. “I just wanted to be the first. Establish dominance and all that.”

“Sure,” I said with a wry look, smiling a little. _Establish dominance._ I should use that more.

More kids shuffled in, giant marshmallows of puffy coats, fuzzy hats, and giant book-bags. The loud hallway echoed into the room, and the TV in the upper left corner of the room was playing the school channel — out of the corner of my eye, I witnessed anchorman Jason Ionello try and fail to
ask his co-anchor Betty to be his valentine.

"And I know you hate getting birthday gifts on Valentine’s Day,” Michelle added with a roll of her eyes, spiraling her hands as if this were a minor detail she only just remembered.

“Uh-huh,” I said, not quite believing her act. For the past week she had been asking me questions about my birthday and what I liked — some in more subtle ways than others (like friending me on Facebook to find whatever stuff I had on there behind the privacy wall, for example). MJ liked to look like she didn’t care about anything, but I had a sneaking suspicion she had been thinking about this a lot more than she wanted me to know.

“Well?” MJ pressed, raising her eyebrows and throwing a pointed look at the little box. “Aren’t you going to open it?”

“Okay, okay,” I laughed, and as the final bell rang for homeroom I began pulling apart the ribbon and ripping open the paper. There was no card or message, just a cardboard box. I paused before opening it, smiling as I watched MJ slide to the edge of her seat in anticipation, before opening the box.

“Aww, I love it!” Inside was a creation of MJ’s own making, it seemed. A bracelet made of interlocking bottle caps, fittingly retro in color and style. Slipping onto my wrist, I lifted my hand and let them jangle and clatter gleefully. I grinned at her, more than pleased. It was so MJ, and I couldn’t wait to annoy someone with it.

“Yes, it fits!” MJ grinned, slumping back in her seat in a combination of victory and relief. “I was afraid I made it too small for your giant man hands. Speaking of, is your dad still coming to your birthday?”

That immediately killed my enthusiasm. I dropped my arms, mood put out. “What does that have to do with my giant man hands?”

“Because I want to meet him!” MJ said, actually smiling a little. It made me scared she was being genuine this time. I couldn’t detect a hint of sarcasm and that was scary indeed. “C’mon, Mia! You know I’ve been dying to meet this mysterious baby daddy of yours.”

“Oh, god, please don’t call him that,” I cringed, the very thought forcing my head to the desk. I covered up my face, unable to look at MJ. “Great, now that’s going to be stuck in my head forever.”

She nudged me with her boot, persistent. “You’re avoiding the question! Is he or is he not coming?”

MJ hadn’t met my dad because I didn’t want her to, but she didn’t know that. She also didn’t know that my dad was Steve Rogers, which would be a pretty big deal when she figured out what that meant. Aunt May had only figured out he was Captain America last month — he was good at keeping a low profile, so none of my neighbors really caught sight of him, or recognized him when they did. Despite the whole world knowing his real name, Steve somehow managed to live a private life.

A very private life. Go figure.

Anyways, that wasn’t the real problem here. The real problem?

“I don’t know,” I finally answered with a deep sigh, lifting my head. “He said he’d be there, he
promised me he wouldn’t miss it.”

“So?” MJ tilted her head. “Sounds like good news to me.”

“He said the same thing last time he missed dinner.” I reminded her.

“Psh, don’t worry about it,” MJ said, scoffing and waving the thought away with her hand. “It’s your Sweet Sixteen, Mia. The big one-six! Why wouldn’t your dad feel obligated to come to a party celebrating your coming-of-age that’s just a shallow construct of society as a way to engage more consumers in the economy?”

“I — what?”

“You haven’t been kissed yet, have you?” MJ leaned in with a whisper.

“N-no!” I shook my head, still reeling from her first spiel. What the hell did it matter that I’d been kissed. A little annoyed now, I retorted sarcastically, “No, I haven’t. Why, are you offering?”

“Well, no, but now that you mention it —”

“You know what, never mind,” I threw up my hands, killing that line of thought right there. “I’m sure you’re right. Maybe he’ll finally keep a promise this time.”

MJ leaned back in her seat, and the room quieted as the PA system turned on with today’s announcements and the Pledge of Allegiance. MJ remained seated while everyone else stood; including myself, but I refrained from joining my voice with the others. I had decided a week into the new semester that the Pledge was just an act of blind patriotism, and I wasn’t going to participate just for the sake of it.

I wasn’t quite bold enough to just sit through it like MJ could; standing felt like a sign of respect. Especially considering what the Old Glory meant to me now.

Not all positive things, unfortunately.

As I sat back down and announcements resumed, MJ spoke again. “Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t know things with your dad were that... rough. I thought things were good with the prodigal father returning.”

Her voice was quiet to avoid being overheard by Ms. Hennessey, our homeroom teacher (or anyone else for that matter), but there was a note of compassion there, too, enough for me to get over the ridge of resentment I found myself on to glance at her, then away again. I felt ashamed for my snippy attitude; I just didn’t talk about Steve much. I didn’t want to.

“They are... sort of,” I admitted at length, tucking my hair behind my ear. It’d grown since Christmas, since October; well past my chin now, I could pull it back into a small ponytail. It was nice to have it out of my face again. “I mean, I’m glad I have him, I’m glad I have someone to talk to but...”

“Not what you expected?” MJ guessed, raising an eyebrow in sympathy.

“You don’t know the half of it,” I muttered. I couldn’t even afford to tell MJ Steve’s name; if he did show up this Friday evening, then she’d get the big reveal. I was prepared for that. But it was a pretty big if. “I mean, I’m not angry at him, I know he cares, but he’s lives hours away and is always busy and I just, I feel like I can’t rely on him like... a real dad.”
Those last words made me wince I regretted saying them almost instantly. I didn’t want MJ to know my doubts, the can of radioactive worms that would open.

She took it another way, though. “I get it, man. But you say he really cares about you? Then he’ll definitely show up to your birthday. He’s gotta know how important it is to you.”

The first period bell rang.

“Yeah.” My voice was tiny as everyone jumped up from their seats, filling the room with din as they headed out the door. “I hope so.”

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“I’m sure he’ll show up, Mia,” Peter was unceasingly positive about the outcome of Friday’s party — even after I told him my thoughts as we were walking home from school that day. “Don’t you guys text every day?”

“Sometimes,” I glanced at my phone. It was the best way for me and Steve to communicate. He preferred phone calls, I knew, but texting felt safer, even if I struggled with reading and spelling mistakes. “Haven’t gotten anything today, though.”

The snowstorm had picked up, as I’d predicted, since this morning. The wind as well, and I found myself leaning into it a little as we went on our way.

“Probably just busy,” Peter shrugged, skipping along the sidewalk, scarf bouncing up and down. The cold wind turned his nose and ears bright pink. “Mr. Stark hasn’t answered any of my texts or messages since Christmas. And Steve came to the dinner week before last right? And he promised he’d be there for your birthday? I mean, come on. Captain America is a man of his word. That’s the best part about having him for a dad, right?”

I huffed a little, both sour and amused. “Well, I’d like a lot more than his word right now.”

To be honest, I was excited. Maybe more than I cared to admit. I wanted so, so bad for Steve to show up tomorrow. Since January, he’d been trying to make it a semi-tradition of having dinner at the Parker Homestead twice every week, trying to make it every Sunday at least — but had missed more than a few; sometimes he managed to cancel beforehand and my disappointment was curbed. Other times, though, I’d just sit at the dinner table in silence, eating slowly and watching the door. Just waiting for the knock, for him to come in all smiles and excuses about lousy weather, something a normal dad would do.

But it never happened.

Either he showed up. Or he didn’t.

And right now it was more often he didn’t.

Peter paused on the street, allowing me to catch up before he continued, in a more thoughtful manner. “Well, if he doesn’t show up, at least you don’t have to worry about Aunt May figuring out what you really are, right?”

I made a face. “You’ve got a funny way of looking at things, Mav.”
“Hey! It’s what I do!” Peter grinned, throwing out his arms and swinging around a light pole. Then getting stuck because ice and spider fingers don’t mix very well apparently. He struggled for a moment to unstick himself before catching up with me. “Anyways, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

I was glad I had Peter to look on the bright side of things for me, because right now I was just getting more worried by the second. What if Aunt May figured out I was really a super soldier? She’d never said anything, not a word about what Steve was or did as it pertained to me. I knew she knew Steve Rogers was Captain America, a super soldier, a 90-year-old man from 1945. She had to know my change over two years had to have something to do with it. Did she know I was a super soldier? Did she know I was Rebel Columbia?

I figured I’d be in a lot more trouble if she did.

As it was, I was still grounded, and unlike Peter, had no interest in going behind May’s back and doing street-level vigilante work. In the dead of winter. In pajamas.

Which, when I turned around after a long stretch of silence, found exactly what I thought I’d see. “Oh, Peter, come on!”

“Here, take this,” He handed me his backpack, which he never took with him as Spider-Man. Peter was now wearing his “super” suit, which consisted of his custom-made webshooters, welding goggles, old sweatpants, and two toned hoodie — now with extra thermal padding. He must’ve ducked into an alleyway while my back was turned; Peter was always quick little guy, and now I was walking side-by-side with Spider-Man as he pulled his mask on.

“You’re going to get a cold if you keep doing this in bad weather,” I said in the best discouraging tone I could muster. No point in bringing up Aunt May — we were both well-aware of the consequences if Peter broke curfew for even a minute. “Forget about my secret identity, what about yours?”

“What? It’s fine! I know what I’m doing,” Peter had initially complained about the extra layers, since it apparently slowed him down; he wanted to tough out the cold like I could, but since I didn’t need to worry about the wind chill from swinging three hundred feet above the city, I didn’t have to. So thermal underwear it was.

“It keeps riding up,” he muttered, yanking on the inseam of his sweatpants, shoes flopping in the wet slush. I couldn’t convince him to switch out of his usual chucks, and could only imagine how cold his toes got just wearing those.

“The curse all superheroes must bear in noble silence,” I said, nodding sagely. “Wedgies.”

“Ha-ha.”

“It’s what you get for being Spider-Man in the dead of winter.”

“It’d be a lot funner if you joined.”

I just scoffed. “Yeah, Rebel Columbia, roaming the streets of New York. Fallen on hard times since her epic showdown in Florida against the Mandarin.”

“What’s wrong with New York? Street-level stuff is great!”

“For you, maybe,” I said, shrugging. Spider-Man was perfectly fit for sticking to a single city; he was way more mobile than I was, faster and stronger, and just, you know... neighborhood-friendly.
I couldn’t move around the entire city like he could, and what with my particular get-up, I’d always be associated with Captain America. Or him with me. And he probably wouldn’t appreciate an upstart copycat trying to build a reputation with catching petty thieves and bank robbers.

In the end, it just wasn’t... feasible for me. And to be honest, I was kind of glad I had an excuse not to. “Pretty sure Steve would know right away what I was doing. And I’m eighty-nine percent positive SHIELD is still monitoring me.”

“Oh, right,” Peter grimaced. He had the benefit of not having Steve or anyone else knowing his secret identity. “Okay, good point. Have you talked to him about it at all? About Rebel Columbia?”

“No more than I already have,” I said, which is to say, not at all since the first day we met. I scowled at him, “You’re really just gonna go off like that, huh?”

“What? Yeah, why?” Peter replied, looking down at himself in his suit. We were lucky it was such a snowy day — there was virtually no one in the streets to notice the kid in the bright red-and-blue getup. “Is there something wrong with it?”

I wanted to say ‘yes’ but didn’t think that’d be enough to convince him to stop. Instead, I pulled off my scarf, and wrapped it around his neck. Then stuck my hat on top of his head. “Your ears are gonna get cold, that’s all.”

“Oh, ha-ha, thanks,” Peter chuckled, embarrassed. Scratching the back of his head, he turned and jumped, using a nearby fire hydrant to boost himself up to the top of a signpost. Looking down at me, he shivered in the thickening snowfall and called, “Just tell Aunt May I’m studying with Ned, okay? I’ll be back before dinner.”

“You better!” I called back, walking backwards to see him off. “Don’t make a liar out of me, Maverick!”

“I won’t, I promise!” Spider-Man replied, rising to stand on what seemed like the impossibly narrow edge of the post. He gave me a quick salute, “See you later, Goose!”

Giving a salute back, I watched as Spider-Man took a flying leap off the post and swung off, disappearing into the white haze of the storm.

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Valentine’s Day was as much as a nightmare as I expected; thankfully, everyone was so wrapped up in the holiday that anyone who didn’t know it was my birthday didn’t bother with me.

I suppose the idea itself wasn’t so bad. I wasn’t big on romance, but I could still appreciate people wanting a socially acceptable way to show affection. High school absolutely made it worse, though; I couldn’t shake the feeling of competition the students had between each other, who got the most valentines. Boys and girls both, who got the most flowers, the most cards, the most gifts. Who bought the most obnoxiously expensive gift (Flash Thompson, of course), and who was the
oh-so-lucky recipient (Sally Avril, who was already taken). It just made me want to bang my head against the wall. Even if I wasn’t already mildly averse to showing any kind of vulnerable emotion, turning love into a competition definitely didn’t help.

Peter, still pining for Liz Allen, sent her an anonymous gift, a flower with a card, a nice poem attached. I actually got to hear her read it aloud, as she and I were in the same homeroom class; wondering if Peter actually wrote the poem himself, I had to ignore MJ gagging in the background.

Ned surprised us when he got a few anonymous valentines of his own, though he suspected one of them to be from his mother. He made everyone’s day by bringing in cupcakes.

For most of the day I stood in solidarity with MJ in never having received any Valentines (which MJ was especially proud of), right up until I got a phone call right before last period in the hallway, and had to duck into a stairwell to answer. Personal phone calls during class time was cause for detention, if Strickland caught you. Normally I wouldn’t, but this case was special. I had recognized the Caller ID immediately; there was no way I could ignore this call.

Cupping my hand over my mouth, I whispered into the receiver, hoping not to be overheard. “Dmitri! You know you can’t call me at school.”

“Ach!” Dmitri said, and I heard a burst of tinny feedback through the phone. Sounded like he’d just smacked his forehead. “Sorry, it is evening here, I forget the time difference. Did I get you in trouble?”

“No,” I replied, glancing over my shoulder into the emptying hallway, and ducked under the steps for better cover. My voice echoed up and down the stairwell; maybe it wasn’t the best choice for a clandestine phone call. “I’m fine for now. So what’s up? Did something happen?”

He laughed at that. “Nothing happened. I just wanted to tell you с Днем рожденья. I’m not too late, am I?”

“Oh,” I dropped my head against the wall, feeling silly now for thinking there had to be a problem for Dmitri to call like this. I’d forgotten it was my own birthday. I had to fight both a blush and a smile growing on my face. “N-no, you’re right on time. Just surprised me, that’s all. Спасибо.”

“You’re welcome. I just wish I could be there,” Dmitri sighed. “I’ll be back in March, though, I think. Or whenever my father has business in America…”

As he continued to speak I heard footsteps behind me. Turning around, I saw Peter by the doorway, waving frantically at me. We had Biology together; he must’ve come looking for me when I hadn’t showed. Class had already started. Grimacing, I turned back around and spoke quickly, interrupting him. “Sorry, Dmitri! I have to go. But when you come back, we’ll hang out, yeah?”

“Yes!” Dmitri’s reply was enthusiastic, and he made no complaint about the interruption. “Yes, I would like that very much. Can I still call you?”

“Of course. Just not during school hours.”

“Right, right…”

With that, we said our goodbyes and I hung up, spinning around to face Peter again. He had a funny look on his face. And by that, I mean a shit-eating grin that only spelt trouble. Frowning as I stuffed my phone away, I said, “What?”
“Oh, nothing,” he said, sticking his hands in his pockets and shrugging. “Just think its funny how excited you get when you talk in Russian.”

“I wasn’t talking in Russian. I was talking to Dmitri.”

“I know.” Peter laughed, and I followed him and this troubling conversation out into the hallway. “You were talking in Russian to Dmitri. You only do that when you two are alone.”

“How would you know that if we were alone?” I demanded, forgetting to deny it. So what, I liked talking to Dmitri, and Russian just came naturally with him. It also came in handy when my previously-assumed private conversations were apparently eavesdropped by little spiders.

“Uhh, don’t worry about it,” Peter said, not meeting my eyes, which was all the answer I needed. But the door to the biology room was open, and I only had long enough to punch him in the shoulder before we entered class.

“Glad you could join us, Mia,” Mr. Harrington started, throwing me a reproachful look for being late.

I had the decency to feel ashamed about it and kept my head down, sitting in the back of class and minding own business for the rest of the school day. I still wanted to kick Peter, but I restrained the urge. I had teased him plenty about Liz during lunch.

As bad as Peter was, I still preferred his teasing to Aunt May’s, who brought up Dmitri just the other day while we were making dinner. Peter had been out “studying” again, leaving me and May with some quality girl time together, something that was definitely not as fun as it sounded.

“What about that nice boy you’ve been helping?” Aunt May had suggested in an all-too-light tone. She'd waved her spatula around.

“I’m not tutoring him anymore,” I’d replied. At least, Dmitri hadn’t asked; he’d passed his classes last semester, which in turn helped me pass the ninth grade I missed.

“But you still hang out with him,” Aunt May had pointed out, then wiggled her eyebrows at me and smiled.

I had flushed at that, and quickly looked away. “... S-sometimes.”

More than a few times I had used my spare free hours before curfew with Dmitri, and maybe once or twice came home late because of it. For whatever reason, Aunt May was never too upset when I had that particular excuse. Of course, Dmitri completely charmed her with his good manners and refined accent that one time he visited in January, so maybe I shouldn’t be surprised she was pushing the topic now.

When I got around to telling her what Dmitri was up to — how he was currently in Russia, visiting his dad, thus too far away to come to a birthday party — Aunt May had gotten really sweet and compassionate, consoling me as if that were the worst news. If I hadn’t known any better, I’d say she was more disappointed about Dmitri not coming than I was.

And the only reason for that? One less person I had to worry about learning who my dad was. Aside from Peter and Aunt May, no one knew that Steve Rogers was my dad, and I was pretty okay with that.

As of today, I still hadn’t gotten another message from him, text or otherwise.
I didn’t bring this up to Peter or anyone else, because I’d already gotten enough reassurances from the past couple days. *He’s coming, you just have to be patient. Stop worrying so much. He wouldn’t miss it for the world.*

As Biology came to an end, I steeled my nerves. Today, I was sixteen years old. It was strange to embrace this fact. Valentine’s Day was distracting, and to me it still felt like only a few months ago I was thirteen, in middle school. How could I be sixteen so soon? I didn’t feel…old enough.

This was in large part thanks to my missing memory; large chunks still just completely gone. I wasn’t sure if they would come back. The past few months had been uneventful and I hadn’t gotten any bad nightmares or flashbacks. A part of me was relieved, and a part of me was scared. What if what I had now was all I’d ever get? There were still so many questions left.

But I had Steve now. If anyone knew what it was like for a super soldier, it would be him. This would be the first birthday we could have together.

Of course he wouldn’t miss it. Why was I worrying so much? I could trust Steve. If anyone, I could trust *Captain America*. I just had to get used to relying on adults again. Nobody could be as perfect as Aunt May, sure, but could I really complain when I had a superhero in the family tree?

As the last bell rang, I smiled to myself. Everything was going to be okay. Everything was going to be fine. I just had to relax, for once in my life.

I was still nervous, but as Peter and I left school that afternoon, it transcended into a more typical excitement. Now that Valentine’s Day was out of the way, my birthday would be in full swing at home.

Aunt May had everything already set up. No cutesy pink and red decorations, but silver and blue balloons and streamers. The kitchen smelled like cake and Peter decided to skip out on being Spider-Man this afternoon to hang out instead. The only guests were Ned and MJ — unlike Liz Allen, I had neither the popularity nor the space to have a full-on birthday bash of a hundred people and spiked punch. But I was fine was with that — I didn’t like loud, cramped places, and I couldn’t get drunk, so…

Still, there was something about today that wasn’t quite right.

The first few hours, I didn’t notice, I was having too much fun with MJ, Ned, and Peter playing Smash Bros.

At first, I thought it might’ve been Steve — still no messages after three days — but that wasn’t it. The thing I couldn’t find went deeper, left a hollow ringing in my chest. I missed Steve, but I didn’t miss him *that* much.

This wasn’t an emptiness I could fill.

It was when night fell, and the pizza guy came around did it hit me. Mom.

My first birthday without Mom.

My first birthday where she wouldn’t turn off all the lights, wouldn’t walk into the room carrying the cake, singing happy birthday with only the warm light of candles to fill the room. Watching me blow out the candles, and then make me promise not to tell anyone my wish, otherwise it would never come true. She’d be the one who’d order the pizza, a real treat because we rarely ordered out to save on money.
I remember hating how she ate pineapple pizza, and having to share with her sometimes. There wasn’t any pineapple pizza today, and somehow I wanted nothing else right now.

I didn’t say anything. Nor did anyone else. Just laughed along with them as MJ did an uncanny impersonation of Flash Thompson, Aunt May improvised a missing 6 candle by flipping over a 9, and nosy neighbor Mrs. Kleinburg came to check on what all the noise was about and leaving with an insincere happy birthday and a snotty look on her face. She didn’t like kids, and she definitely didn’t like teenagers.

But it was fine. Everything was just fine.

We ate slowly, still waiting. Even as I thought about my mother, my eyes were on the door. Or on my phone. Watching. Just watching for a change.

But it never came.

It was seven when Aunt May sighed under her breath and began lighting the candles. Afterwards, cake would be served, presents opened — the main occasion. She wasn’t going to wait anymore.

And that’s when I knew.

Steve wasn’t here. He wasn’t going to show.
I remembered the first conversation I had with Steve.

I could still recall the cold shock that froze my body when I first saw him, standing in our living room. How clammy my skin felt when I shook his hand. Vibrating, with barely constrained intensity, as I sat down opposite him on the couch, my mind racing with a million questions, but my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

Steve himself looked relaxed, elbows on his knees and fingers laced together; impressive, considering Aunt May was practically looming over him, directly behind his seat, and Peter not too far behind her. Having their eyes on him, on us, watching, waiting, really didn't help with the anxiety. But at the same time I couldn't ask them to leave just yet. I was too scared of making a mistake.

I remembered the warm light of the afternoon filtering through the curtains, the stuffiness of my winter jacket I was too nervous to remember to take off. A little too warm, maybe, probably wasn't helping me relax. But it was fine.

It felt like a dream.

"I guess I don't really have to explain myself why I'm here," was the way Steve opened up the conversation. He tilted his head, as if he knew Aunt May was staring holes into his back. "Or who — what I am."

"N-no, no," I shook my head, brow furrowing and glancing up to meet Aunt May's eyes. Her gaze connected with mine, and held it for a moment, before I raised my eyebrows and she jolted a little.

"Right! I'll make us some tea!" she piped up with a grin, although it didn't quite reach up to her eyes, behind those glasses. She puttered off to the kitchen, yanking an idling Peter along with her.

He complained in a whisper. "But I want to listen —"

"— Peter, not now —"

"— But its Captain — !"

"I know who it is."

My gaze slipped back to Steve, and my voice was a little frail. "It's really you, isn't it?"

He chuckled, shoulders shaking a little. "The one and only, I suppose. Hm. But I guess I'm not the only one anymore, am I?"

There was a joking tone to it, but my focus was back on Aunt May, fearing she heard it. I didn't say anything in reply. It was one thing for Aunt May to know Steve Rogers was my dad. It was another for her to know I was a super soldier on top of it all. Or, hell, a vigilante hero.
Steve blinked, waiting for a response that never came. I couldn't even give him a facial reaction, and eventually he cleared his throat and continued, "Well, it's good to see you have a nice home, Ame — Mia. Good, er, good family."

I managed a tight smile at that, at least. "Yeah. Aunt May's the best. And that's Peter —"

"HELLO." Peter called from the kitchen, as if just waiting for his cue. He was still in his winter coat and hat, watching avidly from behind the counter, leaning over it to announce: "I'm Petker! I mean, Parter! I mean, Peter Parker! Nice to meet you, Cap — Mr. Rogers — uh, Steve! Steve? Or maybe..."

Peter was working himself up trying to find the right address, and Steve turned in his seat with a laugh. "No worries. You can call me Steve, too, Pete."

The grin that brightened on Peter's face just then could have lit a thousand cities. He only laughed nervously in response, apparently giddy with speechlessness, before quickly turning around, looking as though he was about to faint.

Steve turned back to me and I was flushed on Peter's behalf. Deep down, my reaction was a lot like his, but my fear had me frozen into a block of repressed expression. I was having trouble remembering how to emote.

At least Steve was smiling. Maybe he didn't notice. "Well, it seems you have a good place here, Mia. Your Aunt May tells me you're doing well in school. Especially history?"

"Yeah!" I said too fast, too loud. Then I blinked, falling back in my seat, wondering why I was being so weird. Shaking my head, I pushed the thoughts away before it made an awkward pause. "It's just, you know, wondering what life was like back then. And it's easy. Memorizing facts instead of having to understand things like subtext or hidden themes. It's all just out there. Usually."

Before I was even done speaking I already hated the way I sounded — like this was an interview, not a conversation, and I had to justify myself to an employer and not my...dad. My hands were working knots in my lap, shoulders hunching up as I struggled to come up with something that didn't feel fake.

"Huh. Interesting." The way Steve tilted his head a little, as if he could sense it, made me even more self-conscious. The short response was just the cherry on top. Had I already killed the conversation before it even started?

I floundered in silence for a moment, squeezing my eyes shut and deciding to give it another shot. I didn’t want him to have the wrong impression of me, even if it meant over-correcting. “I just, I don’t know. It’s not... easy for me to learn. I don’t know what May told you, but I’ve got dyslexia and this other thing that makes it hard for me to write — its not that I can’t read, but I’m always struggling with it and sometimes I wonder why I even bother with history at all. It’s nothing but reading. But I don’t know, I’m just curious, and it’s worth the struggle. I guess, for me, history’s about understanding how we got here. What makes the world I live in now, the world that made me who I am.”

Oh.

Steve’s eyebrows went up, but he didn’t say anything right away. I already knew, too late, just how loaded my words were. Did he think I was being passive aggressive? I hadn’t even meant it that way — my attempt to fix things just made it worse, in my mind’s eye. I waited, with a flinch, watching Steve open his mouth and —
“Here we go!” Aunt May swooped in with two mugs, one for the both of us. The smell of coffee was mildly comforting, even if I didn’t like the taste. The big smile and probing eyes gaze from Aunt May, not so much. She straightened, clapping her hands together. “So! Anything else I can get you guys?”

Her enthusiasm was met with polite-but-reserved refusals — Steve was already sipping his coffee and I just grabbed my mug and held it in my lap. I had tea instead of coffee, but I wanted to give my hands something to do. Aunt May hovered for an extended moment, waiting with a disconcerting amount of nervous energy, before she piped, “Okay! Well, if you need anything, I’ll just be over... there.”

And with that, scurried back to the kitchen to observe from afar with Peter.

Highly aware of being watched, it distracted me enough that I almost didn’t catch Steve’s next words.

“Well, I can appreciate that, not everyone has a love for history,” Steve said, which made me feel better about my stupid response. “Aunt May also told me you go to Midtown, that you skipped ahead two years of school? From the sound of it, I never would’ve guessed you had dyslexia.”

"I also aced my finals last semester," I added, with just a hint of pride. Despite the catastrophe that was Christmas, I got home to discover that all my studying paid off, and I was officially on the sophomore track. This semester, I was no longer behind everyone else in my grade.

"Oh, well then." He chuckled. "If you don't mind me saying, Mia, you seem a little young to be so accomplished."

"And aren't you a little old to be alive?" I retorted before I could stop myself — for whatever reason, my brain had interpreted the obvious compliment as a slight against my age, or my appearance, and fired off before I had a chance to course-correct.

I knew I was screwed before I heard Aunt May inhale sharply through her nose, or Peter slapping his forehead. At that, Steve had done a double-take, his smile dropping. He leaned forward, as if to get up, to leave, and I panicked. Rushing to apologize as fast as I could, I nearly spilled my mug when I quickly sat up, spluttering, "Sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like —"

Honestly, if I had backpedaled any faster I would've left a Mia-shaped hole in the wall behind me. "Jesus, I don't even know why I said that —"

But instead of getting up, Steve threw his head back and laughed, quickly setting down his mug and slapping his knee. "Ha! It's fine, it's fine, Mia. I guess I walked right into that one, huh?"

I almost forgot how to breathe, then started to laugh a little, too. For a hot second there, my soul was this close to vacating my skin. I slumped back in my seat, my laughter more for catching my my breath than anything else.

It was only then I wondered if the compliment wasn't just a compliment. Was Steve referring to Rebel Columbia as one of my 'accomplishments'? My laughter flitted away. He had to know. He just had to. But there was no way I could address it in front of Aunt May.

"Hey, you feel like going for a walk?" Steve asked suddenly, as if reading my mind. Maybe he could, I didn't know. I was ready to believe anything about him or super soldiers at this point. He was already standing up, making a show of stretching his back and making a face. "I've been itching for some fresh air myself..."
"Oh, hell yeah!" Relieved, I practically jumped out of my seat at the mere idea. Anything to get out of here and leave my embarrassment behind.

"A-are you guys sure?" Aunt May called, apparently surprised by this sudden development. I was too, but she looked far more dismayed (ha), maybe even disappointed. I couldn't tell what Peter was thinking because he had his face pressed down into the counter. Overwhelmed by schadenfreude, perhaps, over my previous gaffe.

"Yep!" I called, breeze past Steve and being the first one out the front door. I hadn't even taken my coat off.

No time like the present.

I actually felt a lot better when we were outside. Although it seemed like I lost my safety net without Aunt May there, I could feel a distinct lack of tension as I ambled down the street, keeping pace with Steve.

"Sorry about that... back there. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

"N-no, no! You're fine, it's just... surprising, that's all. I didn't think it'd actually happen, I guess."

It was a good day to be outside — clear skies and cheerfully thick snow, a lack of mud or slush that would normally make walks like this unpleasant. Red cardinals popped back and forth in the bare treetops overhead, the bright bursts of color welcome against the pale colors of winter. I felt much more comfortable, my body temperature returning to normal (which, admittedly, was ten lower than 97 degrees). Steve himself was wearing a thick Carhartt jacket and a baseball cap, which I guess was what went for disguises these days. But who was I to judge? I wasn't even hiding my face.

"Well, when Tony told me what happened in Florida, I didn't think I had much of a choice. I had to see for myself." Steve replied, in a somewhat jovial manner, but there was an added weight to those words. What happened. I remained silent, hands stuffed in my pockets. I felt his gaze shift back to me. "She doesn't know, does she? Your aunt."

I shook my head, unable to look up from the pavement.

"And your cousin? Peter?"

I debated a long moment how to answer that. It seemed easier to explain that I had told Peter about the truth because he first told me about Spider-Man, but I couldn't break that secret. I didn't know how much Tony Stark actually told Steve, and figured it'd be best to play it safe. So I just said, "He knows."

"You trust him?"

Now I looked back at Steve, meeting his eyes. "With my life."

I didn't expect Steve to smile, but he did. Just a small quirk of the lips, pleased. "Good. It's hard to find that, nowadays."

"What? Friends?"

"Honesty." Steve replied. "Trust. You'd be surprised how rare it is, especially in my line of... well, never mind. I'm glad you have someone like that."
"Me, too," I agreed, although I wondered what he had meant to say. His line of work? What was that? I assumed he meant being an Avenger, and it sounded odd; there were only six Avengers, did he not trust them all? That seemed counterproductive. But then again, the last Avenger I met was on the verge of a panic attack, and the ones before that tried to shoot me.

In my head I couldn't help compare Steve to Tony Stark, the other Avenger I had the pleasure of getting to know (a little too well). While Tony was loud and energetic and had anxiety like a bag of cats, Steve was reserved, and far less expressive. I found it difficult to read him, and wondered why no one ever mentioned that poker face in the history books. It was a little intimidating, but at the same time, I appreciated it. Getting that smile meant a lot, at least to me.

"So, like," I pursed my lips, deciding to get in a question of my own. "Is this how you usually do it? Hide in plain sight? I can't believe no one's recognized you yet."

"More or less," Steve replied with a shrug, tipping his hat a little forward, like a salute. There was a glint of mischief in his eye as he said, "And not very often, to be honest. I just keep my head down, mind my business, and I'm mostly left alone. I think people recognize the suit more than they do the face. Which is fine by me. I enjoy the privacy."

"Oh, me, too." I felt a little stupid for not coming up with a snappier reply, but at least it was the truth. I was relieved that I probably wouldn't recognized as taking a walk with Captain America. It boggled my mind that people just wouldn't notice him passing on the street, he was so tall, and had this presence about him, calm with just the faintest aura of power. I mean, jeez, the broad shoulders alone should catch some eyes, draw attention, and yet here we were: walking down towards the park and not a single person we passed ever stopped or did a double-take.

"It's cool, though," I added, still mulling it over to myself. "No one ever told me you had the power of invisibility."

That got a laugh, and I beamed, proud of earning it. Steve stuffed his hands in his pockets and said, "Well, don't tell Tony that, or he'd never stop complaining. But I appreciate the notion. It's... not easy sometimes. I don't have walls of money to hide behind like Stark does."

"That's okay," I wasn't sure what he meant by that, to be honest, glancing up as a garbage truck went by. Its roar drowned out any sound for a moment, so I waited before saying, "I know being seen with me probably wouldn't be the, er, the best. For you. I mean. Personally, um, I don't really want anyone to know about you. Not that it bothers me! But I just... well, you already know, with Peter. I just... I like the privacy, too."

Well, after that word vomit I was ready for the ground to swallow me right up. What was with me today, screwing up with whatever I said? The anxiety made my hands tingle with cold, regardless of the weather. Be normal. God, just be normal.

I thought I would be met with a rebuke. Instead, Steve rubbed the back of his neck and said, "I understand. It's part of that whole 'trust' thing... if too many people know, or the wrong ones, then any sense of privacy is going to be, well. History."

He chuckled at this last bit, but the look he gave me was reassuring. And something else I couldn't decipher. "I don't want you to have that kind of trouble, that's all. No one has to know you don't want them to."

"Well, I haven't gotten any, so far," I said, nodding — mostly to myself. It was good to know but I had a feeling maybe he was holding back. Then my brow furrowed and I snapped back to look at him. "You did that on purpose, didn't you? Leaving the apartment, so we could talk like this?"
"Just figured that out, did you?" Steve replied, and back was the mischief, the tiny quirk of smile. "I hoped I was subtle. Your Aunt has the eyes of a hawk. She looked ready to carve out my liver when I first introduced myself at her door — but at least she was polite about it."

"Yeah, she's like that," There was no doubt in my mind that Aunt May would kill a man to protect me or Peter. Which contributed me to not telling her the truth sooner.

And not about Rebel Columbia at all.

I chewed my lip for a moment. We came out here to talk freely, so I might as well take the opportunity. Still, I was nervous, and not just because I was talking to Captain America. Glancing around, I made sure no one was close by to eavesdrop before I spoke, "W-what's it like? I mean, being a super soldier. I-I don't really know anything about what happened to me, and I noticed I'm still growing, and I was just wondering, just what it's like. If — when I'm older."

I breezed past that falter as quick as I could before Steve could notice, or so I hoped.

I got lucky. Steve heaved a deep sigh, and I knew I was in for a hard answer.

"I don't mean to disappoint you," He started, and my stomach fell. "But disregarding that time under ice, I've only been a super soldier for about as long as you. I honestly don't have a clue what's going to happen five, ten years out. Or longer."

"Oh," I had to keep myself from making a face. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense. I'm just...maybe I'm just scared, that's all."

"I'm sure you'll be fine," he offered kindly, and it did sound as reassuring as he meant it. He gestured to me, somewhat jokingly, "I mean, just look at you. Almost as tall as me. By the end of it you might even be taller."

"I wouldn't mind that." I grinned as we came to a stop at a crosswalk.

"Hey!" Steve punched me lightly on the arm, and we laughed a little — me, too stunned to do anything else, because Steve Rogers just punched me on the arm. Like we were buddies. Like I was his kid. The crossing sign blinked on and I jumped ahead onto the street.

My heart skipped a beat, giddy and pleased, and I had to bite my lip to keep it from getting away from me. The laughter died into a short silence as we made our way across the street. Our footsteps disturbed a flock of pigeons gathered on the street and they flew away at our passing. Our house, the apartment building, was somewhere behind us; I wondered if Aunt May was watching us right now, through the windows. I resisted the urge to look over my shoulder to check, but I had the distinct feeling of being watched nonetheless.

If Steve had the same feeling, he didn't let on. Instead, he was the first to break the silence, beginning hesitantly. "I just want you to know…"

He paused, cleared his throat, and tried again.

"I just want you to know," Steve spoke more slowly as we crossed into the park. Our footsteps crunched softly on the salted sidewalks, and a chilly breeze blew over the crystallized field of snow. "That I'm here, if you need me. Not that you do! But I understand if you, er, prefer I stay uninvolved."

"No! It's okay. I-I want you to be...involved."
"Well, I'm glad. I want to be, too. I just don't want you to think you couldn't have a normal life because of me."

I almost snorted. Ship sailed on that possibility. But I bit my tongue. I did appreciate the gesture, though; right now I was just still searching for my new normal, trying to figure out how I fit in. With Steve here, it only reminded me of the deal I'd broken with SHIELD, with Coulson, and the fact I'd still hadn't seen hide nor hair of them. Were they mad that I broke out as Rebel Columbia again? Were they going to take me in, as Coulson had implied? I didn't want to be a part of SHIELD, but I knew it had been a strong likelihood when I made my choice last Christmas.

So it was a surprise when it never came to be. Now I was just paranoid. What was Coulson waiting for? Had he just forgotten? Or did they have bigger fish to fry?

"Normal is good," I said finally, then a thought occurred to me and I snickered to myself. Steve threw me a curious look, and I cut myself off, a little embarrassed. "Oh, uh, when I first told Peter, he said that I might get lucky and live with the Avengers, in their tower. Just this sort of... fun fantasy life. It was, I don't know, hit me just now. You don't live at Avengers Tower, do you?"

In the interim between Christmas and now, Tony Stark had unofficially unveiled the new plans for his former company tower — the remodeling and construction would be focused to creating a central hub for the Avengers and associated parties. The exterior was already finished; we could see the bright white neon Avengers logo from the park, it was that impressive.

And I'd seen the inside. It wasn't a bad place to live. A little lax in security maybe... but not a bad place.

Steve laughed at the notion, shaking his head. "Ha! No, no, I live down in DC. It's close to my, ah, work. But I don't think anyone of us actually lives up in the Tower. Not even Tony. We all have our own places to be."

"Well, good. I'd had to move again, especially downtown Manhattan. The traffic there is awful."

"Oh, you don't have to tell me," Steve said, smiling. "Have you always lived here?"

"No," I started, then shook my head. "I mean, yes, but not in Queens. I grew up in Hell's Kitchen. With my mom."

Mistake. As soon as I said that, I winced. The silence that dropped after that sentence almost triggered my fight-or-flight response, it was that sudden and gut-clenching.

Oh shit, oh shit. Why did I say that, why did I say that, what's he going to say...

At least we didn't stop walking, continued to move in silence; I had to fight the overwhelming urge to run. Run far away, from that question, from the truth I could already guess at. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, turned around to study a face I was already starting to learn I couldn't read. Steve's face was canted to the ground, an expression flickering across his face, hands in his pockets, shoulders hunching incrementally.

The silence went on. Only our footsteps in the crisp winter air filled the space between us.

I worked my jaw. Didn't he think I wanted to know?

"I, ah..." Steve finally looked up at me, his face pained, a wince, not able to meet my eyes for more than a second, before slipping away.
My own eyes were focused on a bush behind him. "You don't remember her, do you?"

"... No. I'm sorry."

I heaved a sigh through my nose, not surprised but still disappointed. A part of me knew that was going to be his answer, but a part of me still believed that it could be different. That my own doubts could be washed away, and I wouldn't have to worry about if he was really my dad anymore.

And maybe. Maybe I was hoping he could tell me about Mom. Just something I'd never heard before, something that brought her back to life, even for a moment.

But that was gone, too.

"It's... fine," I said at length. A dirty, dirty lie. I tried to play it off, though; I didn't want Steve to see how much it bothered me. We had a good thing going for a moment there, and now I regretted bringing this topic up at all — I thought it had been better, before I asked, before I knew for sure. "I guess I just wished I understood… what happened. And you're the only one left who can tell me."

"I know," he said. "Trust me, I have just as many questions as you. I don't — I'm not sure what's really going on, to be honest. If you don't mind me asking, where's your mom now?"

"Dead." I replied, before I could think about how that came off. Too blunt, too factual. Welp. Too late now. I forged ahead before I could start overthinking, overfeeling; just thinking about this again, I could feel something inside turning off, and in turn my own voice sounded hollow, automated. "Mom, um, she was there during the Incident. Our old building was destroyed, and she... she didn't make it."

It was as sentimental as I could make it without my own emotions coming back to sucker punch me in the gut. My hands clenched and I stuffed them in my coat pockets, doing my best to remain composure.

"A-ah," Steve said, and I could feel him sagging next to me. Of course, he was there, too. He fought against the aliens; his whole job was to protect everyone. "God, I didn't know, Mia. I'm sorry, I wish I could've —"

"I'm not blaming you!" I didn't mean to chuck the guilt train at him, but whoops, there we go. "I don't blame anyone. I'm just... I don't know, it happened a while ago, but it still feels really new to me. A lot of stuff feels new to me." I scanned the park in a panic, trying to think of a way to save this conversation, something positive to say. Squinting my eyes a little, I blue-screened for a moment, before I finally managed to say, "If it means anything, I think she would've liked you. I mean, she never told me anything and I don't really know why, but I don't see why she'd hate you. You seem, er, you seem really nice."

"Well, you seem nice, too, Mia," Steve said, and he seemed to relax a little, chuckling. I resisted the urge to fist pump. Mission accomplished. "I am glad we got a chance to finally meet, even if it didn't necessarily...go as planned. And now Stark can stop holding this over both our heads."

That got me to laugh again. And like that, the tension finally eased.

✮✮✮
I couldn't help thinking about it now, sitting in the dark in my bedroom. It was easier on my eyes after all the bright, intense light of the kitchen. It'd only been a few hours, but I still needed a break. Maybe, when I walked out again, Steve would already be there, laughing and getting along with everybody.

By all accounts, it was a good memory, and one I liked to think back on, for the most part. As far as introductions went, it was a lot better than Tony Stark's (that had been an almost literal nightmare).

But I remembered the disappointment I felt when my mother came up, and it felt a lot like what I was feeling now. Just an expectation, a hope, a doubt I wanted to be proved wrong. Telling myself I should've known better, that I did know better, but still held onto that shred of idealism because I was an idiot.

*It's just a birthday, it's not the end of the world.* I tried to rationalize, stamp down on the emotions I was feeling. I was overreacting, wasn't I? It seemed like it. I didn't like feeling emotions. At least not these emotions. It didn't happen a lot and I didn't want to get used to them.

"Mia?"

The door creaked open and I looked up, seeing Aunt May's silhouette in the doorway. "Sweetie? What are you doing on the floor, in the dark? You're missing the party."

"Oh, I'm," I wasn't even doing anything, just sitting there with my legs splayed out, a lump on a log. I struggled to find a way to explain this. "Just… taking a nap."

"A nap, huh," Aunt May said, with the look of someone who knew better, a sort of half-smile. A little too pitying for my taste, but I was feeling too sorry for myself to really complain. "Well, he won't show up any faster whether you're in here or out there. And out there looks like a lot more fun."

I could hear the sounds of *Smash Bros* through the doorway, the sound of Ned achieving banana peel superiority once again, and it was sure tempting. But my spiteful half didn't want to give Aunt May the satisfaction that I could be enjoying myself at all when I didn't get the one thing I wanted.

"Yeah." I said, shrugging halfheartedly. "I think I'm being a brat."

"Hmm," Aunt May stepped in, coming to sit on the rug next to me. The moonlight glinted off her glasses, but her smile was no less warm. She put a hand on my shoulder, rubbing my back. "You only just turned sixteen, and you missed two years of being a kid, so I think there's still some brattiness you have to catch up on. I just don't want you to be alone just waiting for something. I don't want you to waste your time moping, you'll only be more disappointed. I know it doesn't fix things, but having fun at least takes your mind off of it. Today's your day, after all. I'd say you earned it. Just give yourself a break, Mia. Please."

I stewed on this, chewing my lip and studying my fingers in my lap. It sure was very satisfying to wallow in misery; a certain self-righteousness to it. But Aunt May was right, I wasn't going to feel better eventually doing this. Things weren't just going to turn around in my favor by pouting around and waiting for fate to pull me a solid. My karma was not good enough for that to happen.

I heaved a sigh, and Aunt May's hand dropped away. "I guess you're right. Steve doesn't need to be here, I just —"

A distant growl of an engine cut me off, muffled through the window, but I knew the sound
immediately. A motorcycle driving up the street, coming to a stop. It hadn't even shut off yet before I was on my feet, saying, "It's him!"

I thought I heard a sound of disappointment from Aunt May, but I was already out the door.
There came a knock on the door — Steve already had a key, and according to Aunt May he was always welcome. Nevertheless, each time he arrived, he always knocked three times before letting himself in. Maybe it was his way of being polite, introducing himself so none of us would be alarmed.

It was familiar, and it was safe.

“Sorry I’m late,” Steve began, closing the door behind him with a sheepish laugh. When his eyes landed on me, however, the smile slipped off his face. “I got, er, held up at...work...again…”

He was wearing one of those thick brown leather jackets with the wool collars, cheeks pink from his long ride. Not a lot of people would take a motorcycle from DC to New York in the dead of winter, but Steve wasn’t like a lot of people. Frost had accumulated on his shoulders and boots, which were brushed off by Aunt May when she puttered by.

“I don’t see why you can’t just take the train,” she said, clucking her tongue.

“It’s perfectly fine, ma’am,” Steve chuckled a little, shifting as Aunt May removed his jacket and hung it up. “The cold doesn’t bother me much. And I enjoy the drive.”

“Hm,” Aunt May narrowed her eyes a little, but didn’t comment, as if she were biting back words. Maybe but the train would’ve been faster. Whatever it was, she just shook her head to herself, “Well, I suppose you and Mia have that much in common…”

From the living room, I heard Peter shout, “Hey, Mia’s dad is here! Come on!”

A stampede of feet later and Peter, Ned and MJ gathered directly behind me, so fast they nearly knocked me forward off my feet. When Steve turned to look around in surprise, I heard two sharp intakes. Ned and MJ, seeing him for the first time. Peter standing next to them, quietly vibrating with increasing intensity, as if trying to contain the mischievous smile growing on his face. He couldn’t hold it, and Ned punched him in the shoulder, hissing, “You knew, jerk?”

Steve glanced between the four of us, leaning back just a smidge. Maybe I should’ve given him a warning how excitable some of my friends could be. Ned, at least, was definitely on the pro-Avengers side of things. “Oh, hey, guys. Like I said earlier, sorry I’m late. Got caught in this huge traffic jam down on the Jersey Turnpike —”

“It’s fine!” I blurted, too fast. I felt a little stupid, standing in front him with the other three, like a class of expectant grade-schoolers. Just a little on the robotic side, I managed to introduce them,
“This is Ned and MJ, they’re our friends, and they’re, uh…” I glanced over my shoulder, receiving looks of either confusion or excitement. “You can trust them. They won’t tell, right?”

I put extra emphasis on this, with a hard look so they’d get it. Ned jolted a little, while MJ returned it with a sly smirk. “Oh, yeah, my lips are sealed, Mr. Rogers. My friends call me MJ, but you can call me Michelle.”

Aside from Steve actually showing up, my biggest worry had been how Ned and MJ would react to it. I wasn’t necessarily ashamed of it, it was a secret for a reason and I was ready to explain myself if need be; rather, it was whether or not if they’d like Steve. MJ? She was a total wild card to me. Sometimes she got along great with adults; others she bullied relentlessly. I didn’t take Steve as the type to be bullied by a sixteen-year-old wise guy but that didn’t mean MJ wouldn’t try. What if she didn’t like him because of the time he came from, or the fact he’s with the Avengers, who aren’t without their problems?

And then there was Ned. Ned, I wasn’t worried about having a negative reaction. He loved the Avengers. He thought Captain America was cool (not as cool as Iron Man, but still). But that was a problem in and of itself. MJ, I could trust to keep a secret like this. But would Ned feel the need to tweet this to his seventeen followers? One of whom was his mom?

Maybe it was too soon to say. They still seemed to be in a bit of shock.

Steve regarded MJ with a slight furrow of his brow. “Ah, nice to meet you, too... Michelle.”

“I did say they would be here,” I added, reading the hesitation on Steve’s face and got worried, doubting myself. I had, hadn’t I? Ned I wasn’t too worried about, but MJ could be off-putting to some people and I didn’t want it to throw off Steve. “In my texts?”

I left out the part that he never ended up replying to them. Still, it seemed to jog Steve’s memory, and he snapped his fingers. “You’re right! I remember now. Sorry, it’s been a long day. I hope I didn’t miss too much?”

“You’re actually just in time!” Peter said, gesturing for Steve to follow him into the living room. The TV set was turned on and set to a brightly colored channel — it took me a moment to recognize the video game music playing from the speakers. “Ned brought Mario Kart and we’re trying to see who gets the high score. Which is me, by the way. Do you want to try?”

“C’mon, Pete, that’s not fair,” Ned said, following him. “Captain America’s probably never even played a video game! Now you want him to try the Wii? That’s cruel and unusual punishment.”

“Hey now,” Steve laughed, rubbing the back of his head as he came over to sit on the couch. “Let the old man have his shot first. This is one of them video game things, right? I think Tony showed me a few before…”

I perched myself on the armrest as Peter and Ned fussed over the controllers, before showing them to a mildly baffled Steve; he seemed to follow along well enough, though, laughing a little when the other three promised to go easy on him; there were only four controllers, and with Steve hailing the last one, it left me in the background to watch.

I didn’t really notice I was going antisocial at first; I was too busy enjoying myself, watching as Steve struggled to learn the controls, as MJ drove donuts around his character. Between relentless bananas and thrown shells (turns out they lied about going easy on him), Steve ended up dead last. At least it had been a quick race.
He then proceeded to lose the next three games. Clearly enjoying beating the crap out of him, Ned asked idly, “So how long have you been in the 21st century, Mr. Rogers?”

“About two years, why?”

“Oh, no reason. Just figured you’d, you know, have a better grasp on modern technology,” As awed as Ned was of the Avengers, he took full advantage of the chance to throw a little shade Steve’s way. He offered a grin, just to show he didn’t mean it.

“Well, I’ve got a lot to learn, Ned,” Steve replied, his eyebrows quirking slightly — almost annoyed, I thought, but probably more amused than anything else. Steve returned Ned’s grin, just as his character took out Ned’s kart with an expertly shot blue shell, and leaving him in the dust. “But I’m catching up.”

Ned was left spluttering in surprise, the rest of us laughing as Peter and MJ overtook him as well. But Peter and MJ, too, stopped laughing, when Steve was suddenly dodging their bananas, cutting them off on sharp turns, gaining stars and shooting shells and in the following minute, had won first place.

Steve then proceeded to slay them in the following two races; even Peter, with his superior reflexes, was starting to scowl with concentration. At one point he piped up, “I thought you said you never played video games before, Mr. Rogers?”

“Oh, I’ve played plenty of video games, Peter,” Steve said blithely, far too innocent. He glanced at me and winked. “You just didn’t ask.”

I smiled back, and MJ threw up her arms as she fell off the rainbow bridge road, knocked off for the third time by a savage shell move by Steve.

As the evening wore on, however, I felt something sinking in my chest. A lack of energy, enthusiasm. I thought Steve coming here would make me excited, cheer me up — but it seemed to have achieved the exact opposite.

I watched from the far seat as Steve continued to beat Peter, Ned, and MJ at their own game. As funny as it was, I couldn’t bring myself to really enjoy the moment, just watched with a half-hearted smile, cheek resting on fist. More often than not, my attention shifted to MJ’s bottle cap bracelet, which I played with to get the satisfying clik-clak sound out of. Peter asked if I wanted a turn, but I denied every time.

I could see it in his eyes. Peter knew I wasn’t happy, still; the way his brow furrowed, the glance between me and Steve. But Peter didn’t say anything. I was glad for that.

It wasn’t until they were gone did I realize how much I had been using them as a distraction, and that I hadn’t actually said a thing to Steve for over an hour and a half. Suddenly, the apartment was filled with empty space, silence as the Wii was turned off, and Peter went to go change into pajamas. That left me and Steve, sitting like two awkward ducks in the living room.

“Looks like you’ve got some good friends here,” Steve said at last, and he seemed sincere, even if
he came off a little stilted. Too quick to fill in the silence. “That one, Michelle, she doesn’t bully you, does she?”

The question surprised me, and I snorted. “Not as much as she bullies Peter.”

“Oh, good, I was worried I’d have to have a talk with her parents.”

A shared laugh, then it went silent again. Longer this time. I could hear Aunt May shuffling around in the kitchen, clattering of dishes in the sink, the fridge opening and closing. Cleaning up after the party, and no doubt listening to our (failing) conversation. I was happy Steve was here, and at the same time I was suddenly filled with impatience for him to leave. I just didn’t know what to say. A dull resentment was boiling in my gut and I didn’t know how to work around it.

Was I mad he’d spent his time here interacting with my friends more than me? No. I was glad they got all got along. Really glad. It had been a nervous thought at the back of my mind for weeks.

I wondered if Steve was struggling, too. It wasn’t like I was a great conversationalist, and even now I was scrambling to think of something to say. I could feel Aunt May’s presence nearby, a burning gaze telling me to be social, to be nice. How hard could it be? I wasn’t going to get over him being late by just stewing in my own thoughts.

My eyes shifted to the dark windows, the city lights flickering outside. “So how’d work go? You said it was busy, right?”

I knew it probably wouldn’t work. I could never get Steve to talk about his job; I didn’t even know what he did, exactly, which was a red flag in and of itself. He knew this, too, because it wasn’t the first time I’d asked something like that, in the hopes of getting a little inkling of information, a hint at the truth.

Steve seemed to put up with it, though, instead of cutting me off immediately. “Oh, you know, just one of those committee meetings that last forever. My boss, he’s a real, ah — well, he’s very diligent, and kept us in the boardroom all day, discussing…” his sentence drifted for a second, gaze studying the coffee table. “Shipments.”

I blinked. “Shipments.”

“It was a really important meeting.”

“Oh, right, of course,” I nodded along, scoffing a little as if that was the most obvious thing in the world. I was acting far too agreeable to be ingenious. “I can see why you got held up. Shipments are no joke. Can’t skip out a meeting on shipments for anything, right?”

I regretted those words as soon as they came out of my mouth, but it was too late. I didn’t want to be passive aggressive, I hated that quality and I hated being like that to Steve, who was always honest and straightforward with me.

Well, usually.

Now I just sounded like some petulant child, all pouting, unable to understand that sometimes dad can’t make every single one of your birthdays.

Steve winced, catching the edge in my voice. He shook his head and sighed, at least having the decency to look ashamed. “I’m sorry, Mia. I swear I meant to be here on time, but my work, it’s too demanding. I can’t afford to skip out, not even for a day, or even a few hours. It’s not just some chore I can put off and do later.”
Hm. That stung. My facade dropped like a bag of bricks, fake smile disappearing. “Is that what I
am, then? Something you can just ‘put off’ until later?”

My tone had gone completely flat, cold and devoid of any emphasis. Even and controlled, not
angry, at least. I couldn’t have withdrawn into myself faster.

Steve’s eyes widened, realizing his mistake only too late. “No, wait, that’s not what I meant —”

“No, no, don’t say that, please, I just —“ Steve heaved a big sigh, grimacing. It was clear this
conversation was going in a direction neither of us liked. “I’m sorry, Mia. I don’t want to
disappoint you. I want to be here. But it’s hard to find time, between the travel and my work, it
takes precedence…”

Precedence? I frowned. I knew his work was important, and that I probably shouldn’t feel offended
that he put it before me since he’s had it longer, but my curiosity was relentless. “And what is your
work, exactly?”

It sounded more critical than I meant. Still, I wasn’t completely surprised when Steve went silent,
and bowed his head.

He still couldn’t — or wouldn’t — tell me.

“Come on, please?” I begged, leaning forward with maybe more desperation than I wanted to
show. “Can’t you tell me a little bit, at least? Is it government work? Is that why you can’t say
anything?”

“He had told me before, in those exact words, no less. You’d think with all my effort to be a civilian
I’d be pleased that I was considered as one by… whoever Steve worked for. But nah. My pride was
still wounded; I wasn’t proud of it, but it was the truth. I just wanted to know what kept him out so
long, what had him so busy he couldn’t even reply to my texts or calls. I had no doubt it was
important; but what could it be?

What if it wasn’t as important as he said it was? What if it was only important to him, and the only
reason he wouldn’t tell me was because he didn’t think I’d see it the same way?

Paranoid thoughts began to fester. It occurred to me that this what it was like being locked out of
the superhero loop, being the one who gets secrets kept by them. I didn’t necessarily know exactly
if being a super soldier was a part of Steve’s work, but I could guess. And it was strange, being on
the other end of this. Usually I was the one keeping secrets, feeling bad I had to hide things from
Peter, or Aunt May, or my friends.

Least to say, I had a whole new appreciation for their problems with me.

I heard him say something but didn’t catch it. Looking up, I saw Steve’s expression searching
mine. His hands, meanwhile, twisted nervously in his lap. He spoke again. “Do you understand,
Mia? If I could tell you, I would. But I can’t. And believe me, I want to spend more time with you,
but I just… I’m not sure how to work it out yet.”

“I don’t know either,” I replied quietly; it was the truth. I didn’t know how to fix this, either. Secrecy aside, I didn’t know how Steve could spend more time here. Distance was a factor, as well as his work.

And at this point, a part of me was unwilling to even find a solution anymore.

Another silence fell. Steve hung his head, rubbing his brow. I shifted uncomfortably, but I had no desire to say anything else, and turned my face away, to gloom out the windows.

“Hey, I have an idea!” Aunt May suddenly piped up with a clap of her hands and a big grin, as if she just came to a grand revelation. Her sudden interjection nearly had me falling off my perch; I’d completely forgotten May was even here, had been listening this entire time.

Righting myself, I gazed up as she came to stand behind the couch, smiling with encouragement at us. “Why don’t you two spend Spring Break together? It’s not for another month but I think it’d be nice change, if Mia visits you this time. She’s never been to DC. It can be a real vacation!”

I think my jaw actually dropped a little. Wait, spend more time with him? She might as well just have shot me.

“That’s… actually a great idea.” Steve, however, looked up in surprise, and smiled. “I mean, my place isn’t big, but there’s enough room for you.” He paused, thinking for a moment as his enthusiasm built. “Spring Break is only a week, right? I can… I can get my schedule cleared, so there’s no, ah, interruptions. And we could make a road trip out of it! I’ve never actually been on a road trip.”

He turned this look on me, a sudden optimism in his expression that made my heart lurch a little. “What do you think? We don’t have to if you don’t want to, Mia. It’s up to you.”

Judging from the way Aunt May was sending me the Glare of Doom over his shoulder, it definitely wasn’t.

But what could I say? I wanted to be honest. I didn’t want to go. It sounded like a recipe for disaster. But Aunt May was clearly trying to salvage this situation, and Steve’s enthusiasm only added to the guilt. To me, it just seemed like a lost cause. Our lives were just too at odds to really work. And there was also the not-inconsequential secret I was keeping, which just made me feel worse. I couldn’t consider myself being honest at all if I never brought up my true thoughts about our biological relation.

It was so stupid. My feelings were confusing me, not to mention the external pressure I was also getting. I didn’t want to spend more time with Steve; if I told the truth, I could end it fast, like ripping off a band-aid. Spring Break disaster idea killed before it could even take off the ground.

But deep down, I couldn’t do it. I still wanted Steve to be here. Just not… here here. Or something. Ugh. I was not making this easy for myself. Why couldn’t emotions just make sense for once?

But what other solution was there? I certainly couldn’t come up with anything better (or worse). Doing the same thing we had been doing for the past month definitely wasn’t going to be enough.

I kept my best poker face; otherwise they’d see how much I just didn’t want to try — something else I could say. “... Yeah, sure, why not.”

The grins on both their faces was the real sucker punch to the gut.
It was (slightly) less tense after that, but only because I was stamping down my own feelings on this turn of events. Thankfully, though, Aunt May took the dominant part of the conversation with Steve, distracting him and leaving me to do the dishes — a chore, but one I happily accepted for time to think to myself without any attention.

While Aunt May was no more successful in getting Steve to talk about his work than I was, she did manage to convince him to have a slice of cake, and even stay for the night; being that it was nearing midnight, she rejected any idea of him leaving tonight to get back home to DC. Even Steve was starting to look a little harried by her pressuring, and in the end submitted; tonight, his bed would be the couch, and not a hotel somewhere in Jersey.

As Aunt May went to go fetch extra blankets from the hall closet, I couldn’t help but groan inwardly. Breakfast with Steve tomorrow, I could already feel it. I doubted one night could change my opinion on this whole Spring Break vacation idea.

But at this point I was already settled on the idea, as much as I dreaded it. Short of a nuclear apocalypse, I wasn’t going to get out of this.

The apartment slowly darkened as we settled in for the night, the party cleaned away, the shades drawn and the heat turned up. When I was finished cleaning the kitchens, I gave Steve a quick goodnight before turning down the hallway towards my room.

“Mia, can I talk to you for a moment?” Aunt May’s soft voice came, just before I could step into through the threshold. She was standing by her door, peering out and frowning at me past her glasses. Hair down and loose, bathrobe wrapped around her. Behind her, the rest of the apartment was dark, Steve already settling for sleep. Aunt May’s eyes glimmered in the light emanating from her room.

I paused, my stomach filling with dread. Had I done something wrong? Birthdays were the worst time to get in trouble.

Still, I turned, hands stuffed into the pockets of my hoodie. Shoulders hunched, head down, preparing myself for a lecture, a reprimand.

“I know you’re disappointed,” Aunt May said, her arms folded, brows furrowed. Her voice was soft, so that we wouldn’t be overheard. “I know he’s not what you expected. But you have to understand, I don’t think you’re what he expected, either. This is just as new, and as hard for him as it is for you. He has to learn how to be your dad the same time you’re learning to be his daughter.”

Her words took me by surprise, and I didn’t really know what to say. A part of me understood, deep down, that Steve was probably having a difficult time, too. But hearing it spoken to me? In Aunt May’s soft, wise tones? It left me more than a little shook.

Biting my lip, I looked down. “I-I know.”

“I’m not mad at you.” A soft hand went to my shoulder, and Aunt May continued in a softer tone. “Parenting is a constant challenge, Mia. You think I was playing a stellar mom when we first took Peter in? I wasn’t. I made a lot of mistakes. But I wanted to be better, and I kept trying. And I know Steve is, too. So… promise me you’ll be open-minded when it comes to the D.C. trip?”

I scrunched up my face, reluctant. “Y-yeah, sure. I can try.”

“Good.” Aunt May smiled to me, and as she began turning to the counter, it seemed the
“Aunt May?” But I wasn’t done yet, either. She gave me a curious look and I continued, shifting awkwardly on my feet. “Sorry, I just thought...I thought you’d be more disappointed in him, too. At least that’s what I thought you were, back in my room, before he showed up…”

Aunt May set down her knife, pursing her lips and thinking it over a moment. “I suppose I was. I won’t lie, I haven’t exactly been impressed, either. But he showed me tonight how much he cares, Mia. He’s showing effort, a will to change, and trust me, that’s not as common as you’d think in parents. And I don’t want you growing up without someone to look up to. I think, if this works out, it’d be much better for you both. Do you know what I mean?”

“I-I guess so,” I lied, unable to meet her eyes. All this meant Steve was putting in more effort than I was. That Aunt May believed in it more than I wanted to.

I definitely wasn’t on the winning side, and I didn’t have the confidence or the guts to just tell her what I felt. It was too defeatist. Aunt May would just be disappointed in me, and hoo boy that would be the absolute worst.

“Just checking,” Aunt May said, tilting her head and cupping my cheek. It got me to meet her eyes. “Family isn’t easy, Amelia. It might never be. But I think you’ll end up regretting it if you don’t try.”

Then she leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead. “And Happy Birthday.”

With that, she let me go, and I headed off to bed.
art by me :))
When I woke up that next morning, Steve was already gone.

I had been half-dreading, half-hoping he'd still be there, sleeping on the couch, or maybe drinking coffee and watching the morning news. I had no idea what his daily habits were, and today wouldn't be the day I'd find out. Instead, I walked into the kitchen to find the couch empty, the blankets neatly folded and stacked, with a small yellow note left on top.

When I unfolded it, the note read:

> Sorry I couldn't be there when you wake up. Got an emergency work call. Thank you for your hospitality.

> Happy Birthday, Mia.

— Steve

It was written in cursive. And thus, insanely difficult to read with dyslexia, and I got a bit of a headache squinting at the unrecognizable forms for several long minutes.

I sighed and slumped onto the couch. Warm sunlight streamed across the ceiling and I folded and unfolded the note in my hands. The really petty, immature part of me wanted to crumple it up in my fist — but I couldn't. I carefully smoothed out the folds, listened to the crackle of paper. Steve had at least taken the time to leave a message. He was kind and grateful. He wished me a happy birthday.

I opened it up again, studied the sharp, clean strokes of his letters. Clear, evenly spaced, no slant in his lines — military cursive, I thought. Perfect, clean, concise.

And it was the first piece of Steve's handwriting that I'd seen. That I had. I couldn't throw that away.

Such a contrast to my own scrawled, messy, barely legible script. I was both impressed and a little
annoyed. Was reading and writing ever as hard for him as it was for me? The most I knew about Steve's past could be learned from the history books; he hadn't told me anything personal about his life before the war, before he woke up in the 21st century.

I wondered why. Maybe he just missed it too much. Maybe he didn't think I'd understand.

"Gone already?" Peter's voice was preamble to him jumping onto the couch from behind. He was in his red flannel pajamas, banana in hand. I hadn't heard him approach. Peter leaned over my shoulder to peek at the note. "What does it say?"

I just handed it to him, thinking it'd be easier for Peter to read it himself than me trying to dictate. "Yeah, I guess he got some emergency work call late last night."

"Hm." Peter made a noncommittal noise as he scanned the note. His silence extended far longer than I expected, and I frowned at him. I could see the gears turning behind his eyes and waited for him to speak — at length, Peter said, "I wonder if he works for SHIELD."

My eyebrows shot up. I had my own working theory that Steve was working for the government, but I hadn't considered that line of thought. "Really?"

Peter met my gaze, head tilting, puzzled by my tone. "You don't think so?"

"I don't know. SHIELD's got this whole 'Big Brother is Watching You' thing going on — doesn't really seem like something Steve would jive with." Then again, I'd only known Steve for two months. Who knew what his real thoughts on SHIELD would be.

"They did come from the SSR, though," Peter pointed out. "The guys he's worked for in World War Two. He can work the same way he used to with them."

"True. But SHIELD isn't the same as the SSR. A lot's changed since 1945."

"He can't be just working for the Avengers. And if the US government were using him, I think he'd get more publicity, like Iron Man." Peter said, shrugging. "Patriotism and all. But whatever he's doing, it never on the news."

I knew what Peter was trying to do. Distract me from the uncomfortable topic of Steve's absence, but not ignoring the elephant entirely. He also presented a legitimately thoughtful argument that definitely had me curious. I couldn't help but smirk a little — Peter knew me too well.

"Don't suppose you'll come with us to DC, to find out," I suggested, my tone joking but resigned. I already knew Peter wouldn't be able to join me.

"I wish," Peter grinned, elbowing me in the side. "But there's no way Aunt May is letting me butt in on your father-daughter bonding experience. Have you figured out how you'll be taking your shield with you?"

I snorted. "No, not yet. I'm still thinking of ways to get out of the whole thing."

Still, I appreciated Peter's approach, as if even bringing the shield at all wasn't even a question. I had yet to figure out how to sneak it out under May's nose; there was no way Steve wouldn't notice, I imagined, and I wasn't sure how I could explain that to him, either. I couldn't recall if I even told Steve that I still had my shield. Would he think I was being paranoid, or too extra? Showing off? What would he think of me hiding it from Aunt May?

Awkward.
I didn't even know why I wanted to take it with me. It just… felt like the thing to do. The shield was mine. Even if nothing was happening in DC, I felt safer having it on hand.

"Why?" Peter asked. I cut him a significant look, aggrieved that I would have to explain this to him, the one person I told everything to. Peter blinked, then leaned back, recognition dawning upon his face. "Ohh, right. My two cents? Give it a shot. I think Steve really means it."

That annoyed me, a little bit. "Everyone keeps saying that."

"You don't believe it?"

I could only shrug, slumped back on the couch. I didn't know how else to explain it. The whole thing just made me dead inside, and I had no motivation to put more effort into it. It felt like the beginning of a lost cause.

"Well!" Peter perked up, raising his eyebrows. "Look on the bright side! Spring Break is only ten days, and you got seven with him. You just have to survive the week."

I gave him a wry look. Peter had a funny way with positivity. "Sure. Survive the week. How hard can it be?"

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He only came at night.

Although I knew this, I could never anticipate it.

Freezing wind bit into my cheeks, but I couldn't feel it. A blinding white haze surrounded me, and as I moved through it, dark columns emerged, like ghosts in a blizzard. Heavy footfalls through deep snow, my feet following in the trail of another --- I had to squint to look ahead.

His silhouette, only a few meters in front of me. Metal arm gleaming pearly white in the snow. The red star, the only spot of color in this barren landscape.

A gun in his hands.

A gun in mine.

It was large, long, heavy. The word of it did not come to me immediately, but I knew that this was not the first time I held one.

This was, however, the first time I had been outside since… since…

Since never, perhaps.

Thoughts of escaping seeped into my mind. Run, run. Run while you can. But my feet did not stray from the path. I kept my eyes on the back of his head.

I couldn’t run. I didn’t know where he was taking me. I didn’t know where I was. Mountains, it seemed. Tundra, Siberia? Impossible to say. No sign of human civilization anywhere. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a small white rabbit, before it scampered away at two dark, silent wraiths.
I couldn’t hear anything beyond the shrieking wind that buffeted my face and hair, or the soft crunch of my footsteps. Our clothing was too light for this weather, but it allowed us to move more efficiently.

*Rifle,* I thought to myself, in a fleeting epiphany. *Sniper rifle. That’s what its called.*

A rifle in my hands. My fingers twitch. The soldier did not glance over his shoulder to check on me. He would be completely unaware, should I lift the barrel, aim it at the back of his head. To pull the trigger, just as he taught me.

My hands shook. To lift the weapon without orders was like Atlas attempting to shrug off the world. He couldn’t do it. Neither could I.

In some versions of this dream, I was able to do just that. Point the rifle, aim for his head. But I could never reach the trigger in time before he turned around.

The soldier was always the faster shot.

Still, I couldn’t shake the notion of how *easy* it would be, to just shoot and run. The stupid trust they put in me, their unwilling weapon. And yet, here I was, frozen, all rebellious action smothered before it could even take a breath.

As we continued hiking in a journey that seemed to last forever, I struggled to clench my grip, fight the programming in my head. Was it the programming, or just the logic of dreams that kept me from moving as I wished?

Just as I think I could do it, just as I brought the rifle to bear, rested the butt against my shoulder, I heard something.

Laughter.

Only ten feet to the right are two children playing. A boy and a girl. Dark-haired and blonde, respectively. I stare at them, two kids in bright summer clothing, playing with sparklers. The boy had thick glasses and curly hair. The girl had freckles and was wearing a nasal cannula. An oxygen tank. In her other hand, she carried a little blue plush alien, dragging it along the ground.

*Wrong.* My mind said, sensing a disturbance in the memory. *This shouldn’t be here. Who are they? Why is this here?*

I continued to stare at them as we kept moving. The children’s laughter was so loud, I was surprised the soldier didn’t hear it. But he didn’t seem to notice at all; my head turned to watch them as we kept marching. Soon, the children vanished into the blizzard’s fog.

But just as they vanished, another sound took its place. Something jaunty, with a guitar. *Music?* I couldn’t even remember the last time I heard music.

Now to my left. A hospital gurney and a dialysis machine, beeping softly in the middle of the forest. I blinked, caught off guard, my weapon completely forgotten. *What is going on?*

In the gurney lied a sleeping girl. Blonde with freckles; the same girl I saw earlier, but older, perhaps. Even from here, I could hear her wheezing, labored breath. The bruises under her eyes. The IV in her arm, the tube that vanished into the snow.
And at her bedside, a woman, stroking the girl’s hair and murmuring something too soft to hear.

An ache in my chest, watching them. Pain at the girl’s suffering, but also a longing. A longing for something I couldn’t remember.

“Стоп.”

The soldier’s voice cut through my reverie like a knife. Just like that, the woman and the gurney vanished, and I looked around to find the soldier watching me with cold eyes. Did he see what I saw?

Judging from his expression, or lack of one, apparently not.

With a point, the soldier gestured for me to come next to him. As I did, I found myself standing on the edge of a slope, down into a deep valley. The blizzard seemed to have lifted, allowing depth of field, and I could make out dozens, hundreds of individual trees, stripped bare by the unforgiving winter.

The soldier dropped to a crouch, and I copied him without waiting for command. The silent understanding between us was simple. Do as I do.

As I adjusted my weapon, frowning at my hands and still ruminating on the strange visions I saw, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Смотри.” He murmured, taking my shoulder and pulling me closer as he leaned low. He was not rough; simply guiding, almost… gentle, the ghost of a touch. With his other hand, he pointed, and I looked out to follow his gaze.

Below us, two hundred meters away along the valley floor, a small form shifted between the field of trees. It was difficult to make out at first, as it appeared to be the same color gray as everything around it. But its horizontal motion, slow, delicate, sent the deer into view.

I knew so little of wildlife. I couldn’t tell if it was male or female, only that it didn’t have antlers. It peered around, dark eyes blinking, ears rotating, as if it could sense it was being watched.

Neither of us moved.

“That is your target.” The soldier whispered.

My only acknowledgement was a single nod. Then, I raised the rifle up once more. The action was immediate; smooth, simple, light.

I hated it. I didn’t want it to be so easy, when I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t want to kill this animal; I had never killed anything before. The one thing I wanted to kill, and I couldn’t, no matter how hard I tried.

The irony did not escape me.

I tried to resist, but it was as if my body belonged to someone else. The best I could do was a moment’s hesitation. A tremble in my grip, the catch of breath.

It was enough, though, that the soldier noticed. He didn’t say anything, but I sensed the change when he glanced at me. Could he see me fighting with every ounce of my being?

I tried to stop. I knew I could do it. I could feel something starting to strain in my mind, like an
elastic about to break.

I peered through the sights. No, I wouldn’t do this.

I wouldn’t.

I wouldn’t.

The gunshot cracked through the air.

My hands stopped shaking. The deer fell.

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I woke with a gasp. Eyes flying open, throat raw, heart pounding, drenched in a cold sweat.

The winter forest was so burned into my mind I expected to see it again. But all I saw was my bedroom ceiling, the striped shadows of my window shade, the faint street light outside.

For a long moment, I couldn't move and nearly panicked. It felt as though I were paralyzed, a mysterious ache in my chest, an invisible weight that seemed to be suffocating me. Every muscle in my body was taut, and even though I was panting like I’d just sprinted a marathon, my brain seemed to be getting no oxygen. Oh, god, was I dying —

No, I was fine; the dream had returned to haunt me in the real world. I ended up just lying there, helplessly, waiting for what felt like hours (but was probably only minutes) for the paralyzation to fade.

Bit by bit, my muscles relaxed, the sweat faded. By the time I could finally pull myself to a sitting position, I was absolutely exhausted.

But how could I fall asleep after that?

I dropped my head into my hands, rubbing at my dry eyes. Of course I had to have a nightmare on the day I headed out for vacation.

With no other recourse, I did what I always did when I had a nightmare. I headed to the roof. No coat and no shoes; the sharp wind and the feeling of rough, crumbly gravel beneath my feet helped ground me to reality.

Mr. Holmes’ hive was still in the same place as it always was. March had warmed up significantly to the point where every couple of days, the bees would venture out during the day, to clean their hive and begin early exploration for pollen, but it was still too cold at night and in the early hours of the day for them to go outside.

I could hear them inside, buzzing around in their winter cluster, keeping the queen warm in the center. A month had come and went far too fast. I had been dreading the start of Spring Break, which was at odds with basically everyone else I knew. Everyone at school was looking forward to mid-March — either gearing up for fun, or taking a seat back and relaxing. I was neither. The closer it came, the more anxious I got.
All that anxiety culminated in the sleepless nights leading up to today. This was the first real nightmare that had struck me, though. The quiet hum of the bees was a small balm on the frantic electricity firing in my head.

I didn't necessarily dream of the Crucible, or any of the memories I had there. They came to be in broken pieces, fragments pieced together into confusing and impossible scenarios. The Winter Soldier, unsurprisingly, featured in a lot of them. Others, slightly less awful, were the ones with Wanda and Pietro — there was one memorable dream where they had been in history class with me.

Only we were handcuffed to the desks, as we had been once in the Crucible. We couldn't escape until I answered the questions written on the board. We had until the clock ran out. I couldn't read, not even in my dream; the twins knew what the words said, but their mouths had been sewn shut.

We never got out.

So, you know. That's fun.

A lot of my nightmares were like that. Pieces of horror haphazardly stitched into my civilian life.

This was the first time I ever had such a vivid… recollection.

Thinking about Wanda and Pietro now, I couldn't help but feel the old ache. I missed them. I wished they were here, so I could have people to talk to. I didn't tell anyone about these dreams. Not to Peter, not to Steve, not May, not anyone.

It wasn't just that it would be hard, getting those words out. But they didn't have the context I did. They wouldn't understand, I wasn't sure I could ever bring them to the same level as me. It hurt just thinking about it, and it'd be that much worse trying.

Whatever. Still feeling sick, I began to pace around the roof, turning my face towards the sky, hoping to catch the faint twinkle of a star past the haze of light pollution. With the unusually warm March weather, the breeze wasn't quite as cold as I'd like. After a few moments, staring into Queens at night, left me feeling too exposed. I exited the roof, and slipped back downstairs to the apartment.

Into the bathroom. Sink, faucet, cold water gushing out. Ice cold. Splashing it onto my face, feeling the slight rush as my neurons fired and nerve receptors gave me something tangible to latch onto, to feel.

Then I just stood there, leaning against the sink, looking at my reflection but not really seeing it. Water dripping off my chin, a few tendrils of hair sticking to my cheeks. A girl with a scar above her eye and freckles on her face who couldn't make a smile look real if she bet her life on it.

I could feel the Crucible drifting at the edges of my mind. The misplaced memories of those little kids, of childhood moments, and how I couldn't recognize them — myself — in my own dream. How it unsettled me.

*The Crucible is a part of you, Amelia.* Brandt's words whispered in my head. *You can't run away from it, no matter how far you go. It's already inside of you.*

No, no, don't dwell on it. I closed my eyes, tried to focus on what I could sense again. Cold tile floor, cold water down my face, whir of the small ceiling fan, the creak of a mattress in the room next door. These things reminded me of the here and now, of Queens, of everything that wasn't the Crucible. It never will be.
It’s gone. Destroyed. I was never going to see it again.

Morning could not come soon enough.

I tried to get some sleep after that, but didn't succeed. I ended up groaning to the noise of my alarm going off, my phone buzzing with a text message. I had trouble reading it, especially as tired as I was, but already guessed what it said; Steve, who had left early in the morning, probably before the sun rose up, to drive over and pick me up.

He really was devoted to this whole mini road trip idea. Aunt May had tried to convince him not to drive, that I could just travel to DC on the train.

Steve would not be convinced. Either through some foolhardy devotion to tradition, or some harebrained concept that being stuck in a confined space for five hours would be good for the two of us, Steve was not letting go of the idea.

So at 10AM, he arrived as he promised; in a Ford pick-up, green and beige panels. It looked used, second hand. At least a decade old. I had seen it from my window and it did not improve too much when I was down on the street, fully dressed with my duffel bag. Aunt May had invited him in for a break of coffee, and I had left the meal early to go sit outside and contemplate my doom.

It was just silly teen angst, but better to brood about than my nightmare.

Steve had always used his motorcycle when he came to New York. I didn't even think he had another vehicle. Not that I had been looking forward to a motorcycle ride; this felt safer, even if it meant the possibility for conversation would be 100%.

Hmm. Was it too late to feign sick and opt out? I hadn't been sick since my grand return; I wasn't sure Aunt May would buy it. Steve definitely wouldn't. So I tried to enjoy the March weather. It was sunny, warm for a pre-Spring day. I was dressed moderately in jeans, sneakers and my green jacket. My fingers played absently with MJ's bottle cap bracelet around my wrist. Aunt May insisted on the scarf and hat, so I obliged. It was quite comfortable now, and I actually smiled to myself, just a little.

This wasn't so bad.

The doors opened behind me. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Steve and May stepping out, involved in chatter, with Peter right behind them.

As I came to a stand, Peter hopped down and nudged me with his elbow. "I took care of our little problem, by the way."

It took me a second to remember what he was talking about, and I blinked in surprise when it hit me. "Really? When did you have time to do that?"

Steve had been here for less than an hour, and I had been under the impression that Peter had been inside for most of it. Peter himself just winked at me, and before he could answer, Aunt May called, "C'mon, you two! Let's have one big goodbye hug before you leave."

This hug involved nearly squishing me to death (which a small part of me almost wished had succeeded), kissing me on the forehead, and telling me to be on my best behavior. Guessing by the significant look May gave me, she knew I did not respect Steve's authority as much as I did hers.

When she let me go, Steve was already getting into the truck, so I had no choice but to follow suit. Aunt May gave me one last pat on the back, and when I threw a desperate look in Peter's direction,
he just grinned and gave me a thumbs-up.

It wasn't what I wanted, but it made me feel better, just a little.

Steve turned the engine on just as I closed the passenger door, duffle bag at my feet. Steve cast me a hesitant, but encouraging smile as he kicked the truck into gear and urged it off the curb. "Alright, this is it. You ready?"

Despite the fact that he had been up before the sun rose this morning, he looked fresh and energetic. All crisp shirt and jeans, even a Dodgers baseball cap. He kind of looked like...well, a dad, and I wondered how Steve could manage to be so well put-together that he looked as though he never needed a wink of sleep in his life.

It was a level of control I envied.

I just nodded mutely, barely able to return the smile. As the truck began to accelerate my heart did a funky lurch, and I turned in my seat. Faced nearly pressed against the window, I watched as May and Peter got smaller and smaller. They waved at us and I waved back; right up until we turned a corner and they vanished.

And that was it.

"This is the first time you've been away from them, huh?"

It was a surprisingly astute guess, and one I didn't even realize was true until I had a second to think about it. I hadn't left Peter or May's side since I first returned home from Sokovia. When it dawned on me that I was going to be on my own again, it felt like I got run over by a train. "... Y-yeah. How'd you know?"

Steve just cast me a sympathetic look. "Mia, you've been wound up like a spring ever since I got here."

"Oh," I felt my face warm and I ducked my head in embarrassment. I didn't realize I had been so easy to read; or maybe I just forgot how perceptive Steve was. And to think, I didn't consider him knowing me that well. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize, I'm not judging you," Steve said, and at my skeptical look he insisted, "No, really! I understand. Honestly, I'm the one who should say sorry. If I'd known the effect it would've had on you, I wouldn't have pushed so hard at the idea."

I shifted awkwardly in my seat, leaning against the door and away from him. The apology was even less anticipated, one I didn't think was necessary and now didn't know how to respond to. "It's, er, it's okay. It's not like I said anything."

"Why didn't you?"

That time, I remained silent. I didn't know how to tell Steve that I hadn't said anything simply because it hadn't occurred to me.

Or explain why even though the idea bothered me anyways, I still hadn't spoken up.

The whole realization made me feel stupid, even a little cowardly; but I didn't want to discuss it. I had made my decision and I was going to stick with it.

Steve glanced at me again, still waiting for me to say something; when it became clear I wasn't, he
turned his attention back to the road, sighing softly and settling into his seat. The silence in the truck was almost unbearable, and I was decidedly relieved when he turned on the radio; grungy guitar notes and jaunty lyrics, tunes of a folk-rock station, began to fill the cabin. I, too, relaxed, for a different reason — Steve wasn't going to push the matter.

The music was a welcome backdrop as we made our way, first across the Queens-borough Bridge, then Manhattan. Although a short distance, traffic slowed us down, and I got to appreciate the last minutes I could spend in New York. It'd be a whole week before I'd see it again. The rivers, the towering sentinels of skyscrapers, the neat and orderly streets and even the angry honking and rude gestures of taxi drivers warring against the rest of the populace. The way the buildings were all packed together, so many people in the streets, just going about their business, filling up my field of vision and never leaving me without something to look at, I felt safe. They served as a buffer to the outside world, staved off the endless advance of sky and trees and the unknown wideness of the world. There was a luxury in the anonymity it provided; you could live here all your life and never see the same face twice.

Not only was I leaving Peter and May. I was also leaving the one place I could disappear into, and never get lost in.

Later, as we were coming out of the Lincoln Tunnel and heading onto the mainland, my phone buzzed with a text message.

How’s it going so far? :D

Not even an hour into the trip and Peter was already messaging me. The text was super-large, easier for me to read, and it didn't occur to me until now that it was also large enough for Steve to read if he were to glance over.

I quickly pressed my phone down without answering. And just as my instincts warned me, Steve asked, “Who’s that?”

“Just Peter.” My tone was clipped.

When I didn’t elaborate, Steve cleared his throat and said, “Er, what did he say?”

As if there was any not-awkward way to relay the message without directly highlighting the current state of our conversation; that is to say, weird, stilted, and almost non-existent. So instead of the whole truth, I said, “Just wanted to know how I was doing.”

“Oh.” was Steve’s reply. A long pause. “You aren’t going to answer him?”

Now I was annoyed. What are you, the text police? I wanted to say, but bit my tongue. That’s now how he meant it, that’s not how he meant it. “I will, later, I’m just — I’m just tired, that’s all.”

Also, you know, didn’t want him to be able to read my reply and ask me about that, too.

“Well, you can take a nap if you like,” Steve offered, and checked his watch. “We’ve got four hours to kill until we get there. Of course, that’s before traffic…”
I was actually a little surprised the trip was so short; then again, my last ill-planned road trip had been on a bus to Tennessee; a longer trip on a slower vehicle. When Steve hit the highway, I noticed he angled somewhere between five to ten miles over the speed limit; not JARVIS-level crazy, probably still slower than most people on the road, but it made me wonder at Steve’s driving habits, and what it said about a person.

... Who was I kidding? Steve rode a motorcycle, too. That was, by default, more dangerous than mildly speeding in a truck.

But I digress. I was happy to take up the offer, as I was devoid of any conversation topics, and even with the short trip time, four hours was still a long time to be stuck in a car with someone you had trouble talking to.

And I hadn’t been lying, either. I was tired. That nightmare was still rattling in my brain somewhere, like some demented bat in the attic.

Deciding I really could use the sleep — and maybe when I woke up it’d put me in a better mood — I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, shutting out the sun, the truck, the whishing scenery outside. Deep down, I wondered if it was already too late to salvage this trip. If sleep could do anything at all to help.

Two failed conversations and heavy silence. Hell of a way to start this family vacation.
Golden sunlight greeted me when I stirred again, later that day.

Thankfully, no nightmares.

Music was still playing, now at a lower volume as the truck navigated through suburban streets. Not ready to wake up just yet, I looked out the window with half-lidded eyes, observing the passing houses and the pedestrians, out for a nice afternoon walk. The sun was warm and low in the sky, a soft evening drawing in.

When the truck started to slow and pull to the side, I looked up. A large, pale brownstone on the street corner, facing the sunset. Was this his place? The premature spring had small green buds sprouting on the sidewalk tree just outside, the rose bushes planted by the staircase.

Evening sunlight bathed the four-story brownstone as Steve parked the truck. Getting out and stretching my legs for the first time in hours, I noticed his bike parked a few feet away by the front steps. Just sitting there, no extra security. I looked back up at the brownstone. It seemed so ordinary, so demure. I could've mistaken this house for any of the others along this street.

Steve led the way inside, into a dim corridor and a staircase. We passed several rooms on the bottom floor, and as we began to climb, I said, "So. This is your super-secret superhero hideout, huh?"

"I'm just a man who likes his privacy," Steve replied as he paused on the second floor landing. He threw me a look over his shoulder, smirking. "It's also rent-controlled."

That made me smile and he winked. The hallway was narrower up here, with only two doors. As we continued, I said, "Well, I like it more than Avengers Tower, could you imagine —"

Before I could finish my thought, the door closest to us opened as we past, and out came a woman with a basket of laundry. She stopped at the sight of us, startled. "Oh, Steve! I didn't hear you come up."

"Oh, uh — hey! Kate," Steve faltered at the sight of her, a bewildered smile catching across his
face. I nearly bumped into him when he suddenly stopped in the middle of the hallway. I caught myself in time, a little annoyed as I took a second gander at this lady. Shorter than me, but older, maybe Steve's age. Honey blonde with warm coffee-colored eyes, she matched Steve smile for smile. "Sorry, we're just coming in from New York."

"New York?" The blonde woman eyes lit up again when she turned her attention back to Steve. "All that way, and I didn't even realize you'd left!"

"Uh, yeah, you know, just took the truck and made a day of it," Steve said, rubbing the back of his neck. My annoyance faded as I started to pick up on the pink in Steve's cheeks, the fidgety stance, then it hit me; Steve was nervous. Nervous in front of this lady.

"Well, that's nice," The woman said, and sounded like she meant it. The way she cocked her head and smiled at him, closed lips and sparkling eyes. "I'm glad you had a good time."

And then there was me, just standing there like an idiot, looking between the two. What the heck was going on?

"Yeah, me too," Steve said, remarkably uncreative of him. They just stood there looking at each other for a long, awkward moment.

Then my eyes widened, comprehension dawning on me. Oh my god. Is this flirting? Am I a dumbass?

At long last, the woman seemed to notice me. Looking to me, she asked pleasantly, "So, who's this? A friend?"

"Who?" Steve did a double-take, then looked at me as if suddenly remembering I was there. Mildly unimpressed, I raised my eyebrows at him, giving a significant look, but didn't say a word. Steve gave a chuckled weakly, caught, before saying, "Ah, sorry, right. Mia, this is Kate, my neighbor," Steve said, gesturing vaguely to her, then to me. "And Kate, this is Mia. She's my, er…"

It was only a second's hesitation, but it was enough. Having already witnessed what I guessed to be an awkward attempt at flirtation (by my guess, at any rate), the natural urge for shenanigans and spite kicked in, and before I could stop myself, I held out my hand to Kate and grinned. "— Latest pity-case. It's nice to meet you, Kate."

Steve blinked, then threw me a look that said Really? I just shrugged, unashamed.

Kate, for her part, caught my sarcasm and laughed before taking my hand. "Well, it's nice to meet you, too, Mia. I didn't know Steve had any, ah, pity cases."

Shaking his head, Steve turned back to Kate and continued, "I was going to say 'family', but she beat me to it."

"Hey —" I began, offended.

"Well, we gotta go!" Steve said quickly, pushing me along down the hall before I could throw any more shade at either of us. He waved jovially to Kate. "See you later!"

"Of course!" Kate grinned, seemingly oblivious as she went on her way towards the staircase. She waved to us and called, "Maybe we'll run into each other later!"

It seemed Steve couldn't get me inside fast enough. As I waved to Kate, he fumbled with the keys
to the door, before dragging me inside just as I called out, "Yeah, sure! Hope you have a good even _"

The door shutting cut me off. I wasn't even mad. Not gonna lie, that was pretty entertaining. I could barely contain myself, and it wasn't until Steve had ushered me inside his apartment did I finally break. With a shit-eating grin, I turned to him and said, "So, Kate, huh?"

We stepped into a small foyer with a window to the left. With a small closet and stool where a small series of boots and shoes were lined up. Steve took my jacket and hung it on the wall next to the door, and I glanced out the window to my right, taking in the street below.

"Very funny," Steve said wryly. Not mad, maybe a little aggrieved. But I was too pleased to be ashamed, glad I finally seen Steve in a moment of vulnerability. "I'm not going to live that one down, am I?"

At first, I thought he meant the flirting, but then it occurred to me he might've meant the awkward introduction instead. It didn't bother me _bad_, but I hadn't failed to notice he specifically avoided the word 'daughter' or any other word that might refer to me as his kid. Then again, it wasn't like I'd given him the chance.

"Hm," I said, pursing my lips upon realizing I was the idiot in this situation. "I haven't decided yet. You never mentioned me to this Kate, huh?"

But that hesitation still resonated with me. _Family_. I was aware of how I saw Steve, the reality of the situation. But how did Steve view me? If I hadn't jumped the gun, would Steve had been more straightforward? It wasn't like he was used to introducing me to people — anymore than I him. Or maybe I was, once again, overthinking things.

"No, we're just neighbors. I've only spoken to her in passing. Anyways, make yourself at home," he offered with a smile, gesturing for me to head further into the house. "What’s mine is yours."

I was relieved he hadn't taken my answer badly. As Steve moved on ahead, through the open doorway into a larger room, turning on the lights and bringing the apartment to life, I stopped and stood there, taking a second to absorb it. It felt awkward, to suddenly step into his life like this, and the unfamiliar setting instinctively had me marking all the windows and doors, possible exits and escapes.

After I calmed that part of my mind, my eyes drifted to the details — the living room before me, the modern furniture, the soft, warm tones. A fireplace with a finished hardwood mantle, the window seat with slightly worn upholstery. The center of the floor was occupied by a support column, fitted to be a decorative half-wall with shelving. This wasn't the penthouse of Avengers tower; bright and shiny, high-contrast with flashy colors. No, it was reserved, humble, even. Normal.

Normal. The kind of place you wouldn't guess Captain America to live in.

There was just enough technology to throw me off. The widescreen TV, the stereo system, the wafer-thin laptop sitting on the coffee table. An electronic thermostat, flip switches. I don't know why I assumed he _wouldn't_ have these things, I just expected something…. different.

"Sorry it's a little messy, I didn't really have the chance to clean before I left this morning," Steve apologized with a chuckle, picking up a jacket off a nearby seat, but besides that I didn't notice anything out of place.
"It's fine," I said absent-mindedly, still looking around. God, Aunt May would kill for Peter and I to keep our house as clean as Steve did his.

Then the other pieces came into place as I shifted again, taking one step forward, then another. The living room took one corner of the building, so the rest of the apartment laid out to my right. Past the living room was a small hallway of doors to what I figured to be a bed and bathroom. Opposite the far end of the living room was a small bar and a set of stools that opened into the kitchen, leading to another hallway leading back into the building.

It was about the same size as Aunt May's in Queens, but...sparser, somehow. I couldn't put my finger on it. There was just as many things here, each room was filled with its share of furnishings and knickknacks. But something was missing. I just couldn't figure out what.

I caught the items that made this place home for Steve, special in a way that was his alone. The old-fashioned record player, the X-shaped stand to hold said discs. The framed posters on the wall, old war propaganda pieces, a few framed newspaper headliners from the 40's. More framed pictures were set against the floor, along with stacks of books by the wall of shelves. Lots of books.

I half-expected them to be war novels or biographies when I stepped closer to inspect them. But picking one up, I was surprised to find it was an anthology of Mark Rothko, a famous painter. The book beneath that one on the stack was a history of cinema. Another, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Huh.

"Had any ideas for dinner?" Steve called, making me jolt a little. His voice had come from behind and I realized I'd lost track of his movements.

Setting the book down, I just shrugged my shoulders. "Uh…dunno."

Another one of my incredible eloquent responses. Steve seemed to expect this, as he leaned against the bar that separated the space between us. Tilted his head in what I thought might have been encouraging. "Well, I'm open to ideas. There's always take-out, pizza. Kate recommends a Thai place down the road I haven't tried yet. Or I could whip something up here? My cooking will probably never stand up to May's, but I promise, it's more edible than it looks."

That made me smile a little. *God, he is trying, isn't he?* Ordering take-out seemed tempting, especially after a long ride, but it didn't feel quite right to get lazy just yet. Still pondering about the titles I just read, I said the first thing that popped into my mind, "How about… pasta?"

"Spaghetti it is," Steve grinned, and the relief that followed in his dropped shoulders was nearly palpable. We found something we could both work with, it seemed.

Matter settled, I made to turn around and inspect his library some more when Steve spoke up again, catching my attention. "Oh, you can go set your bag in the room down the hall. The bed's yours."

The comment surprised me. "Y-your bed? I mean, I can just take the couch…?"

I'd honestly sleep on the floor, that seemed more comfortable an idea than taking Steve's own room. But he just shook his head, turned towards the stove, face away from me. "I don't think it's very gentleman of me to make you sleep on the couch."

I just stood there silently, stewing in my discomfort but unable to vocalize it in any coherent way. Perhaps sensing my growing anxiety, Steve paused, then turned to me, gesturing with a placating
hand. "Mia, it's fine. The couch is big enough for me, don't worry about it. I figured you'd like the
privacy."

He was right, I did, but that didn't shake the scratchy feeling of displacing Steve in his own home.
Still, he insisted, and I followed his pointed finger down the hall, to the singular bedroom that
awaited.

It was as tidy as everything else, I noted, stepping inside. The floor was clear, the hamper empty,
bed made and sheets tucked to military precision. I almost felt bad, dropping my bag on top and
messing the smooth spread of sheets. The impact sent up the distinct scent of fabric softener —
new, clean sheets. He must have prepped this before he left this morning.

Wow, Steve really did have it all taken care of, didn't he?

Unsure how to feel about this, I left the bag there; first setting up my phone charger and cell on the
nightstand before sitting on the bed; partly just to test it out, partly because I was feeling kind of
useless and didn't know what to do. So I just sat there and took in the room, with its plain dresser,
the vintage photographs of old bomber planes, a model car on the bureau with a mirror. My
reflection looked back at me, the bags under my eyes a reminder of the sleepless night I had before.

Still watching myself, I tucked some hair behind my ear. I had come a long way since Sokovia.

"Hey Mia!" Steve's voice echoed down the hall. "Wanna help your old man out with dinner?"

"Oh, right," I snapped out of it and got up, making a beeline back to the kitchen. A seed of
uncertainty was still sprouting in my gut. I still felt a little dumb around Steve, feeling every
moment of silence and wondering what the hell my teenage emo ass was gonna do when I didn't
have Aunt May there to make Casual Adult Conversation.

I decided I was going to try my best. That always worked out. Sometimes.

When I returned, the kitchen had been transformed with an influx of ingredients, spices, pots and
tools. A pot of water was already set over the stove, not yet boiling, while another had plain tomato
juice in it — one Steve was trying to add spices into, studying a cookbook at the same time,
holding out a tablespoon over the pot, not yet tipping it over as he read over the instructions
another time. After a long second of deep trepidation, he finally tipped his hand and let the oregano
fall.

On the cutting board was a frozen brick of packaged meat. My attention drew to that, first. I picked
it up without a second thought. "What's this for?"

"Meatballs," Steve said, not looking up from his book. "Forgot I had it in the freezer, though… we
don't have to have them if you don't want to."

"Spaghetti without meatballs is like," I began, taking the brick and sticking it in the microwave to
defrost. "Cake without icing. It's just not as good."

"Fair enough," Steve grinned, shaking his head. "I wasn't sure if you were a big eater or not."

"I'm not so bad," I said, watching the meat rotate behind the microwave window. Halfway through,
I opened the door to flip the meat over. "It's Peter you have to look out for. His stomach is bigger
on the inside than the outside."

"That explains why there's no leftover pizza every time I bring some over."
I laughed a little at that. When the microwave dinged, I pulled out the now-warm slab of burger and set it on the cutting board. The process was mostly silent, aside from the slowly bubbling pot of water, the clatter of bowls and spatulas, the crackle of fire in the stovetop. It wasn't a bad silence; at least not to me. Both of us were busy working and I kind of liked the quiet comradery. It was also nice because, just as I predicted, I couldn't think of a way to break the ice. So I just puttered along and pretended to be oblivious as I started to roll the blended meat-and-spice combo into little balls, setting them in neat rows on a cookie sheet, while Steve finished taste-testing the sauce and put the dried spaghetti into the now-boiling pot of water.

When we switched tasks so he could finish the meatballs and I watch the simmering sauce, the conversation didn't pick up again. I noticed the TV in the corner behind us and was heavily tempted to ask to turn it on. Or maybe just do it myself. But that would be rude, wouldn't it? At least, to me, it would be clear that my socializing was so bad or reluctant that I had to cover it in some other way.

The one good thing was that the meal seemed to be getting along alright. The meatballs now baking in the oven. The noodles swirling in water, sauce bubbling cheerfully. The smells, certainly, indicated a good turnout, and the kitchen grew warm and comfortable with our activity.

"What is it?"

Steve's question pulled me out of a reverie; I had been staring into the sauce pan, not paying attention aside from stirring. I looked up, confused. "What?"

"You're smiling," Steve shrugged one shoulder, the one closest to me.

"Oh," I said, blinking down at the pot, feeling the corners of my lips pull into my cheeks. "The sauce. It smells just like the way my mom used to cook it."

And just like that, the smile was gone.

I hadn't meant to bring her up, but the memories were there; of Mom in the kitchen, tending to an array of pots and pans, whipping up homemade dinner as she always did. Nothing fancy, really; soups and pastas, often because I was sick and had difficulty eating other things.

It was bad enough I remembered her, and remembered that I missed her. It was another to remind Steve of the one thing about him I couldn't get over.

I didn't mean to guilt trip him; nevertheless, Steve went silent, having no immediate reply. I closed my eyes and inhaled; I had inadvertently killed another moment.

"My mom used to cook all the time, too."

Eyes opening, I blinked up at Steve in surprise. "Really?"

"Oh yeah," Steve nodded, stirring the noodles with a distant look in his face. "Dinner, birthdays, church potlucks, the soup kitchens, she was always making stuff. Not just for us, but for the folks in the neighborhood. She'd drop by a pot of soup for a family that just lost a job, she'd trade coffee rations for flour. Somehow, my mother always had an extra loaf of bread around to give to Bucky after school. Save up a whole month for enough sugar to make a cake for my birthday once. I was seven. It was the best birthday I ever had."

Steve shook his head to himself, chuckling wryly. "I have no idea how she did it. It wasn't so bad when I was young, but when the Great Depression hit...we barely had enough to feed ourselves. But my mother, she always had something. We kept a small garden on the roof; carrots, cabbages,
whatever we could make grow in an old pot or bucket...I think it was the one of the reasons I made it out of there alive."

As I listened to him speak, it occurred to me that this was entirely new information. I had no idea what Steve's own mother was like, his family even. I knew, vaguely, from the history books that he didn't have a father growing up, but beyond that, Steve's past prior to WWII was a mystery to me.

I tilted my head, intrigued. "I think I heard about those. Victory gardens, right?"

"No, that's what they were called during the War." Steve shook his head, then frowned a little, apparently amused by a thought. "I guess we were just used to the rationing at that point. I don't know when it ended, but for me, it was just a, uh, a reality. I don't remember much of my life that didn't involve having to scrape by with food. But my mother, she knew how to survive, and she wasn't going to let anyone else down if she could help it. We were all suffering, together."

I studied the stove's backwash, taking all that in. "What was her name?"

"Sarah." A faint, sad smile on his lips. "Her name was Sarah. I think she would've liked you, Mia."

My lips quirked up, surprised, and also touched. A silence fell between us as I absorbed that, continuing to stir the slowly simmering sauce. Sarah: the name of a woman I've never met. A strange ache filled my chest, a sense of loss I couldn't quite understand.

Then I noted a missing piece in Steve's story. "What about your dad?"

"Oh, he died before I was born. A soldier in World War One." The look on Steve's face was a type of serene melancholy; an old pain, but one he had long since learned to live with, had come to accept. "Never got to meet him, but my mother would tell stories. An Irishman who moved to America for a better life; faced discrimination, but didn't let that stop him from finding a life, a home here, a country worth fighting for. Dying for."

I opened my mouth and almost said I know how that feels before remembering who I was talking to. How I wished Mom had done that, but she had remained utterly silent. I suppose she had a good reason, looking back, but still. It didn't feel right to say something like that. Not to Steve. I didn't want to inadvertently accuse him of anything.

Instead, I screwed up my face, feeling a deep sense of empathy and wondering how to communicate it. "That's good, though, right? You knew who he was."

"I think so," Steve said, taking the pot of cooked noodles and dumping the hot water in the sink, before setting the pot back down on the counter. Taking out plates, he continued, "He inspired me, maybe in ways my mother would have preferred not to. But I like to think I would've made them proud. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be who I am now."

"You wouldn't be here now," I added; not in a mean way, but pointing out what I figured to be a fact. If Steve hadn't been raised the way he had, he wouldn't have joined the Army, wouldn't have become the perfect soldier.

Wouldn't have woken up seventy years in the future.

Steve, too, didn't take it that way. He just cast me a rueful smile. "Yeah, I suppose that's true. Can't complain, though. Future's not so bad once you get used to it."

That surprised me a little, too. As the plates were filled, I took the one Steve handed to me and stuck my fork into the first meatball. Although there was a kitchen table right there, neither of us
moved from the kitchen counter, or the mess we had made. I said, "It doesn't bother you, being in the future? I always figured it'd never stop being weird, or something."

"Oh, it has its moments, still," Steve said with a nod of acknowledgement. He pulled out two sodas from the fridge and tossed me one. "Hey, good catch. There are the things you expect, you know, better phones and cars. The Internet completely blindsided me." Steve cast me a side glance as he took a sip from his bottle. "Oh, and the manners. Respect for your elders? Completely gone down the drain."

"You're mean," I said with a grin, flipping off the soda cap with my thumb, one-handed. The other hand was still balancing my plate. I set my drink onto the counter as I continued, not at all offended, "Maybe we just don't respect you because you haven't earned it yet."

"Oh, ouch," Steve pretended to wince and bend over in mock pain. "See what I mean? No respect. Things weren't like this back in the day, no sir."

Steve cast me a side glance as he took a sip from his bottle. "No, I do, it's just," Steve frowned a little, studying the far wall for a moment, then back to his plate, pushing over a meatball. "It's not something I prefer to dwell on, I suppose. When I can, I do. But I think what's best for me right now is to live in the present, or try to. Too much time in the past and you might miss what's right in front you."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess that makes sense." After hearing so much about his parents, I wasn't expecting that answer.

Steve glanced at me, maybe realizing I didn't have much of an answer for that. He smiled, but not in a way that I liked. "So, how's school going?"

I threw him a sour look. "Oh, please. That's the best segue you got?"

Steve just shrugged, pleased with himself. "Depends if you have good grades or not. Is Michelle still bullying Peter?"

"He wouldn't call it that, but yeah," I replied, easing up at the tease. The conversation after that was light, easy. As we ate, I found myself enjoying everything. The food, the jokes, just the general air of it all. It occurred to me, in a brief revelation, that this might be the longest conversation we ever had between each other.

Huh. So far, so good.

Bang.

I wasn't sure where the noise came from, only that it was close. One second, I was leaning against the counter, in the middle of telling Steve a joke Peter told me a day ago. And the next, I was on the ground, heart pounding, eyes wide, and my dinner plate, shattered on the ground at my feet.

I didn't remember falling. My eyes stared at the red sauce now splattering the floor, thick and red, its pungent spice lost to me, replaced by a thicker, rustier scent.

The sound of the gunshot still rang in my ears. I didn't even hear Steve saying my name, and didn't register his presence until a touch on my shoulder made me jump.

Steve snapped his hand back, concern engraved into his face. He was kneeling down next to me;
mouth moving, but I couldn't make out the words until the pounding heartbeat in my ears started to ease: "….fine, everything's fine, just a car backfiring…"

Even though he was right next to me, Steve's voice sounded far away, like it was echoing down a train tunnel.

When I finally understood what he was saying, my face flushed warm with embarrassment. My hands trembled as I started to gather the shattered plate pieces, a burning behind my eyes. "S-sorry, I-I can't — I d-didn't mean —"

It was more than just embarrassment. Even though I knew I had overreacted, I couldn't seem to control my breathing or get my heart to slow down.

*Why couldn't I calm down?*

"Hey, it's alright, it's just an accident," Steve replied evenly, helping clean up, in more measured, easy movements. When he grabbed a washcloth, I thought he was going to use it to clean up the sauce, but instead he handed it to me. "Oh, Mia, your nose is bleeding…"

"W-what?" I blinked, startled. Stared at the offered cloth, then my hand went to my nose. Withdrew it, and a trail of blood slipped down my fingers.

And when I looked up again, it wasn't Steve there in front of me. No, instead, I saw cold eyes and pallid face, lanky dark hair and a shiny, metal arm presenting me the washcloth. But it wasn't clean anymore. It was covered in blood.

Bright, vibrant blood. Red as the star on his shoulder. Red as the star on mine.

I seized, terror petrifying me, a gasp caught in my throat. But as soon as I blinked, the image (*so real, so close*) was gone.

Steve was back — blond hair, blue eyes — brow furrowing at my reaction. "Mia? What's wrong?"

I opened my mouth to answer but nothing came out. A dozen different words caught on the tip of my tongue, too many and too confusing to speak. My heart was still going like a rabbit, my hands tingled, muscles in my back and legs tensing. Ready to go, ready to run. *It's not safe, it's not safe here.*

Blood slipped past my lip, onto my tongue. I recoiled at the taste, and without thinking, I was on my feet, rushing out of the kitchen, trying to staunch the bleeding with my own hand. Steve stumbled back at my sudden departure, calling out to me, but I wasn't listening. I just had to go, had to leave, had to hide.

I had just turned my back on him when the burning in my eyes came to the forefront. A sharp, ragged breath racked my throat before I could stop it, a brief sob escaping.

Luckily, by the time I felt the shame double, I was already in the bedroom, slamming the door behind me.

The bed was right in front of me, but I went for the closet instead. Banged my hip against the bedpost on my way there, before crawling into the far corner of the closet, shoving aside boxes and yanking the door closed. The racing thoughts and pounding heart only began to subside as darkness fell over me, and the comforting presence of the narrow walls and veil of hanging clothes brought protection. From what? Who knows. I certainly didn't. I only knew the panic in my skin, in my
still-shaking hands, the smeared blood mixed with confused, unwarranted tears.

I curled up there, arms wrapped around my legs, and buried my head in my knees, trying to catch my breath, and failing, over and over.

"Mia?"

Steve. I jolted, looking up. The tears had abated; I didn't know how much time had passed, only that it was long enough for me to calm down, to stop hyperventilating. I squinted in the darkness, trying to locate Steve's voice, only to realize he wasn't outside the closet, but rather the bedroom. The following rap on the door confirmed that theory.

"Amelia? Are you there?" he tried again, but I was still huddled in the closet, too far away to answer. Or too ashamed to try.

How long had I been in here? How long had he been out there? Why didn't he enter? I couldn't remember if I had locked the door behind me or not. It seemed like something I would naturally do, but the past hour was now just a blur. I didn't know if I had the sense of mind at the time to even think of it.

Even now, I was starting to feel ridiculous. Hiding in a closet, as if that would protect me from the dangers I feared. The very real dangers that hadn't haunted me for months.

Why was I suddenly freaking out now?

I didn't know how to explain it, only knew that whatever I was feeling, it was powerful, overwhelming. It was like my nightmares, only worse, because I had been awake. I couldn't shake myself out of it like I could before.

The silence stretched on to the point I hoped Steve had already left; I hadn't bothered to answer, after all. I certainly wasn't going to open that door. My body felt locked in place, fingers gripping the fabric of my jeans so tightly my knuckles were white.

But then —

"Look, I-I don't know what's going on," Steve spoke again, at length. There was an odd timbre in his voice. Almost a tremble. "But I just, I want you to know you can talk to me, okay? Whatever it is, I'm... I'm right here."

Swallowing thickly, I peered out of the crack in the closet door. The light of the hallway shone in beneath the bedroom door, Steve's shadow splitting the middle. In a movie, this would be the moment I found my gumption, had a change in heart, slipped out of my hiding spot and opened the door, just at the right moment, when Steve begun to turn away, defeated.

But this wasn't a movie. My emotions didn't obey the laws of good cinematic timing. I just continued to sit there, bereft in the dark, watching Steve's shadow beneath the doorway.

Waited, watched as, after one long minute stretched by. Then another.

A soft sigh, barely perceptible. Then Steve's shadow slipped away.

I listened carefully as his footsteps vanished down the hallway. I pressed my face into my arm to cover a cough, hoping he wouldn't hear and come back. Then I slumped backwards and rested my head against an old duffel bag. I had already resigned myself to this spot; no way was I going to be sleeping in the bed tonight. I doubted I'd be able to get sleep anyways.
This was going to be a long night.

What a hell of a way to start to this vacation.
The next morning, I found a plate outside the bedroom door, with two pieces of toast and a note on it.

It was a surprise; earlier, I heard Steve knocked once on the door and say something, but I had been half-asleep and didn’t catch it.

Honestly, I almost didn’t take it. Almost. But then I remembered I had never finished dinner last night. Maybe Steve remembered, too.

I quickly dragged it inside before Steve could notice the door was open. This time, I made sure to lock it behind me, glanced at the shaded windows (no sunlight or spies for me), before looking down at the note.

It was short. Took me about half a minute to read through the cursive.

If you ever need to talk, I’m here.

I contemplated the note for a long moment before putting it back down on the plate, exchanging it for the toast. I didn’t hesitate to eat that, and actually managed to enjoy the taste of honey jam for a hot second. I ate sitting on the floor, my back against the door, glad to have my grumbling stomach appeased.

The clock read 10:43AM. I had not left the bedroom since I hid in here last night.

Steve had knocked on the door a few more times over the night and earlier this morning, to no response. I had figured he must have given up.

Picking the crumbs off the plate and nibbling on them, I guessed maybe he hadn’t.

I smiled a little bit, but it dropped all too soon. That dull headache behind my eyes returned, as well
as the exhaustion of a sleepless night.

The bed sat before me, sheets untouched. Waiting.

I went back to safe, windowless shadows of the closet.

Rated Rating

Fragments of my past, haunting me.

That same nightmare came back. The white forest, the snow, the whistling bitter wind in my face. The Winter Soldier, leading the way in complete silence.

But something was different this time.

I wasn’t sure what it was in the beginning. At first, the only difference I noticed was the sudden chill, the cold that bit into my skin. The pain wasn’t numbed anymore. I could feel the sting in my cheeks, wince at the rising shrill of wind. But it wasn’t snowing as heavily. The fog not as thick. Just like last time, I followed in the soldier’s trail, matching him footstep for footstep in the deep snow.

My legs seemed to be on autopilot, and I stared at the back of the soldier’s head.

And just like last time, the thought entered my head: This is your chance. Kill him and run.

But the rifle was too heavy in my hands. My arms were wet cement. I couldn’t move them no matter how much I tried. I struggled telling apart nightmare from memory. I was trapped in my own body, my own head, unable to do anything but watch it all play out.

I never stopped trying to fight.

I should have been trying to wake myself up, but I was never any good at lucid dreaming. This felt too real to ever be just a dream.

What should have given it away was when a boy and a girl suddenly appeared in front of me, racing through the forest; the same girl and boy as before. The girl, blonde braid flying in the wind as she rode on a skateboard, the boy pushing her from behind. Laughter echoed, distant and bouncing, as if coming down a long subway tunnel.

I paused, stared as they went past. The only time I felt in control of myself.

The soldier did not turn around. He didn’t seem to see or hear anything I did, as usual.

On we walked, not stopping for any breaks. I noticed the trees here weren’t so bare — some of the pines still had some needles, providing overhead coverage. A bird, here or there.

But the sky remained an endless expanse of thick white clouds, the horizon hidden by mountainsides in every direction I looked.
Far from home.

Once again, the soldier came to a stop ahead of me. I joined him, discovering ourselves at the edge of a treeline, a cliff. A valley, below us.

He pointed down the slope. I expected to see another deer, but instead, there was a small village, a road leading out. The houses were all small, made of stone, and their streets unpaved. From up here, we had a perfect view of the town center, the church tower the tallest building in the entire area.

It seemed so…cozy. The town center seemed to be a market, little rows of stalls and people circling around like ants.

This time, when the soldier brought me in close, he had a small, grainy photo in his hand. The portrait of a man with a thick handlebar mustache, dark eyes and a friendly smile. There was a distinct mole on his right cheek.

“This is your target.” The soldier whispered.

I didn’t know how long it took to find him. All I knew was my knees in the snow, the both of us still as statues as we scanned the little town. The soldier with a small pair of binoculars. Me with my scope. I imagined we would’ve been in that exact position for days, if that’s what it took, waiting for that man to arrive.

And all that time, I wanted to run. I knew what was going to happen.

I couldn’t let it.

“Там.”

The soldier’s tone was quiet, but I had gotten so used to the silence that his voice made me jump. He pointed to a spot east of the village. I squinted, and watched as a vehicle emerged from around a bend below. An old Jeep, chipped brown paint, heading towards the village.

I readied myself without needing the order. Made sure the rifle was loaded, before following the vehicle through my scope. This was a greater distance than the deer had been. I would need more care to account for wind, and the arc of the bullet.

I could not miss.

*I had to miss.*

I didn’t want to do this, but my body wouldn’t listen. I couldn’t tear my eyes away, unable to stop watching as the Jeep came to a stop just outside the village, at the front of a little house. The driver of the Jeep got out, before opening the rear passenger door.

Out emerged the man. The target. Handlebar mustache, cheek mole, thick fur coat. He clapped his driver on the shoulder with a smile, as thanks, and began to walk around the car, to the front door of the house.

The back of his head entered the crosshairs.

“Сделай выстрел.” The soldier ordered.

Something in my chest lurched. My finger froze over the trigger. Breath caught in my throat.
Tongue dry.

Don’t do it. Don’t do it. Resist.

“Сделай выстрел.” The soldier repeated, his voice tensing. The target was now on the stoop of the house. He was raising his hand to knock.

Soon, he would be inside, and it would be too late.

Still, I couldn’t move.

This isn’t who you are.

I wanted to listen. I was trying so hard. I could feel parts of my body responding to me. A twitch of my head, a wriggle of my toes. I could do it. I could break out. I could run.

If you do this, there’s no turning back.

I sensed, rather than saw, the soldier turning his head to me. I didn’t dare look up to meet his gaze. If I didn’t do this, if I failed, there would be no remorse in my punishment.

But it would be better than to take a life.

Better than to become a monster.


My arms tensed around the weapon.

No. You are not a killer.

The door to the little house opened. A squat woman greeted the man with open arms. They were smiling, laughing.

I leaned forward. My thoughts were racing, panicking. This isn’t me. They can’t control me. I am stronger, I am stronger, I will not kill, I am not a —

CRACK.

The target jolted, as if he’d been shoved. Then he fell forward, revealing woman standing in front of him. The man landed hard, sprawling across her doormat.

The woman threw her arms up, mouth opening in a silent scream.

Her face, splattered in blood.

✮✮✮

My eyes flew open.
The darkness that greeted me was so different from the dream that at first, I didn’t know where I was. My heart was racing and my neck was cramped, and it wasn’t until I shifted and felt the wall behind me and a coat brushed my shoulder did I remember I was still curled up inside the closet.

The small space no longer felt comforting. Suddenly feeling stifled, unable to breathe, I shoved the door open with my heel and tumbled out, trying not to gasp for breath.

I braced myself against the carpeted floor. I stared at my splayed fingers. The memory of holding that rifle was still hot in my mind, heavy in my hands.

I didn’t realize I was shaking until I made myself stand up. My shirt clung to my body, cold sweat chilling in the night air. I glanced at the alarm clock on the bedside table.

Three in the morning.

Fantastic.

Two days had passed since my… episode, and I did not leave the apartment. Hell, I barely left the bedroom, and spent my time staring at the walls, my phone, or in short, fitful naps of the insomniac. I couldn’t remain asleep longer than an hour. I didn’t want to.

This night had been the worst so far. The nightmares that I had been anticipating all this time finally pounced, and left me a shaking, sweating mess.

I rubbed back at the closet; my wretched little sanctuary for the past two, almost three nights now. Rubbing my arms, I already knew I wouldn’t be doing that again. It could protect my paranoia in the daytime. But at night? Nothing could keep away the nightmares.

It felt as though I hadn’t gotten any sleep at all. I felt more exhausted now than I had the previous morning.

At the same time, a restlessness overwhelmed me. Standing up felt better, but I had to move. To think. To… I don’t know. Just not be here anymore.

Opening the bedroom door carefully, I peered out into the dark hallway. I couldn’t hear anything—hadn’t heard anything as far as I could recall. Steve must still be asleep. Not wishing to disturb the silence, I crept out, stepping carefully over the hardwood floor; I couldn’t predict where it would creak, so just went for the lightest footsteps I could manage.

Moonlight filtered in through the living room windows, casting the space in a soft blue-white light. I glanced at the couch, and frowned when I saw that it was empty. Where was Steve?

I looked around, behind me, towards the kitchen. He didn’t seem to be here. Maybe he was in another room.

Fine by me. I wanted to be alone anyways.

Approaching one of the windows, I fumbled around for a bit before I figured out how to open it. There was no handy fire escape or balcony for me to brood on, and I wasn’t daring enough to sneak out onto the roof (just yet), so an open window would have to do. The pane opened by angling out, so I couldn’t really lean out that far. But it was all I needed for the moment.

Cold night air rushed in. I pressed my forehead against the cool glass and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Can’t sleep?”
Jumping, I cursed, then wanted to kick myself for letting that out. Behind me stood Steve, leaning against the bookcase, the upper half of his body hidden in shadow. I hadn’t heard him come in. I opened my mouth, scrambling on what to say; apologize for my language, give a witty retort, or maybe swear again.

Instead, I bowed my head. “...Yeah.”

“Me neither,” Steve replied, his tone so casual. As if the fact that we hadn’t really spoken for two days was an issue. He just sauntered over, sitting on the window seat opposite me, easy as could be; like the last time he saw me wasn’t in the middle of a panic attack. He was dressed in a loose shirt and some black sweatpants — pajamas?

The moonlight glinted off his blue eyes, turning them silver. He had a sort of half-smile on his face. Part amused, part chagrin. “Couch is too soft. I take it the bed doesn’t suit you, either?”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I hadn’t used it, even once. Unable to meet his gaze, I focused on his socks and mumbled, “Yeah, something like that.”

The way Steve could be so calm, friendly had completely disarmed me. I didn’t expect this to be the way our first conversation started after that whole episode. We had interacted in small ways; the most direct way was texting me intermittently. The first day he asked if I wanted to call Aunt May, wanted to go home. I said no; as terrible as I felt, I didn’t want to go home to May and explain what happened. I certainly couldn’t lie about it, and Steve would no doubt give her a full briefing.

As far as I knew, Steve kept his word and didn’t tell her. At least, I hadn’t gotten any calls from Aunt May, which was a good sign. She wouldn’t hesitate if she knew something was wrong. After that, Steve would ask me more mundane questions; usually if I was okay.

All of my replies were monosyllabic. But I made sure to reply to most of them.

“How’re you feeling?” Steve asked.

“Oh,” I blinked, stirred out of another reverie. I hugged my legs to my chest. Resting my cheek on my knees, I could look out the window and not feel pressured to meet his gaze. “I’m… okay. Better, I guess. A little bit.”

It sounded a lot like a lie.

“Nightmares?” he guessed, tilting his head. Gentle, inquisitive.

I could sense the topic dancing at the edge of our conversation. I focused on a street lamp across the road, its light flickering over the sidewalk. “Yeah.”

“I get them, too.”

I lifted my head, eyes widening slightly at him. Steve looked so relaxed lounging there, while I was a wound-up ball of tension. How could he have nightmares? “You do?”

“Well, when I’m not tossing and turning all night, sure,” Steve shrugged, making a face. “It’s not as bad as it used to be. When I first woke up here, they were constant. But now, I don’t know. It got better, over time. My biggest problem is just finding the right mattress now.”

It was meant as a lighthearted joke on a serious topic, and it actually worked. I laughed. A hoarse, weak little huff, really, but genuine nonetheless. “Yeah, I’m not used to sleeping on a real bed, either.”
It wasn’t until the mirth froze on Steve’s face did I finally hear myself and I shut down. Mouth snapping close, eyes averted, head turned away.

*Why did I say that. Why did I say that. Such an idiot.*

Steve didn’t say anything. My neck prickled from his gaze, and it took all my strength to keep my hackles from rising.

At length, he said, “Mia, I want you to know that you can trust me. You can talk to me. And if you don’t want to, that’s okay, too.”

Fingers tightened into my jeans. I clenched my jaw, watching that streetlamp like my life depended on it. A part of me really did want to tell him. To just unload, if nothing else. And what if Steve was the only person who could understand? I didn’t have anyone else in my life that I could potentially trust with the whole story right now. Not even Peter. The twins, once, but they weren’t here right now.

Someone I didn’t have to worry I’d hurt or scare with this information.

But the thought of revealing my current nightmare was too awful. My skin crawled and my eyes burned just thinking about it.

Pushing it back, I struggled to keep my face even. I was probably failing miserably. But could I really trust Steve? I wasn’t even sure who he worked for. Maybe he was mature, experienced enough to hear the story, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be just as disgusted as anyone else.

Fear made my heart skip a beat.

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes. Not talking was okay, too.

He had nightmares, too.

Steve sighed. Maybe he knew he’d gone too far, pushed too hard. Didn’t know how to backpedal after I made that slip. Rubbing the back of his neck, he started to say, “Mia, I’m sorry, I won’t ask —”

“I thought it would be over,” I whispered. “I thought it’d be over when I got home.”

I was so caught up in my own thoughts I hadn’t realized I’d interrupted him. When I realized I had, I flushed and glanced at him, embarrassed. But Steve was just staring at me; a tiny nod to keep going.

Discomfort climbing up my back like a spectre, I went back to studying the seat upholstery. Continuing quietly: “Even after I found out Mom died, I thought I still had a normal life waiting for me. That I could just fall back into it, like an old habit. That I could put behind everything that happened and just move on.”

I didn’t know how to explain everything that happened after the fact. Then again, Steve probably already knew. “But obviously, that wasn’t the case.”

“When that Mandarin thing happened?” I took a deep breath, straightening my back, having finally summoned the will to meet Steve’s gaze again. His face was unreadable, a slight frown, but it meant I could speak without hesitation. “I jumped right into it. Everything I tried to do to be normal? Right out the window without a second thought. Risking my life for who knows what. And the funniest thing? After it was all over, I had the best sleep of my life.”
I just hunched up my shoulders in a helpless shrug, laughing without humor. “I mean, that’s messed up, right? After everything that I’ve gone through, everything I’ve seen, and it doesn’t stop me. I wonder if there’s something wrong with me.”

Steve’s frown deepened, but he didn’t answer that.

“But at least it’s not worse, right?” I finished with a wry, broken smile.

Steve sighed through his nose. I guess that was a lot to take in; I didn’t realize how much I was rambling and now I was starting to feel mortified, and had to break eye contact again. Look out the window, work my jaw and fight against the tears again. What an idiot. What a fool. Why did I say all that?

That’s when a hand rested on my shoulder. Steve had leaned over, and now gave me a gentle shake of reassurance.

And said: “No.”

I blinked, caught off guard. Steve looked me dead in the eye as he continued, “You don’t have to be grateful that it isn’t worse, Mia. Just because you’re not where you were before doesn’t mean it’s all better now.”

“...Oh.” Was my oh-so-eloquent reply. I didn’t know how to respond to that; something in me said those words were important, but I was struggling to unravel them. All the same, I felt a strange lightness in my chest. A sort of sense that, maybe, everything would be okay.

Still feeling a little lame on how to respond, I added, “Thanks.”

Nice save.

Apparently assured that I had received the message, Steve nodded and pulled back. I watched him for a moment before asking, “What do you do, then? About the nightmares?”

Steve had to think about that. “Not sure. I don’t really have a cure for it. But doing this, getting fresh air, even exercise sometimes, it helps. Netflix is also a great help.”

“You have a Netflix account?” I snorted, disbelieving. But from the look on his face, I realized he was serious. “No way. I didn’t think you’d go for that sort of thing.”

“What, you don’t remember our last conversation?” Steve asked, smirking. It was dangerously close to a bad topic, but he managed to steer it away with: “Just because I’m old doesn’t mean I can’t get with the times. I bet I know a lot more than you think. I even take suggestions, from time to time.”

“Really?” I said, sitting back to stretch out my legs and fold my arms. It was a more open position, and my back had been starting to cramp up. “So if I tell you to watch something from this millennium, you’ll do it?”

“I guess it depends, but sure.”

Grinning, I already knew what I wanted to suggest. “Have you seen TopGun?”

“...That’s the one with that Tom Cruise guy, right?”

“Yes, him! Me and Peter love that movie. If you haven’t already, you have to see it.”
“This is by far the most excited I’ve ever seen you and that scares me, to be honest,” Steve said with a completely straight face. “Do I really want to do this?”

“Yes!”

“Alright, alright,” he laughed, holding up his hands in surrender. “I’ll add it to the list, don’t worry.”

Extremely pleased, I sat back, letting my shoulders drop. What felt like a mass of tension had left my body, a weight lifted, my mind brought to a better place. Even if temporarily.

Funny how things work out.

“Hey,” Steve began quietly, pulling something out of his pocket and offering it to me. “I know this is kind of late, but consider it a belated birthday present. Just something I wanted you to have.”

He placed a small, cylindrical object into my hand, a long cord attached. My brow furrowed, confused. I flipped open the cover, discovering the floating needle inside.

It was a compass. Steve’s compass.

My jaw dropped and I whipped around to look at him. “This — this is your —”

“Yep, the one and only,” Steve gave a definite nod, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a smile. Then he dipped his head, expression fading slightly. He clasped his hands together. “Look, I, ah, I know I haven’t been the best. But I want you to know, Mia, I’m not giving up on you. So, try not to give up on me just yet, okay?”

I pulled my eyes from the compass to meet his gaze, uncertain. “I...I’ll try.”

He smiled. “If you want me to hang around, just say the word. I’ll be with you till the end of the line.”

I stared at him, then back at the compass. I ran my thumb over the slightly scratched glass covering the needle. Although the device was over seventy years old, it felt much newer. It was small, but the green metal casing gave it a solidity. A little dinged, a little scratched, hardly perfect, but somehow more valuable than I could describe. Markings of a war I’d only read in books and seen on screen. And there was a weight to it, a mass greater than its physical size in my palm.

A burning rose behind my eyes; I was suddenly overwhelmed with an emotion I didn’t know how to describe. Steve’s words had struck me far deeper than I anticipated.

Tears bit at the surface, and I quickly wiped them away before Steve could see. But the little sniffl ratted me out, and I was screwed.

“Oh, hey,” A gentle hand landed on my back. Steve leaned in, his brows rising in worry. Perhaps even a little bit of panic, clearly not expecting this reaction. “Uh, it’s — it’s okay. I’m sorry, if it’s not right, I didn’t mean to upset you, Mia —”

“No, it’s not that,” I shook my head, teary smile half-hidden behind my raised sleeve. Once it started, it was hard to stop. With shaky voice I said, “I-I love it, it’s just…”

When I didn’t speak for a long moment, Steve frowned. “What? What’s the matter?”

How could I say it? The guilt rattled in my bones, taunting. Here Steve was, giving me a sacred
piece of his past. Or at least, I thought it was sacred. Point was, I knew why he was doing it, and it all felt wrong. I couldn’t accept the compass knowing it was given to me on false premises.

I couldn’t live with my cowardice anymore.

“I don’t deserve it,” I whispered, voice hoarse; any louder and it’d break. I studied the compass, pressing my lips together, my heart aching. “Because I’m not — I’m not your daughter.”

It was like a gunshot, ringing through the air and leaving nothing but its chilling echo, and dead silence behind. I closed my eyes, tensing for the hit to land. I had no idea how Steve would respond. My fist tightened around the compass, already hating the idea that it would be taken away.

“I know.”


I turned to Steve, completely caught off guard. He just sat there, elbows on his knees, looking at me evenly. And shrugged.

He just shrugged.

“I know,” he repeated, looking not the least bit surprised. Didn’t break my gaze, or offer an angry retort. When he realized I was still stunned, his blue eyes twinkled in laughter. “Mia, come on. I’m not an idiot. I knew as soon as I got the news that you weren’t mine. And believe me, Tony told a convincing tale. I’m sure he still believes we’re related. But clearly, we both know that isn’t the case.”

My eyes drifted from his face, staring out the window into the night sky and city lights. Jaw still hanging open, I couldn’t stop my mind from reeling.

“This entire goddamn time…

“Wait, so if you knew this whole time,” I demanded, tears suddenly gone, replaced with complete bewilderment. I waved my hands wildly, gesturing to him. “Why even — why even bother meeting me? Staying? You didn’t have to do… any of that! I’m not your responsibility. I mean, saying you’re my dad? That’s a big deal! Why pretend?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I was just curious,” Steve looked almost as baffled as I did, but he looked far more amused about it. “And your Aunt never would’ve let me in that door otherwise. I just wanted to meet you, another super soldier. We’re a surprisingly small demographic, in case you didn’t know.”

Huh. He had a point. I could only shake my head in disbelief. Ever since I met him months ago, I had been terrified of him finding out the truth. And for it all to come out, like this?! Unbelievable. “And it doesn’t bother you that I’ve been lying this whole time?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I was just curious,” Steve looked almost as baffled as I did, but he looked far more amused about it. “And your Aunt never would’ve let me in that door otherwise. I just wanted to meet you, another super soldier. We’re a surprisingly small demographic, in case you didn’t know.”

Huh. He had a point. I could only shake my head in disbelief. Ever since I met him months ago, I had been terrified of him finding out the truth. And for it all to come out, like this?! Unbelievable. “And it doesn’t bother you that I’ve been lying this whole time?”

“It did occur to me,” Steve admitted, but again, he shrugged. “I wondered if you were scared, and didn’t say anything because of your Aunt. And if you really did believe it, I didn’t want to put needless doubt in your head by questioning you. Either that, or you just needed an answer. Someone to be there for you. I didn’t mind. It seemed like the right thing to do.”

I huffed, falling slack against the wall. “So that’s just it then? It was just that easy?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say easy. And I do feel responsible for you, Mia,” Steve continued, in a more sincere tone, eyebrows pinching up. “But maybe that’s just how I am. That’s why my original
point still stands. I’m with you for as long as you need me, Amelia.”

I fixed him a skeptical look. “To the end of the line?”

“To the end of the line.”

I pursed my lips, nodding slowly after taking a second to absorb all that. The long-standing terror that I felt was finally abating, replaced by something stronger. Better. Glancing up, I noticed the sky was starting to lighten; pink and orange seeping in, morning on the horizon. Even the traffic was starting to pick up, even if only by a few new cars that hadn’t been there before.

Boy, was I gonna suffer tonight.

I looked back down at the compass. It pointed away from the sun, towards me, wobbling as I tilted it to face the light. Not remembering if I said it before, I suddenly blurted, “Thank you! By the way. If you’re letting me keep this.”

“Oh, it’s all yours now.” Steve chuckled, waving his hand as if he wanted nothing to do with it anymore. Sitting back, he continued, “You know, that compass has been through a lot. Got me through a war, and a few other things. I figured you should have it; hopefully it’ll help you as much as it helped me. You know, er, keep you pointed in the right direction.”

“Or if I get lost in D.C.”

“That, too.”

Pleased, and more than a little relieved, I took the cord and slung it around my neck, the compass coming to rest down my midsection. Looking back up towards the coming day, I glanced at Steve and asked, “Think it’s too late for bedtime?”

“Too early, if you ask me,” Steve said, raising his eyebrows with a smirk before getting up with a light grunt. “This is usually the time I get up.”

“Oh, my god, you’re insane.”

“It’s what I do,” Steve replied with a one-sided shrug, looking not the least bit concerned. Heading to the kitchen, he stretched his arms and shoulders, and I winced a little as he turned on the light.

“Some coffee sounds good about now.”

“Well, I had already decided I wasn’t going to bed, and as exhausted as I was, it wasn’t the kind that begged for sleep just yet. My head was tired, but not my bones. I still felt a little restless. And as reassuring — and enlightening — as that recent conversation had been, I was still not quite settled.

The fact that Steve knew this whole time, and just went with it because he’s just that noble really threw me for a loop. I’d be stuck on that one for a while.

I, too, had to stretch as I rose from my spot. Curled up like that was too much like being stuck in the closet, so it felt like I had even more kinks to work out than before. “So what do you usually do at this hour? Contemplate the meaning of life?”

“I actually make some breakfast first before I do any of that,” Steve replied, with just a hint of
sarcasm. When I threw him a look, he winked at me. “Cereal or pancakes?”

“Pancakes.”

“Fantastic, I’ll learn just for you.” Steve said. Then he turned to me, his features suddenly brightening. “Hey, you wanna go for a jog with me?”

I slumped against the counter on the other side of the kitchen. “Sure, why not.”

“Great.” The smile that grew on his face just then spoke only of one thing: trouble. “There’s someone I want you to meet.”
Chapter End Notes

I almost had Mia shilling for the Mission Impossible movies before I remembered that the latest two weren’t out in 2012/13. Also, if you haven’t seen them, you should watch them (skip the 2nd one, no one needs it).
I’m sorry I keep writing these long ass chapters. They seem to get even longer with each one I write… I’m worried about the pacing tbqh lmao. But! Exciting stuff planned for next chapter :D

The sun was just starting to peek over the horizon as I sat on the front stoop, stretching out my legs. It was nice to be wearing clean clothes, and I was thankful that I had the foresight to bring my exercise gear. After being constrained in jeans for too long, it was nice to wear leggings.

The sensation of being able to move again sent a jolt of energy, anticipation through me. I was ready to go.

Steve was nearby, leaning against the low wall and checking his phone. Around us, the world was beginning to wake up. Birds chirped, flitting between the trees and bushes. A car or two rolled by but the neighborhood was still very quiet at this hour. Any shop or business that wasn’t a gas station would still be closed. A dog barked in the distance, echoing over the still rooftops, stars fading in the sky above.

“So where are we heading?” I asked, checking to make sure my own phone was secured in the side pocket of my leggings. The way I tended to run, there would be no survival for my phone if it came flying out.

“Lincoln Memorial,” Steve replied, tucking his phone away before looking west, and pointing. “The park’s in that direction, about two miles. I figured we could race it.”

That caught me off guard, and I hesitated as I stepped down to the sidewalk. “Race it?”

“Yeah, you know, see who gets there first,” Steve replied, with an all too casual glance at me, folding his arms. As if challenging teenagers in feats of speed was something he did all the time. Seeing the look on my face, Steve smirked and added, “What, you’re not up for it? I’ll even throw in ice cream if you win.”

“What? I never said that!” Now I was a little peeved, and bounced on the balls of my feet. The ice cream was just a bonus. “We go on the count of three.”

“Alright, alright, just making sure,” Steve chuckled, throwing up his hands in a gesture of peace.
“Had to know you weren’t afraid of losing to a ninety-year-old man.”

“Oh, please,” I rolled my eyes, then noticed my shoe was untied. “We’ll see about that…”

As I was bending down to tie my shoe-lace, I heard a rush of footsteps. Startled, I looked up.

Steve was already taking off running.

“What the — Hey! Wait!” I shouted, scrambling to finish my shoelace before stumbling to my feet. Steve wasn’t stopping; in fact, he was picking up speed. Bewildered, I nearly tripped over myself going after him. “You didn’t count to three yet!”

“Wasn’t part of the deal!”

“Cheater!” Realizing I’d been played, I finally took off, charging.

All I got in response was laughter. Steve apparently didn’t feel the least bit sorry about his opportunism, which only served to egg me on. Steve was already a block ahead of me, while I was still finding my stride.

Two miles. Steve had a head start, but I still had two miles to catch up. Surely that’d be enough…

Turns out two miles is a lot shorter when you can run like a super soldier.

We had made it down another block, Steve still ahead, when he looked over his shoulder at me. “Looking a little out of breath there!”

I gritted my teeth and threw myself forward into an all-out sprint. At the very least, his teasing had the intended effect of making me push myself harder. I was chiding myself for giving Steve too much credit; clearly, he wasn’t all ‘fair game’ as I thought he would be.

The next time Steve would turn his head to look at me, it would be just as I flew past him. “Hey —”

“Better pick up the pace, old man!” Having finally caught my wind, I breezed right past him “Now that’s just uncalled for!” Even then, he was grinning, and as he pressed harder to catch up with me, I found myself smiling, too. Laughing, even.

It would only strike me then. For the first time, Steve and I were having fun.

We tore into the park like bats out of hell. I could only imagine what we might’ve looked like to any passerby; two freaks sprinting at inhuman speeds. It was hardly the light jog I had assumed this would be. But the reality was all the better.

By the time the Lincoln Memorial came into view through, I still had the lead, if by a smaller margin. Seeing it, however, gave me that extra burst of energy. I hit the steps running, and by the time I’d reached the top, I’d slow down, before flopping down on the marble floor.

Steve, right behind me, came to a stop a few steps below, hands on his knees. With slightly wheezy laughter, he said, “Gotta admit, I didn’t see that one coming.”

“What? Me winning?” I said, panting. I tried to go for a nonchalant pose, but ended up lying on my back, appreciating the cool stone soaking through the back of my shirt, wicking away the sweat. “A-ain’t nothing but a… but a thing…”
I, too, was surprised. I didn’t really need proof that Steve was bigger and stronger than me, because — well, he was. He had at least a hundred pounds, if not more, on me. Perhaps being smaller, less bulky, had an advantage I hadn’t considered before. Of course, did that ever stop me from taking a silly bet? Absolutely not.

Tilting my head back against the floor, up towards the upside-down Lincoln statue sitting in his throne. “That ice cream is so mine.”

When Steve offered me a hand, I took it and helped myself up. Instead of being exhausted by that run, I felt invigorated. Over the Memorial pond, the sun was starting to rise a little higher, just peeking over the treetops, casting its golden rays across the city.

“Oh, there he is!” A quick tapping on my arm, and I looked over to see Steve suddenly hiding behind one of the columns. Startled, I looked down towards the walking path, and spotted a man jogging below.

From what? I threw Steve a strange look and stood where I was. Dressed in shorts, basic jogging gear, with dark skin and a close shave, the guy seemed pretty average, as far as I could figure. Aside from maybe the Airforce logo on his shirt, nothing out of the ordinary.

I squinted slightly. It was a little too far to make out any specific details about the man, and he was too far away to notice me. “Is that your friend?”

“Yep, that’s him,” Steve said, waiting until the man had turned his back to us, heading down one length of the pond, did he turn to me and say, “Hey, Mia, I got an idea. You in?”

“What kind of idea?” I asked, a little hesitantly. Steve’s last idea was playing a fast one on me for some ice cream, and I won out of sheer spite (among other things). Judging by the mischievous smile pulling across his face, I had a feeling this might be something along the same lines.

After Steve was done explaining, my eyebrows shot up. Least to say, I was a little confused. “Are you sure he’s okay with that?”

“What? Of course he is,” Steve replied. He nearly bounced — bounced — with enthusiasm. “He loves it! Don’t worry.”

I still had reservations, but followed without complaint as Steve led the way down the steps.

The man was still jogging alongside the pond. Steve took off first, picking up speed fast. I did as he instructed, counting to five before going after him. It wasn’t a sprint like we had been doing before, but certainly it was a faster gait than anything a normal human could do.

Likewise, Steve’s footsteps must have caught the man’s ear, who just called out without turning his head, “Oh, come on, not this again —”

“On your left!” Steve said as he raced past the man.

The man didn’t stop running, just grumbled, “Every goddamn time —”

He wasn’t done before I tore past on his other side. “On your right!”

“ — Gah!” The man faltered, caught by surprise, and stared at me as I ran past him. Raising his voice, the man shouted after us, “What the hell? There’s two of you now?!”

Steve had come to a stop at the end of the pond, bent over. Not out of breath from exertion, but
from *laughter*. I caught up with him there, unable to fight my own amusement any longer, and had to sit down so I didn’t fall over myself. The man, looking greatly disgruntled, came in last at a fast walk before stopping.

He threw each of us a glare, hands on his hips. “Oh, ha-ha. Yeah, huck it up. Make fun of the slow little human, so hilarious.” Although he looked annoyed, there was a quirk to the man’s lips that said he might’ve been a little amused himself. Jerking a thumb at me, he said, “Yo, Steve, you didn’t tell me you got a sidekick now.”

This caught me by surprise. Did this man know? I cut a curious look at Steve, who had already straightened and held up his hands. “No, no, she’s family. Sam, meet Mia. Mia, Sam.”

“Mia, huh?” Sam offered his hand to me, looking a little skeptical, but it seemed light-hearted. He smiled. “Sam Wilson. Nice to know this big guy ain’t alone in the world.”

“Right,” *He definitely had to know*. Not like I hadn’t made it obvious tearing past him at a hundred miles an hour. Probably could’ve been more subtle about it. Wanting to take this conversation off me, I quickly said, “So, you’re his jogging partner?”

“Ha! Sense of humor, very nice,” Sam let out a short laugh, pointing at me. Folding his arms, Sam just shook his head in amusement. “No, I only wish I was fast enough to be his jogging partner.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t sell yourself short,” Steve replied, but I couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or not. The air between the two seemed to be jovial, light-hearted. “Who else is going to keep track of how fast I’m going?”

“You see, he bullies me,” Sam said to me with a knowing look. “And he keeps getting away with it because so far, no one’s powerful enough to stop him.”

“If it makes you feel better,” I said with a grin. “I just beat him in a race. He’s not as fast as he looks.”

“No shit!” Sam paid him no mind at all, looking incredibly pleased by this news. “Finally, someone faster than Captain America. I’ll be damned.”

A look had crossed Steve’s face, like perhaps he was reconsidering this. That putting the two of us together might have been a mistake.

Maybe it was. I knew I was enjoying myself now. To think I had been hesitant to meet Steve’s friend, starting with the little joke, had turned out much better than I thought it would. To Sam, I said, “He owes me ice cream now. You want in?”

“Hell yeah! ‘Bout time I earn a little for my own suffering.” Sam replied with a grin, clapping his hands together in anticipation.

Steve glanced at me, looking dead inside. “You’re doing this on purpose now, aren’t you.”

In the end, Sam would not let go of the ice cream idea, so Steve eventually caved. Sam also knew of a location conveniently nearby, and as we headed over, spent the whole time gloating. He would then spend ten minutes in the ice cream parlor mulling over the dozens of flavors, only to change his mind again, just to irk Steve.
Sometime in the middle of it, I got worried if it had gotten too far, but I caught Steve’s gaze as we waited behind Sam, and he shot me a wink.

Everything was fine.

“So, Mia, has Steve here told you what his day job is yet?” Sam would ask as we languished outside on park tables. Sam had a massive sugar cone filled with scoops of sherbet; of the three of us, it had been the most expensive one. Probably on purpose. “Or whatever it is he does that pays for these beautiful cones of breakfast ice cream?”

“Nope.” I replied. I had a much smaller cone; French vanilla drizzled in, what else, honey. It was still early morning, hardly the time to get ice cream (the shop workers looked a little surprised but, hey, they were open). Still, I had likely already burned all the calories I had eaten for breakfast, so this was more than a welcome treat.

“See, me neither,” Sam pressed a hand to his chest, feigning deep offense. Steve made a noise of protest, but Sam ignored him. “You think he’d trust me, his only real friend, but nooo… He’s just a man of secrets.”

“Right now, I’m a man of regrets,” Steve muttered, observing his strawberry ice cream with a glum look.

His only friend? A part of me wanted to think Sam was only being facetious; but from what I’d seen of Steve, he lived a very lonely life. Maybe it was true. If that was the case, I wondered what it was about Sam Wilson in particular that cottoned on to Steve so well.

Licking some honey that had dripped onto my hand, I asked, “What do you do, then, Sam?”

“Me? I work at the VA. You know, a real job,” Sam cast a shit-eating grin to Steve, elbowing him, before turning back to me. “Anonymous therapy meetings, everyone sits in a circle and shares their feelings, honest talks, hard truths, that sort of thing. I keep inviting your old man here, and he says he’ll show, but then he never does.”

“In my defense,” Steve interjected, lifting a finger. “One of those dates was your birthday, Mia.”

I snorted, and Sam just rolled his eyes. “Oh, okay, excuse me, Dad of the Year. What about all those other times, huh?”

“I was busy.”

“You’re always busy.”

“You’re kind of a jerk, you know that?” Steve cut Sam a look.

“And yet, you still tolerate me,” Sam said with a flourish of his hand. “Just be honest, you’re worried my greatness will rub off on your kid.”

Steve looked to Sam, then to me, then back to Sam again. “Oh, trust me, she doesn’t need your help.”

Hearing their banter back and forth made me smile so much it was starting to hurt. Although they were taking the piss out of each other, I could tell by the cheeky looks and the sarcastic replies that they weren’t really on each other’s nerves. It was, in fact, the first time I’d ever seen Steve so relaxed.
“I bet,” Sam smirked, cocking an eyebrow. “I already know how annoying an adult super soldier is, I can’t imagine how awful some hyperactive a teenager would be. I do not envy you, friend.”

“Hey!” I said, mildly affronted.

“She’s not so bad,” Steve winked at me again. “Most of the time.”

“Yeah? What’s the worse part? Too much spending or the boyfriends?”

“I’m right here, you know.” I tried to butt in, but realized only too late that they had ganged up on me. Oh, how the turn tables.

“Bed time, actually.” Steve replied casually, swallowing the last of his cone before bunching up the napkin and tossing it into a trashcan twenty feet away. Score. “Having the damndest time making her fall asleep.”

“Oh, I hear that…”

“Excuse me,” I said, leaning in just so they could look at me. When they did, I raised my eyebrows and said, “I’m just following Steve’s example.”

“Oo! Ouch,” Sam laughed, while Steve just leaned back and ran a hand over his face. Sam just shook his head, clapping Steve on the shoulder. “She gives as good as she gets. You really do have your hands full. And! I’d love to help out with that, but I gotta head to work. Hey, maybe this time, you’ll actually show up?”

As Sam stood up, he turned and tried to fist bump Steve. When Steve just sat there, puzzled, Sam stole a side glance at me, leaned in and stage-whispered, “I don’t think he’s ready for that one yet.”

Steve frowned slightly at my snicker, but it slid away into an easy smile as he clasped Sam’s hand in a handshake. ‘Heh, we’ll see. It was nice seeing you, Sam.’

“You two, dude,” Sam returned the handshake heartily, and as he headed towards the street, he finger-gunned me. “And good meeting you, Mia! Keep your old man on his toes for me, will ya?”

“Till the day I die!”

Sam grinned, giving me a thumbs up as he began to jog down the street, and out of sight. “That’s what I like to hear!”

☆☆☆

The American History Museum was on the other side of the Washington Memorial,

From where we stood by the long rectangular Reflecting Pond. One end of the pond lied the Lincoln Memorial; to the West, another I wasn't familiar with.

I hadn't initially meant to stop there, but at first I didn't know what it was. A small oval pool surrounded by 56 pillars and two triumphal arches had immediately caught my attention, and Steve
made no complaint as we took a slight detour to check it out.

It wasn't until we were actually within did, I realize it was the World War II memorial. I knew DC had one, but until now I never realized this was what it looked like. The Vietnam Memorial had a much stronger image in my head, as far as distinctive visuals go. But this one had its own distinct aesthetic, the silent pillars with its dark metal wreaths, the arches commemorating each theatre of war. On the west side, with the Lincoln Memorial behind it, sat a long curved wall covered in thousands of gold stars. 4048 to be exact, when I glanced at a nearby plaque.

It was filled with more, smaller words that ended up distracting me, trying to read through and giving me a headache. Sensing my struggle, Steve spoke quietly next to me, "One for every hundred lives we lost in the war."

"Oh," I withdrew from the plaque, feeling a silly for not just having asked him. The way Steve said it, it sounded like he'd been here before, knew what each symbol and what each pillar stood for. He probably did. "Why is it called the Freedom Wall?"

Steve pointed down to a spot directly in front of our feet. Large letters engraved into the marble ground before us.

I read it aloud, mostly to myself in order to help parse through each word. "Here we mark… the price of freedom."

We didn't share many words here. I wasn't really sure what to say, to be honest. The memorial itself had left me standing at the bottom for a long minute, shaken by a feeling, an experience I couldn't comprehend. Could never comprehend. Here and there I noticed other people milling about. Some were just taking in the atmosphere; others were laying down flowers at certain pillars or at the arches. Older folk, quiet and in small, tightly knit groups.

I wondered if Steve felt the same way I did, or maybe he had some deep wisdom or knowledge that set him apart. This was his war, the people who these stars represented had been his friends; which was why I hesitated to ask.

Of course, I didn't have to.

"Daunting, isn't it?" Steve finally asked, his tone soft so as not to disturb the somber atmosphere. The air was quiet here, aside from bird calls. People held low conversations, and there really wasn't much humor or laughter going around.

It felt like treading on forbidden territory.

"Yeah," I said, craning my head up to see the top of the wall, so high that even someone like me would have trouble reaching. "I never realized how… much it was. How many were involved. In APUSH they talk about the four-hundred-and-eight-thousand killed in action, but I just…"

"It just sounds like another statistic." Steve finished for me. Somehow, he knew exactly what I meant, and put it into words better than I ever could.

I bowed my head. "Yeah."

A hand on my shoulder, and I looked up to see Steve giving me a somewhat rueful smile. "It's alright. History's a lot different when its just words off a page."

They were comforting words; a validation that I was allowed to feel this way, that it wasn't wrong. At least, that's what I hoped. "How do you… handle it?"
It was probably not the most elegant way to put it, or even really specified what I meant. I wanted to know how Steve felt, seeing the result of his efforts, the efforts of a country he grew up in. Something that he missed, in the end.

That one of those stars represented him, too.

Steve didn't answer right away, and I hoped I hadn't royally screwed up. But when he spoke again, it was thoughtful, if somewhat hesitant. "I don't know. Its not always… clear to me. But I try to comfort myself with the knowledge that these people knew what they were fighting for. They had a choice, they didn't have to, but they did it anyways."

"Oh." I said again, my voice dropping to a murmur. I couldn't look away from the wall as he spoke, or the silence that followed after Steve's words. When I looked back to him again, I was startled to find Steve no longer standing next to me, but twenty feet away. Back turned slightly towards me, his head was down and he gazed into the small pool in front of the wall, the blue sky reflecting in the rippling water.

In the back of my mind, I wondered who it was he saw in there.

Honestly, I was more than a little relieved to finally reach the museum. The somberness had been a stark contrast to the fun I had earlier this morning. The day was beginning to warm up now, as the sun rose closer to noon.

I was still mulling over our run-in (ha) with Sam Wilson; as genial as it was, I had come to the realization that Sam probably knew as much about Steve as I did. Maybe even less. Even with his only friend, Steve kept Sam at an arm’s length.

It took me months just to end up where I was now with Steve, and even this was an extremely recent development. I not only realized I was having fun, with Steve, but I actually enjoyed this time with him more than I ever had before. To think I had been so terrified that being honest with him would have brought it all crashing down.

When, in fact, honesty was just the thing I needed.

It was a good feeling. A great feeling, really. Was Steve my dad? No. But that didn’t change the fact that, deep down, I still needed him. I didn’t really know why, but I knew that if he wasn’t here, I’d be the worse for it.

And yet, the question remained.

What was Steve’s job?

It was such an infuriating topic that I was more focused on that than paying attention to where I was going, heading up the steps to the museum.

So distracted, in fact, I didn’t notice the person heading my way as I passed through the doors.

I had just stepped inside when my shoulder bumped into someone else. I only happened to glance at them out of the corner of my eye when the apology began its way past my lips, when I recognized him.

“— Dmitri?” My apology cut short, I came to a complete stop, utterly stunned.

“Mia?” He, too, turned to look at me, eyes widening when I said his name. Indeed, Dmitri was standing right there next to me, having just been caught in the midst of passing through the front
doors of the museum. His shock instantly turned to a grin. “W-what are you doing here?”

“I was just visiting my —” My tongue caught in my mouth as I was heavily aware Captain America was here. Would Dmitri recognize him, even in plainclothes? “My Steve!”

“You’re here visiting your Steve?” Dmitri furrowed his brows at my braindead sentence. His eyes glanced to Steve, who now stood right behind me.

“Hi,” Steve said, giving a tiny wave from behind me. “I’m Steve.”

“This is my friend, Dmitri. I told you about him, remember? I used to tutor him last year.”

“Oh, I remember,” Steve smiled easily, offering a hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet another of Mia’s friends.”

“Hi-Hello,” As Dmitri stared at Steve, then his hand, I watched his face carefully for any sign of recognition. But as he slowly lifted his hand to take Steve’s, he just seemed more taken aback than alarmed or excited. “Sorry, if I’d known I’d run into you today, I would’ve worn better clothes…”

He was just in jeans and a shirt — which was much more casual and appropriate than the jogging gear we were still in, I thought. At first, I was still reeling at Dmitri’s presence, wondering how such a coincidence could transpire. Then I remembered what he had told me on my birthday — that he’d be returning to the States in March. How could I have forgotten?

I had just opened my mouth to reassure him, when the doors opened again and a feminine voice cut me off. “Alright, I found my notebook. Come, Dmitri, the driver’s waiting — oh.”

Diana Hawkins arrived in an announcement of clicking heels and swishing dress. She came to an abrupt when her eyes landed on me, just as she was tucking a small blue moleskin into her purse. Dressed impeccably as ever in a white linen dress and Louboutin heels, she had an absolutely arresting glare. Although the air was cool inside the museum, there was a light sweat upon her forehead, a flush in her cheeks; she had been in a rush, anxious even, at having lost and found her notebook.

Her curious tone immediately dropped to a dead one. “Oh. Amelia. How… lovely to find you here.”

I tried to return it, but my smile was equally as fake. “Oh, hi, Ms. Hawkins. I’m just here on vacation.”

“So am I!” Dmitri grinned, completely oblivious.

“Oh, well, that’s nice.” With a flick of her head, Diana Hawkins tossed a perfectly coiffed lock of hair out of her face. She laid a manicured hand on Dmitri’s shoulder, urging him forward as she headed towards the doors. “Unfortunately, we don’t have time to stay and chat. Say good-bye, Dmitri, I have an interview that can’t wait.”

“Sorry,” Dmitri said, and just as his mother pulled him through the doorway, he suddenly reached out and grabbed my hand. I started, as he leaned over and whispered, “I’m glad you’re here. I’ll call you.”

And with a smile, he disappeared out the door.

I stood there, staring through the windows as he and his mother slipped into a luxury sedan and
disappeared down the road. My hand still tingled where Dmitri’s thumb had rubbed over my knuckles, warm and soft.

“So,” Steve’s voice had me jolting back to the present. “She doesn’t like you much.”

“What?” I turned, surprised to find he was still standing next to me. Had he been there the whole time? Had he seen all of that? “Oh, yeah. Guess you could say it was loathing at first sight.”

I was surprised Diana hadn’t said anything to Steve. Or even looked his way.

Guess that interview was pretty important.

“The kid seems to like you a lot, though,” Steve commented, as we finally turned and headed deeper into the main hall. “You failed to mention that last time.”

A flush bloomed across my cheeks and I almost walked into a marble column when I turned into the next hallway. “Oh —! Uh, yeah, no, he’s just, ah, just a friend.”

“Just a friend?” Steve asked, and while I couldn’t look at him, I could just hear the smirk on his face. “Does he know about you? About the …” he paused, seemed to notice we were surrounded by dozens of people. “Your condition?”

“No,” I struggled to come up with a way for him to drop this subject immediately. It seemed Steve was only teasing, but the pulling in my gut said there was a bit of gravity to this talk, too, if I let it go too far. “He’s not — I mean, I just don’t know how to tell him yet. I don’t want to scare him and he’s, you know, he’s just a friend.”

If only I could keep saying it, Steve would believe me.

“So no shenanigans between you two?” Steve pressed, in that all-too-easy, light tone parents used when trying to broach deeper topics with teenagers. I knew the tactic all too well; Aunt May was a master of it, and far more subtle. “Just friends?”

Getting annoyed, I retorted, “Yeah. The same way you and Kate are friends.”

That did the trick. Steve cast me a look that said Well, then. And acquiesced with a humble shrug. I smiled, falling at ease. Thank god.

It hit me then. I wondered if it was too presumptuous of me to assume his job was the reason for Steve’s loneliness, that it was so secret, so dangerous that he couldn’t afford personal relationships. What if that wasn’t true? What if it was because he just didn’t want friends? Maybe he didn’t know how. Or maybe he was scared.

I turned my attention back to the foyer, picking up a map from a nearby kiosk and glancing at the different exhibits. It took me a hot minute to parse through the tough font and complex words, but I figured it out eventually. “Huh. Yours isn’t on here.”

“What? You mean the Captain America exhibit?” Steve tilted his head, but didn’t reach for the map. He wore a baseball cap as his best disguise and I was a little mad that it was actually working. No one here seemed to realize that Captain America was standing right there in front of them. “That’s because it’s not here, it’s in the Air and Space Museum.”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense. Why is it there?”

Steve just shrugged. “Don’t ask me, I wasn’t a consultant. Wait, is that why you wanted to come
here? You thought it was here?"

“Well, yeah,” I said, cursing myself for not looking it up earlier, for exact location details. All the bullying opportunities, wasted.

“You know you could just ask me what you want to know, Mia.”

*What I want to know isn’t in the history books.* I wanted to say, but bit back those words. It was too close a reminder to what he had said to me earlier, about history not being the same on the page. Maybe I was afraid if I just asked, I’d get more than I bargained for. I saved my hide by saying, “Yeah, but it’s more fun reading it from someone else’s perspective.”

“What, to make fun of me?” Steve guessed with a suspicious look. Damn, he knew me too well.

“Whaat, nooo…” I quickly looked around for a distraction, and headed down the first hall I saw. “Let’s go this way!”

I had hoped that we could see the Air and Space Museum after this one, but as it turned out — the American History Museum was huge in its own right, and indulging my inner completionist, I had to see all of it. I had to see the Ruby Slippers, the Hall of Music, and the other two dozen rooms they had. When noontime came around, we had only explored half of it, and Steve didn’t seem the least bothered by my desire to see everything.

One exhibit featured the scientists behind the Manhattan Project, as well as scientists brought over from World War Two. In front of the portrait and biography of Dr. Abraham Erskine, Steve had stopped and said, “I knew him, once. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be here today.”

It was a sweet sentiment, but Steve’s look was faraway, his tone equally as distant. He seemed lost in a memory, and I felt suddenly apart from that, disconnected and unable to understand. I could only look at Dr. Erskine’s portrait and assume his character, while Steve already knew. “What was he like?”

“Hm?” Steve jolted, as if pulled out of a reverie. He blinked down at me, then said, “Oh. He was a good man. A wise one. Gave me the words I live by today.”

I frowned, curious. “And what’s that?”

A soft smile played at his lips, and Steve tapped my collarbone gently. “To stay who you are — not a perfect soldier, but a good man.”

That took me by surprised, and for a long minute I couldn’t speak. In fact, I couldn’t think of what to say for quite a while, at least until we passed through the hall of presidents and I finally found a way to break the somberness in my mind with a bit of dumbassery.

Pulling at Steve’s sleeve to get his attention, I pointed at a portrait of George Washington and asked, “Did you know him, too?”

Steve looked taken aback, even baffled, up until he saw the look on my face. “Oh. Because I’m old. Very funny.”

But I wasn’t done yet. Upon seeing an image of John Rockefeller, I gasped, grabbed his arm, and said, “Oh, was he your friend, too?”

Was I being too facetious? Maybe a little, but when Steve slung an arm around my shoulder, squeezing a little and speaking a faux-tense voice, saying, “Oh, you’re a real comedian, aren’t
“You?” I knew he wasn’t going to give me heat for it.

Then Steve pointed at a passing group of third-graders. “Oh, look, there’s your class, Mia. Better catch up with your friends!”

“Ha-ha.” I tried to wriggle myself out of his arm, but Steve had a good grip on me at this point, and I realized that in finding something to tease him with, I’d only given Steve more ammunition. I was pretty sure I’d made this mistake before, but here I was making it again. Apparently, I was a slow learner.

Entering another room, he spotted a mother and a baby in its stroller, and pointed at it. “Oh, I should get you one of those.”

“This is revenge, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I don’t get revenge,” Steve said mildly, before mussing up my hair with his hand and ducking back when I tried to slap it away. He cast me a wicked smile, holding out his arms in a pretend show of bravado. “I get even.”

It went back and forth like that for the rest of the day, teasing back and forth — me pointing out old folks and ancient dead people, him picking out babies and asking if he should get a child leash like one parent. By the end of the day, I was finally getting tired, my egging fading away. Not only had exploring the museum drained my energy, but all that reading did, too. That was probably why we ended up there for so long, because I was too stubborn not to read every single thing.

When we got back to Steve’s apartment, it was well into early evening. Steve had suggested we take the subway back, but I was an idiot and thought walking was a great idea, until we actually did it and I felt like dying. It seemed those long hours awake at night were finally catching up to me.

The relief of entering the dark apartment, the cool, still air, was like a blessing. I made a beeline for the couch, flopping down face first while Steve flicked on the lights, and headed into the kitchen.

There was a clatter of pans and the sound of the fridge opening as he began to prepare dinner. Over the noise, he called out, “Hey, I was thinking, maybe tomorrow we can go to the Air and Space Museum. Figured you could bully me some more there.” When met with no response, Steve called out, “Mia?”

Greeted with further silence, Steve peered out into the living room, brow drawn in concern. Then his expression smoothed, chuckling softly at the sight before him.

Amelia, still lying on the couch with one arm hanging off the side, had fallen dead asleep.

Still smiling, Steve wandered over, walking softly so as not to disturb her. With a careful move, he pulled the blanket folded on the back of the couch and laid it over Amelia. It had taken him over twelve hours, but he finally got her to sleep.

Mission accomplished.
I was up bright and early the next morning, ready to go.

Somehow, Steve was up before me. Impressive, considering I myself had slept for a solid thirteen hours.

And nary a nightmare. Refreshed hardly covered it. I felt like the storm had finally broken, clouds pulling away to reveal cool blue sky and bright, cleansing sunlight.

Although that might just be because that was the actual weather for today. I took the time to enjoy it as we made our way to the Smithsonian again today. Like last time we were dressed casually, Steve bringing a baseball cap with him this time. Much like how he did in New York, the hat was part of his whole hiding-in-plain-sight thing, although I wasn't sure if it was the key to it, or just the current disguise.

The first thing I did when we walked into the Air and Space Museum was head straight for the gift shop. A little premature? Maybe. But I already knew exactly what I wanted.

Steve stood outside the shop; when I walked out, wearing my new merchandise, he raised his eyebrows at me, before breaking out into a smile. "Is that what you had me waiting out here five minutes for?"

"Uh, yes," I adjusted the new hat — dark blue, a baseball cap like the one he was wearing. Only difference? The miniature symbol of Captain America's shield sewn onto the front. I grinned at him. "I figured if we're doing the whole undercover look, we might as well match. We can be twinsies!"

I inflected that last bit with an overabundance of saccharine cuteness, but only a little bit mocking. Steve's eyes drew from that hat (which I had chosen specifically for the design) back to my face, his eyebrows shooting up even higher.

"Twinsies. Right." It sounded like he didn't quite know what that word meant, but didn't ask for clarification.

"I'm just here to give you a little hell,"

"Oh, is that what you're doing?" Steve feigned surprise as we began walking back to the main floor. "Sorry, I was under a different impression."

The really funny thing was that he sounded sincere. Perhaps my attempt to mildly tease and aggravate him had only accomplished the opposite. Had it been endearing? I hadn't quite meant it that way. Still, there was something oddly receptive in the way Steve looked at me just then — Flattered? Touched? — that suddenly made me the embarrassed one here.

Well, that backfired.
I wasn't too salty about it; I mean, could I really complain? If Steve didn't mind me wearing a hat with his shield on it, then I must be doing something right.

And I did like the hat.

The main atrium of the Air and Space museum spacious, with a glass ceiling, from which hung various air- and space-craft. I had never seen the Apollo 11 command module before — it was much smaller than I had originally thought. Lying propped on the floor, I could actually look into it. Did they really fit three people in there?

The Milestones of Flight, I discovered it was called. Above hung a white, boxy monoplane, near the orange needle-nosed Bell X-1; I only knew about it because of Ned, who loved aircraft. It was from him I had learned the Bell had been the first aircraft to break the sound barrier.

I had been studying the Spirit of St. Louis overhead, when a soft, feminine voice from behind caught my attention. Looking over my shoulder, I was surprised to find Steve standing a fair distance away, his head bent low as he spoke to a redhead woman with shoulder-length straight hair, wearing a fitted leather jacket and boots that compensated for her short height. But the different look didn't stop me from recognizing her.

The air escaped me like I'd been punched in the gut.

Holy shit. It's her.

Her as in the woman from Stark Tower. Her as in the one of two Avengers Peter and I pissed off and escaped from that winter evening.

The Black Widow.

I didn't know her actual name, obviously, but I felt a strange sense of deja vu; that somehow, her being here wasn't just a coincidence.

Perhaps sensing she was being watched, the Widow turned her head. Her eyes immediately fell on me. I expected a look of surprise, or recognition, but her expression remained perfectly neutral. Then, slowly, her lips curved into a smile.

It was enough of an invitation for me to draw closer and join the conversation.

(Not that I needed one, anyways).

"Well, hello there," the woman said, her tone much friendlier than the last time we'd run into each other. The warmth in her words sounded sincere, but I couldn't help but feel like I just stepped into the spider's web, too dumb to escape. "I was wondering why Steve had asked for a week off from work. Now it all makes sense."

The sound Steve made just then was halfway between a laugh and a cough; embarrassed, maybe a little amused, but not willing to anyone catch on. "Ah, ha-ha, yeah. Mia, this is...er, Natasha. We're, ah, colleagues."

Colleagues? As in, fellow Avenger? Something about it didn't seem quite right. I had been under the impression that, unless there was a crisis, most Avengers had their own lives to live, separate from one another.

I knew exactly three things about Natasha. That she was an Avenger, that she was a spy, and that she wasn't one I should cross lightly.
I guess four things now, since I had a name. Or a part of one.

(Was it her real name? I had my doubts).

"Oh, I know," I said without thinking. Natasha held out her hand, but I took a little too long to take it to be completely convincing. "Nice to meet you. Again."

For such a petite woman, Natasha's grip was strong. Not surprising, considering the way she grabbed me back in the Tower. Natasha just smiled back at me, appearing completely oblivious. "Oh, that's right. How's that internship with Sterling and Bosch going, by the way?"

Clever. Natasha hadn't forgotten me anymore than I'd forgotten about her. Now it was Steve's turn to glance between us, looking utterly confused. "Wait, have you two met before?"

"Not officially," I replied with a smile. Fake? Yes. But the standard poker face probably wouldn't come across so well.

I didn't really want to elaborate, and I was surprised when Natasha didn't, either. She was still watching me, though, even as I was talking to Steve; I felt like a bug under a microscope, pinned in place, helpless as I was being analyzed.

"I just wanted to apologize, actually," Natasha said, still evading Steve's questioning look. "I know we got off on the wrong foot last time. I hope we can start over, have another go at those first impressions sort of thing."

I blinked. She was ...apologizing? Color me double surprised. Natasha was avoiding any specific phrasing or context, only giving enough so that I could understand. Considering Steve was standing right here, it seemed like a lot of effort, even a risk, for someone who didn't really mean it. Why bother? She was a big-time spy, and I was small potatoes.

At the very least, it caught me off guard, leaving me bereft of what to say. I went for a half-hearted response, hoping she was being genuine and praying I wasn't being willfully naive. "...Oh, yeah, sure. I guess I should thank you, too. My Aunt really loved that trip to the Barton Resort."

This time, Natasha grinned, at once coy and thrilled, the kind of smile that made you feel like a million bucks. "Consider it a favor well-spent."

Something must have clicked for Steve, because the confusion had lifted from his face, replaced by one of contemplation. There were definitely some gears turning in there. Maybe the name Barton gave it away. "Well, I'm glad you two are getting along. Clearly I made an error keeping you two from each other."

"Clearly," Natasha repeated, casting him a smirk. Then she glanced at her watch and said, "Well, I gotta scram. Unlike some, I actually enjoy my work. Maybe I'll see you guys later, hm?"

But will we see you? We waved her good-bye and before I knew it, Natasha had vanished into the crowd. A turn of her body, a swish of red hair, and she was gone.

Invisible, just like Steve.

"Do I want to know?" Steve asked in an undertone as we began up the stairs.

I only shook my head, fighting a smile. "I'll tell you later."

I wasn't sure if I liked Natasha. Or even trusted her. The mention of her liking her job, implying
that Steve didn't, had seemed to come off like they worked at the same place. Unfortunately, that meant nothing to me, because I didn't know what Natasha did, and I couldn't be sure if she wasn't referring to her work as an Avenger.

And whatever Steve was doing, I was pretty sure it was not something the other Avengers were involved in.

The thoughts festered in my mind as we headed up to the exhibit I had been dying to see since we got here. While I still questioned the placement of the Captain America exhibit, I couldn't deny that the Smithsonian had done an excellent job in setting it up. If nothing else, they knew presentation.

The first thing that greeted you upon entering was the quote "Welcome back, Cap," from President Ellis, printed on a black wall, with a projection of a waving American flag. Next to it, beneath the painted blue silhouette of Captain America, shield and star in white contrast. Beneath it, read: CAPTAIN AMERICA — The Living Legend and Symbol of Courage.

It took me a half a minute to parse through all that, and it left me standing there, casting Steve a look. "Wow. It's subtle."

He just chuckled and cuffed me lightly on the head, sending my hat askew. "Trust me, it gets better."

Steve kept his head down as we entered a large atrium, filled with signs and features, art painted on the walls, video footage and even artifacts behind glass. The room was surprisingly dim, with its dark walls and solemn lighting. Yet the air was alive with activity, people milling around, children playing under the guise of their favorite heroes.

If I thought Steve could be invisible before, he really was now. Surrounded by pictures and portraits of himself, by dozens of people who could recognize his image on sight, his own name plastered on every wall and plaque, Steve still managed to go completely unnoticed. No one paid him a second thought; I had initially felt self-conscious standing next to him, but soon enough I started to relax.

Huh. Maybe that hat trick really did work.

"A symbol to the nation." a male narrator spoke as I wandered through the exhibit. This one had a disproportionate amount of kids, compared to the other places we went. Many were gathered around the life-sized screen images of Steve, as a scrawny young man to the full-grown supersoldier, comparing their sizes to him as the images shifted from one to another. "A hero to the world. The story of Captain America is one of honor, bravery and sacrifice."

I stopped to study the small Steve, pictured in Sepia, on one wall. Text next to him compared his height and weight, before and after his transformation.

He had only been 5'4 once. There was something quite humbling to see his face on the body of a much smaller man — smaller than me, right now. My chest tightened, when I realized that had been me, too, once. Even smaller, weighing less.

"Denied enlistment due to poor health, Steven Rogers was chosen for a program unique in the annals of American warfare."

I noted, however, that the one thing that didn't change between the two Steve's was the expression on his face. Maybe one was more confident than the other, but they still held the same quiet conviction, the unwavering diligence that had become familiar to me these past few months.
"One that would transform him into the world's first super soldier."

There was a large stage at the far back, on which stood seven mannequins, each with its own costume — behind it, a portrait of each member of the Howling Commandos. At the center, of course, was Captain America's war-time suit, with his original shield — the heater shield, made of a cheap metal, yet still somehow survived this long.

"Battle-tested, Captain America and his Howling Commandos, quickly earned their stripes. Their mission: take down HYDRA, the Nazi's rogue science division."

I let myself get lost a little, just wandering around and taking everything in. My initial plan to tease the hell out of Steve had gone right out the window, once I was standing in the full majesty of the place.

Majesty. It seemed silly to say, and I didn't think it fit Steve quite right, but the attitude in which the exhibit and the audience seemed to regard him with couldn't be called anything less. The patriotic imagery alongside the narrative being told, gave off a strong sense of patriotism, or a sort of communal pride. It was both strange and comforting at the same time.

On a glass panel was an engraved portrait, a man with dark hair mussed by wind and battle. Serious eyes set in a frown, he looked directly into the eyes of anyone that passed; I had seen it from across the room, and something about it had me drawing closer, curious.

Alongside the panel was a short biography, also carved in glass. Beneath it, a name: James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes. Born in 1917, died 1944.

"Best friends since childhood…" the male narrator spoke over the exhibit, making it easier for me so I didn't have to read the difficult paragraphs of the written biography. "Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield."

I knew of Bucky Barnes, from history class and grainy 1940's news reels, but this was probably the first time I'd ever seen an image of him so large and highly rendered. Because it was glass, the portrait had no color, yet it still captured intensity of his gray-eyed stare.

Familiar gray eyes…

"With his duty as a sniper, a rifleman with skills unlike any other, Bucky Barnes often goes unseen, or unnoticed in the background amongst Howling Commando activity."

I couldn't tear my gaze away from the portrait.

"His job often required him to hide in the treetops far away, where he could eliminate targets undetected."

From the same eyes I'd seen before.

"Because of this, Barnes is the Howling Commando with the least amount of known video footage."

From the man on the bridge.

"Make no mistake, however. No matter where he was, Barnes was always watching Roger's back."

The Winter Soldier.
"...Barnes is the only Howling Commando to give his life in the service of his country."

My entire body went cold. A cold metal hand clamped its vice grip around my neck.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I could only stare in the face of a dead man; a man who had been at Tower Bridge the day it was attacked.

A man with a metal arm, who had killed over a dozen people in the past seventy years.

The man who had stalked the halls of the Crucible like a specter made of ash and blood.

A man I had seen walking away from me six months ago in Sokovia, a rifle slung over his shoulder.

A man no one believed exists.

It wasn't possible.

It couldn't be possible.

And yet…

I stared into the face of Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes — Steve's best and oldest friend — and all I saw was the man from my nightmares.

Everyone surrounding me, worshiping him like a martyr.

It's him.

"It's him? What are you talking about, Mia?" Someone asked; their voice sounded a million miles away. I hadn't realized I'd spoken aloud until I heard my name. "Hey there, space cadet, everything okay?"

A hand landed on my shoulder.

I nearly flew out of my socks. All at once, my consciousness slammed back into my body and suddenly all I could feel was my racing heart, the cold sweat, the shallow breathing picking up speed. I gasped inwardly, whirled around, only to find a startled Steve next to me.

He stepped back a little, eyes widening, hand lifting away. "Whoa, hey, is everything all right? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

Steve's voice had a slight joking lilt at the last sentence, but the undercurrent of sudden nervousness meant he was trying to lighten the mood. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. My gaze slipped from him to the glass panel next to me.

I had seen the Winter Soldier's entire face only once, on the bridge; more times, if you counted my memory dreams, or whatever they were. It was enough to have it imprinted in my mind forever. So although Bucky Barnes' hair was short, his face clean-shaven and lined with the sense of expression, of feeling, of thought…

It was still the Winter Soldier.

Right there, watching me.

My gaze returned to Steve's, who was still waiting for me to respond. His nervous smile slipped
away when he realized that it wasn't coming.

Or maybe he recognized the look on my face. The same look I had when I heard that car backfire standing in his kitchen.

"It's him," I could only say in a hoarse, terrified whisper. Everything seemed to fade into a blur. Everything except the Winter Soldier. "It's him."

The room suddenly felt too full, the air hot and heavy, crushing me with suffocating pressure. I saw the kids, the innocent kids, the families milling about, completely unaware of the danger they were in. Stumbling away from the portrait, I couldn't breathe. I couldn't speak. He was here.

I didn't know what to do.

So I ran.

"Wh — Mia, wait!"

I heard Steve's shout but wasn't listening. All I could hear was the dozens, hundreds chattering, the bodies pressing in, all the dark shadows and corners and unseen places he could hide.

He's here he's here he's here

I burst out of the exhibit with such speed that I nearly sent myself over the railing on the other side.

I caught it just before, then pushed off, tearing across the upper balcony until I found the stairs. I leapt down them two, three at a time, nearly pitching head over heels at one point, before scrambling for the door. Several security guards spotted me and called out, alarmed, but they'd catch me soon enough to find out what was wrong.

In less than fifteen seconds I was out the door.

Sunlight hit me and it was like a shot to my system. Cool fresh air sucked into my lungs, wicking away the sweat that had accumulated on my skin. The new smells permeated my mind; of the tulips growing nearby, the freshly mowed grass, the faint scent of food drifting past — coffee and pastry. My frantic escape came to an end somewhere in the middle of the park — I'd slowed down along a walking path before coming to a complete stop by an empty bench.

I hunkered down on the ground, pressing my back against one side of the bench, facing away from the Air and Space Museum. Deep, shuddering breaths wracked my frame; half-way between gasp and sob, my hands on my head, tucking around into a tight fetal position.

Just trying to catch my breath. To get feeling back into my hands. My fingers tingled ominously, so I clenched and unclenched my hands, focusing on the tension in my muscles instead of the terrifying thoughts racing through my head. My throat felt raw and my heart pounded in my chest with such force it ached. Run, run, it said. Run or die.

I managed to cling to rationality, but only just. I had to fight for each moment to stay still, to remind myself to breathe.

Another panic attack, but now there was no convenient closet to hide in. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the Winter Soldier; trying to kill me on the bridge, making me to shoot a man I knew nothing about.

Watching him laugh alongside Steve in an old monochrome film reel, watching their lips move
soundlessly as they traded jokes and barbs.

The smile of a machine that had once been human.

A hand, reaching for me, right before I fell into a churning black river.

Nightmare mixing into awful reality. None of it felt real.

"Amelia? Amelia!"

Steve again. He'd caught up with me. Panting slightly, he dropped down to one knee next to me, an arm dropping around my shoulder and pulling me close. "Jesus, you're shaking. What happened?"

He was right. I was shivering so hard, like it was the middle of winter. But even if it was, I didn't shiver in winter temperatures.

No, the cold was already inside of me.

"What happened, Mia?" Steve asked again, quietly. My vision was a little blurry — maybe tears, maybe just shock — but I could see the urgency in his face that wasn't in his voice. Each word was carefully measured, even and soft. Like one wrong shift, and I'd shatter into a million pieces. "What did you see?"

He didn't ask me what's wrong — he already knew that. Another panic attack, another echo of trauma coming back to me. Only this time, it wasn't because of crossed wires, mistaking one stimulus for another.

This was the real thing.

"I-it's him." I whispered, stumbling over my words. The old stutter, called back by a new stroke of anxiety. It was hard to form words; the muscles in my neck and jaw were clenched so tight, and my mind so scattered in high emotions, confusion and fear. I had no idea how to form any of it into coherent words. "Him. B-Bucky. It's him."

My eyes swept out over the National Mall, skipping from one distant body to the next. My mind kept seeing every shadow, every vague silhouette, as a possible threat, a possible enemy.

"Bucky?" Steve frowned, baffled. "Mia, what are you talking about?"

I stared into his eyes, for a second unable to believe how he didn't understand. Steve really had no idea, did he?

Of course he wouldn't. It was all just a myth.

"The man on the bridge," I breathed, almost too afraid to say the name out loud. Like he would know, like he could hear me. "In London. It's him. The Winter Soldier."

"The Winter —" Steve shook his head, running his other hand over his face. "Bridge in London? You mean, that attack last October? Are you saying you were there, Mia?"

I could only nod dumbly, and swallowed at an errant sob. I was not going to cry. Not this time. I was too busy trying to piece it all together. "The Winter Soldier w-was there. H-He was hunting me. The Crucible s-sent him. He's the one w-who trained me. He was too good. I c-c-couldn't beat him, I-I couldn't…" My failure in that battle left me rattled, and I couldn't continue for a moment. Taking a deep breath, I went on, "I had to escape."
"The Crucible," Steve repeated. Still that same, measured tone, but a new expression had crossed his face. Hardening, the edges of deep thought. "This Winter Soldier works for them? What, who is he?"

"A-an assassin," I said, nearly choking on the words as I wrapped my arms around myself. My fingers grazed against the compass hanging from my neck, and wrapped around it instinctively. In the back of my mind, I realized this was more information about my past than I had ever told Steve before. "Soviet, or u-used to be. I tried to tell SHIELD w-when they found me, b-but they just said he was a ghost. H-he didn't exist. Over two dozen possible targets, over seventy years, but never been caught. No physical proof, o-or…"

I dropped my head to my knees. More deep, shuddering breaths. My head was pounding, and nausea came and went in rolling waves. The desire to run, to keep running, to never stop running was still coursing through my blood. The only reason I didn't? Steve's arm still around me, grounding my mind and body into place.

"He's dangerous," I whispered, closing my eyes and seeing him again. "He h-has a metal arm. A red star o-on the shoulder."

I felt, rather than saw, Steve go still next to me. The way his arm tensed, stiffening, around my shoulders. The sudden lack of movement, breathing, beside me. He'd seen the tattoo on my shoulder. Until now, I had never him what it meant.

For one very long, very silent minute, Steve didn't say anything.

I wasn't sure what he would say. If he even believed me at all. But something told me he did. Just enough.

"And what does this have to do with Bucky?" he finally asked. Still the same quiet voice, now edged with wariness.

"The last I-I ever saw the Winter Soldier was right before I left Sokovia," I said, lifting my head up again. I looked over the park once more, but I could feel Steve's gaze burning into the side of my face. "That is, until today, when I walked into that room and his face next to the name Bucky Barnes."

"What? N-no, that's…" Steve began, but cut himself off, his mouth opening and closing helplessly for a moment. He blinked several times, squeezing his eyes shut and looking down and away. The disbelief couldn't be more apparent.

It took him several seconds to recover, and even then Steve still looked pale, shaken, disturbed. "Mia, it can't be him, y-you must be confused —"

"Confused? He tried to kill me! He's the one who made me who I am!" I snarled, throwing off his arm and rounding on Steve. The sudden rage, the hurt, the desperation, released all in one go. "I could never forget his face!"

Steve recoiled, caught off guard. Pain flashed in his eyes. The pain of reliving death, of it getting thrown back in your face with such callousness and disregard.

"Mia." His voice only became softer compared to my own, but was just as tense now. "Bucky's been dead for years."

"Yeah, and?" I demanded, breathing hard. I jammed a finger into his chest. "So were you, Steve."
He just looked at me, speechless.

Realizing I may have taken it too far, I backed off, leaning away from him and back into the side of the bench. Of course he wouldn't believe me. If Peter had died years ago and someone told me he was somehow still alive, but now an evil assassin, I wouldn't take them seriously either.

What was I expecting?

I looked away, wiping away the sudden tears that had escaped. All the rage I felt a moment ago had disappeared in an instant.

"I-I'm sorry," Aside from a slight tremble, my tone has eased, dropping to something close to dead. Unemotional. I was starting to regret ever saying anything at all. "I didn't mean... I never met Bucky. I don't know what happened. All I'm telling you is that the Winter Soldier has his face."

I tried to convince myself it was some wild coincidence. Bucky Barnes, American war hero turned Soviet assassin? Sure, he never made as much acclaim as Steve did, but his sacrifice put him a step above the rest. Why would a man who would die for his country, now be one of its greatest foreign enemies?

I mean, Jesus. I thought the Winter Soldier was Russian. Had he really been an American this whole time?

...Then again, wasn't I an American, too?

I had been kidnapped and made turncoat against my will. Who's to say it wasn't the same for Bucky Barnes?

Of course, it left open the possibility of another option.

That Bucky Barnes had betrayed his country of his own free will.

I didn't want to consider it. I imagined Steve wouldn't, either.

I was waiting for the final nail in the coffin, for Steve to deny it, to blow it off as wild conspiracy. Because...well, it was. I sure as hell didn't know how to explain it. I didn't have the answers. Just a tiny sliver of the truth, and not a particularly good sliver either.

But when he spoke again, his question took me by surprise. "...You said he had a metal arm. What did it look like? What kind of metal was it?"

My brows furrowed, and I studied my shoes. "I'm not sure. It could've been Vibranium, maybe — it was strong, I've seen it block bullets and knives with no scratches. Maybe cybernetic, too. I never saw how it was grafted onto him, but it matched him perfectly. He never had trouble using it."

"Grafted?" Steve tilted his head, puzzled by this word. "Like a prosthetic? He'd lost his arm?"

I could only nod and shrug. "I think so. I mean, no one ever told me how. He certainly didn't."

"Did he ever talk to you?"

I tried not to snort at that. At the very least, my smile was a weak one. "I mean, he's the one that taught me. Didn't say a lot, just what I needed to know, and nothing more. He only spoke Russian — that's how I learned."

"Did he ever give you a name?"
"His name? No." I was jumping off the cliff into deep waters — telling Steve everything, not holding anything back. Before, the idea had scared me. Now, nothing scared me more than the Winter Soldier. "He didn't have a name. Neither did I, for that matter. They only called him солдат — soldier."

"And what were you called?" Steve asked, and his expression was unreadable, but there had been a slight hesitation when he said it. Like he was afraid to know the answer.

"Солдатка. Means the same thing."

Steve inhaled deeply, nodding his head. Although it was hard having to say all this, I was glad he was asking these questions. He was curious, at least. Giving me a shot.

"How did he kill people? What was his specialty?"

I almost laughed, but I had no good humor left in me. "I guess a better question would be what isn't he good at. He's an expert sniper, and with every other gun known to man. In close combat, you'd be lucky to survive more than a few seconds. Aside from the arm, he carries an arsenal of weapons on him at all times. Guns, knives, grenades. You disarm one thing and he pulls out another. He's completely silent, he can get in and out of places with no one ever noticing. There and gone again. No one who ever crosses him survives. He's unstoppable."

"Unstoppable," Steve repeated to himself, fingers tapping on his knee. "And until today, you had no idea he might've been someone else?"

"No. No one else did either, as far as I knew."

"But SHIELD knows about him?"

"In theory. I don't know what they have on him. Just that he's largely a myth, because the deaths attributed to him date back so far they don't believe it could all possibly be done by the same man. They use him to scare newbies with, but besides that… he's not real."

"Well," Steve heaved a sigh, rubbing his hand across his chin. "We know that's not true."

I cut him a sharp look, surprised. "...You believe me?"

Steve inhaled through his nose, leaned back until he was sitting on the ground with his knees up, rubbing his hands together. A long pause before he answered me. "I believe you when you say the Winter Soldier is real. Whatever SHIELD thinks it knows, it's not enough. And whether he really is Bucky or not…"

His sentence drifted off, his lips pressing thin. Steve didn't meet my eyes as his jaw worked for a moment. "...I guess that remains to be seen."

That was as diplomatic an answer as I was going to get. Carefully neutral, not revealing his opinion either way. I could only imagine what Steve was really thinking right now. Maybe he was hoping I was just crazy.

I bit my lip, wincing internally. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Steve just shook his head, the ghost of a smile on his face to put me at ease. He cast me a long look, his face tense with concern. "I'm glad you told me. That you trusted me."

Me, too. I thought, but didn't have the will to speak. I returned the smile, if only for a moment.
"But I want you to promise me something, Mia," He continued. "Please don't run away again. I know its hard for you, but I want to help, and I can't do that if we don't stick tog —"

Just as he spoke, a ringtone interrupted him. He paused, scowling as he pulled his phone out of his pocket, read whatever message it was on the screen. Something flickered across his face — anger? Frustration? He put the phone back without a word.

"What's that?" I asked, taken aback. I had never seen Steve use his phone. As far as I knew, he hadn't received any calls or messages from anyone since I'd been here. Until now, I had almost assumed he didn't have a phone at all, aside from when I had texted him.

"Work." Steve muttered. He seemed to be fighting something for a moment, moving stiffly as he settled back down. "I..I can't avoid it, I have to go."

I blinked. "W-when?"

"Now."

My heart dropped. "Oh."

So much for sticking together.

To think this entire time, I had been curious about if and when Steve's work would come up, that I can learn more about it. But, of course, it just had to come at the most inconvenient time, when I wanted nothing to do with it at the moment.

It was clear that Steve wasn't happy with this either. Taking his hat off, he ran a hand through his hair, before putting it back on with a sharp jerk. Regret made its way into his tone. "I'm sorry, Mia. I don't want to leave you, not now, not when you're feeling like this. But its —"

"An emergency?" I guessed, raising my eyebrows. I wasn't being sarcastic or mean, just… sad.

I didn't want him to leave. I didn't want to be on my own, as deceptively tempting as it might be. Although I had calmed down considerably since the initial panic, I was still deeply rattled. A tremble remained in my fingers every time I moved my hands, so I kept them tucked under my arms so he wouldn't see them. But I doubt he'd need to. I felt like I was standing on the edge of a precipice; one wrong step could send me pitching back into the void.

"Yeah." Steve replied with a huff, perhaps more frustrated with himself than anything else at the moment. "I'll bring you home, and when I come back, we can talk more about it, if you want."

If I want. Did I want to? I felt like I had said enough already. More than enough, really. The main fact had been put across: Bucky Barnes was the Winter Soldier.

The question: what happens now?

"Mia." My name again, followed by a hand on the shoulder. I thought it'd be another one of those reassuring gestures, but was surprised when Steve drew me in, thick arms wrapping around me in a gentle, but firm, embrace. "You're going to be okay. I promise, I won't let him hurt you again."

The words in the same measured tone as always, yet each one hit me in a new way, until it felt like my heart was completely exposed. To say I was touched would be underselling it. Burying my face into his shoulder, I took in a deep, shaking breath, trying to force back the tears again.

Not as successful this time. But I let myself believe that what Steve said could be true.
If anyone could stop the Winter Soldier, it'd be Steve.

Of course, if the Winter Soldier didn't kill him first.

The negative thoughts were an unwelcome presence in an otherwise comforting moment. But I couldn't shake them away; I was too scared of the possibility that Steve couldn't take on the Winter Soldier that I didn't want to think of what would happen if that were the case.

Another sob slipped out and Steve pulled me in tighter, warm hand rubbing my back. As my fingers dug into the back of his shirt, he shushed me gently. "Shh, you're okay, you're going to be fine...You're safe, I promise."

Steve should've known better than to make a promise he couldn't keep.
"So, Mia," Kate said, as she tossed a bowl of salad. "How was the museum today?"

I sat at the table in the center of Kate's kitchen, my hands lying limp on the table. There was only the barest tremble in my fingers now, since Steve had dropped me off here.

"It was fine."

My words were clipped, quiet. While Kate's apartment was not too different from Steve's, it was still strange and uncomfortable to sit in. It was much more...cutesy. The tablecloth had a bright, garish pattern. A lot of decorative pillows, here and in the living room, covered in sequins and ribbons and what-not. A line of ceramic children with cherubic faces lined the top shelf of a nearby cabinet, as well as the side tables in the living room. Next to the framed picture of her nursing diploma, Kate had a 'Live Laugh Love' sign made of hammered copper.

It wasn't exactly my taste.

Kate, dressed in a simple white shirt and jeans, cast me a look over her shoulder. Her face was fixed in a sympathetic frown. "A little disappointed?"

How did she know? I tried to keep my hackles from rising. I didn't like that she had read me so easily, but then again, I was an exposed nerve right now. A hot mess, as one might say, after the museum trip. I was good at hiding it, maybe, but not enough to keep everything from her. "...Yeah, I guess."

Disappointed that Steve had to leave for work, even though he'd said it wouldn't interrupt this week. Disappointed that it had to happen right after another panic attack.

Disappointed that I got stuck with a babysitter.

We had run into Kate on the stairs; she had a day off, and had offered to look after me when Steve explained to her, in as few details as possible, that he had to work and couldn't stay to watch me.

Like I was some invalid.

Not that I was angry at Steve, no. He was doing what he thought was best, and leaving me with someone he trusted, a neighbor, was the answer.

But I didn't want to be in a stranger's apartment. I didn't want to be alone with her. I certainly didn't want to maintain a conversation with her when I already felt so exhausted.

The aftermath of my panic attack was a long, quiet walk back to the apartment. We considered the subway only briefly — when the passing screech of a train made all the blood drain out of my face, Steve made the executive decision to take the scenic route.

He had asked me more questions — mostly about Bucky, for obvious reasons, but all I could see
was the Winter Soldier. I'd been unable to answer them. Or just didn't hear them at all. I had gone
that entire walk hugging myself, shoulders hunched, wound up like a spring ready to launch into
the stratosphere at the wrong touch.

That had eased somewhat, but only because now I had something else unpleasant to think about. It
was hard to say if Kate and her apartment were a welcome distraction or not.

It was a deceptively small situation that threatened to overwhelm me, simply through basic
interaction I wasn't sure I could perform at this moment.

"Well, I know it's not how you expected things to turn out, but I just want you to know that you're
welcome here, Mia," Kate said, bringing the finished salad to the table. She forked it over into two
smaller bowls, and handed one to me. "I hope you like Caesar salad. I tend to make extra, for my
lunches at the hospital."

I wasn't exactly the biggest fan of salad. The low calories did not satisfy me, and the taste was
never as enjoyable as I'd like. Still, I didn't complain as I took the bowl; Kate was just being a good
hostess. It reminded me of what Aunt May would do, and I couldn't blame her for that.

As Kate dug in, I picked at the leafy greens, having lost my appetite a long while ago.
Uninterested, bored, I turned my attention back to my surroundings.

The apartment was nice and spacious, despite the decor, and I thought to myself how a place like
this in New York would cost a fortune. Was living in DC more or less expensive than Manhattan? I
knew Steve could afford this place because whatever his secret job was, it definitely paid well, as
anything clandestine probably would. I wondered, vaguely, how Kate could pay for this on a
nurse's salary.

"Is DC suiting you so far?" Kate's question broke me out of my reverie.

I blinked, taking another gander at my salad and again unable to find the will to eat. "It's alright."

"Been out exploring?"

"A little."

"It must be nice to spend the holiday with your family."

"Yeah."

Kate pressed her lips together. My monosyllabic answers were giving her nothing to work with. I
wasn't trying to be frustrating, but my head wasn't here. Every time I closed my eyes I was back at
the Crucible. But I was present enough to feel bad about it, and rather than suffer through more, I
thought about excusing myself. At least save us both the embarrassment of an awkward
conversation.

But before I could, Kate pressed on. "So, where do you go to school?"

I was still trying to distract myself, counting the number of decorative pillows I saw; I could feel
her gaze on me. As if to prompt me, Kate added, "I hear Midtown's pretty prestigious. Your family
must be proud."

I looked back to her, caught off guard. "How did you know that?"

"Hm? Right, Steve mentioned it to me once," Kate shrugged, then took another bite of food.
"Oh," I said, brow furrowing. All of a sudden, I forgot about the Crucible. That new information had surprised me. I doubted I could hide my sudden unease, tensing in my shoulders.

"So what do you study there?"

"Just, you know," I didn't feel comfortable really explaining my life to her. I knew Kate was just trying to make small-talk, but it was hard to reciprocate. "Basic school stuff. Chemistry, calc, English. I take AP classes, even if it's more to read."

"Don't like reading, huh?" Kate smirked at that, as if I was subject to the typical teenage laziness. "The usual procrastination, I bet."

"Something like that," I decided to say, with a slight smile of my own, but without the humor. I wasn't in the mood to explain my dyslexia, and accidentally evoke any sympathy or pity. "Where did you go to school?"

"University of Vermont. I got my first job working ICU and PICU floors at Metro General before coming here. That had to have been about...seven years ago, I think."

I almost did a double-take. "Really?"

"Yeah, why?"

Metro-General was where I used to go every time I was sick — I knew the PICU wing, the doctors and the nurses and the patients, like the back of my hand.

By all accounts, Kate and I would've been there at the same time.

"I used to go to Metro-General a lot," I said, pursing my lips. "I was really sick when I was younger, so I was always in the PICU. But I don't think I ever saw you there."

Kate blinked, looking as equally surprised as I felt. She dropped her fork for a moment, appearing to mull that over. But the easy look on her face never faded, and she just said, "Huh, what a coincidence. Or maybe it's ironic? But I guess that's just New York," she chuckled, shaking her head. "So many people all in one place and you might never see run into each other, right?"

I smiled back, but it didn't reach my eyes. "Right."

I glanced away, flattening my hands against the table to stop them from twitching or clenching. I took in an array of photo frames arranged on a nearby counter, Kate and colleagues in scrubs. They were the only ones I could spot in the apartment. "Do you have family here?"

"Oh, no, my parents died when I was young. I was raised by my grandmother until she passed away, too. Became an emancipated child and worked my way up from there," Kate said this all with an easy smile, a one-shouldered shrug. "It hasn't been easy, but I've made my way for myself, found my happiness. I know that's what my family would want. I try to keep them in my heart."

"You don't seem to have any photos of them," I remarked, still gazing about the room, but always keeping Kate in the corner of my eye. For someone who seemed to love her family so much, she didn't have a lot of keepsakes of them.

"Oh," Kate said, the smile on her face flickering. "I haven't unpacked them yet."

The switch in her tone was small, but noticeable. A little stiffer, a little stilted. Lacking the natural, almost lyrical tone she had before, lighthearted and humorous.
I couldn't resist. "Now who has the usual procrastination?"

Something in her expression changed. It was almost imperceptible. But since my panic attack, I was on high alert for even a single dust molecule out of place. I didn't fail to notice the way her eyes narrowed, just a smidge, the pinch of her brows, the way her smile looked more like a smirk.

Playing the same game now.

Kate continued briskly, as if that awkward moment was completely forgotten, "Sorry, I didn't mean to dump that all on you. I tend to overshare, I guess."

"How long have you been living here?" I asked, deciding to ignore it. I kept my tone neutral, turning back to my meal. A bright red cherry tomato caught my interest and I chased it with my fork. My eyes remained on Kate, unblinking.

"About ten months. Why?" Kate blinked. Maybe my staring disconcerted her, or maybe she didn't expect the passive-aggressiveness. Still, she didn't hesitate.

"Oh! Just curious." Raising my eyebrows, as if charmed by this information, I plucked up the cherry tomato with my fingers and popped it into my mouth. "So you and Steve moved in right around the same time then, huh?"

"I suppose" Kate's smile faded a little, perhaps detecting that my politeness was feigned. Or perhaps I was getting too close. Her demeanor was a lot less soft when it felt like you were playing chess with words. "Right before, actually."

"Wow. What a coincidence." With a great bite, the cherry tomato burst in my mouth, and I chewed thoughtfully.

"It definitely is," She continued, still casual, although her tone had become cool. She picked at her salad but was watching me, leaning with one arm on the table. "But I can't complain. Steve's been a good neighbor; I've gotten a lot less luck than this in the past. I actually had something to ask you. How do you know Steve again? I don't think he ever said."

Hm, turning the tables on me now. And a hard one, too. I didn't think I could avoid the question without being completely obvious. I decided to remain conversational.

"He probably didn't, but that's Steve, you know?" I said, sitting back in my seat with my hands still on the table. "He's a private guy. Only likes to share with people he knows he can trust."

I didn't have to put in that little jab, but I wanted to make it a point so that Kate knew I knew that Steve couldn't trust her. _Shouldn't_ trust her.

"Yeah, that's what I like about him. Steve expects the same level of trust that he gives us. The kind of man you know you can rely on." Kate's smile was sweet. Too sweet. "But you didn't answer my question, Mia."

"I thought Steve explained it pretty well," I just shrugged. "We're family."

"I meant how are you two _related_. What is he, father, uncle, cousin?"

She was digging. I tilted my head, edging on the defensive. "Maybe that's none of your business."

"It's just a simple question," Kate replied, her eyebrows rising innocently, but her dark eyes were piercing.
"I thought I gave you a pretty satisfactory answer."

"You know, if I didn't know any better," she said, taking a sip of water. "I'd say you were hiding something."

That just brought a smile to my face. I clicked my tongue. "Funny you should say that."

Glass still in her hand, Kate threw me a quizzical look. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, its nothing. I just keep thinking about what you said earlier, how you learned about my school from Steve?" I said with the same smile. "Because you looked pretty surprised by me when we first met. As if you had no idea who I was. Almost like Steve never mentioned me in conversation before."

Kate opened her mouth to respond, probably another totally-casual-but-non-verifiable excuse, but I cut her off.

"In fact," I raised a finger. "That's exactly what he told me afterwards when I asked him about it."

Kate didn't move for a very long moment. Our gazes, locked onto each other.

My mouth turned into a thin line. "So why don't you tell me who's the one that's hiding."

I tried to convince myself it was just my paranoia making me overthink this. The dial on my suspicion meter had been broken off and now everything felt like a bad sign.

But I knew one thing was for certain. I couldn't trust Kate.

And now I'd upended the chessboard, making it anyone's game. I had no idea what was going to happen next, but I knew I couldn't keep it to myself any longer. It was Kate's turn to do something. Her face was unreadable, however, although I could tell by her sudden rigidity that our previous faux-polite conversation was at an end.

Finally, at length, she spoke quietly. "It's not what you think,"

"Really?" I said, my expression hardening as I leaned in closer. My voice dropped, even though we were the only two in the room. "Because I think you're not who you say you are, Kate, if that's even your real name."

Her slip-up, the simple lie that Steve told her about my school, had given her away, and I had been onto her ever since. Kate had weave a pretty good story around her; the diploma and the pictures all looked convincing. If she had chosen any other hospital, I might've believed her about that, too. But she obviously knew very little about me, maybe never even knew I'd grown up sick — maybe she chose a New York hospital hoping to engender a sense of kinship. But it had only achieved the opposite effect.

"Amelia, you don't —" Kate stood up, but I was on edge and reacted badly. As soon as she moved, I jumped out of my seat and away from the table, ready to bolt.

"Hey, easy!" This seemed to catch Kate by surprise, who caught herself, hands raised as a sign of peace. She kept her pitch low, her head slightly bowed, like I was a skittish horse she was trying to calm. Slowly, Kate lowered her hands onto the table. The meals between us were entirely forgotten, as the air in the apartment took on a distinct change. "Easy. Just listen. I'm not going to hurt you, okay? There's a lot you don't understand."
"You mean, besides the fact you've been stalking Steve?" I demanded, the sarcasm spitting out harsh. On my feet, my heart was pounding a mile a minute. I glanced around, my instinct seeking escape kicking in.

"It's not stalking," Kate almost rolled her eyes, and the sweet facade dropped away completely. Her expression turned hard, even annoyed, and her whole posture changed to one of defense. I noticed the way her hands curled, the tendons and muscles in her arms. She was healthy, athletic even. Probably not your average shut-in crazy stalker. "It's just a job. I'm not here to hurt you or Steve, okay?"

"A job?" And that's when it clicked. "You work for SHIELD."

A muscle in Kate's jaw clenched, and she glanced down, seeming angry with herself for a moment. She didn't deny it. Apparently, she thought I'd already figured it out.

Instead, she'd given herself away.

I took another step back.

"Amelia," She said again, a warning tone now. Dark eyes met mine, pinning me in place. "Don't freak out. I was assigned as Steve's protection detail. I'm just here to keep an eye on things, make sure he's okay."

"Oh really? Does he know that?" I demanded.

She scowled, side-stepping around the table, but that only had me backing away further. I glanced at the door behind me. Already guessing what I was thinking, Kate spoke up, "I wouldn't do it, Amelia. You can't tell him. In order to do my job I can't lose my cover."

I just snorted at that, wondering why the hell that should matter to me. "I think maybe Steve deserves to know that SHIELD is spying on him."

And all this time I'd been worried they were on me. I had never thought that SHIELD would think Captain America to be worth suspicion. Kate could call it whatever she wanted, but I wasn't stupid. If Steve didn't know, it meant SHIELD didn't trust him.

And I didn't trust them. Not before, and not now.

"Amelia, if you tell him, you will ruin over a year of valuable intelligence work," Kate said, her voice rising at my defiance. She was smaller than me, weighed a little less, but I had no doubt in my mind that Kate was someone who knew full well how to take care of herself. Any SHIELD agent would.

I just made a face. Intelligence work. "So you are spying on him."

"I am protecting Rogers, by order of Director Fury. I don't need to explain to you what that means." Kate replied, her teeth gritted. "I'm not here to argue semantics. You have no idea the repercussions of what this will do to him, to me, to all of SHIELD."

I clenched my fists. "I don't care."

All thoughts of leaving vanished when a better idea came to mind. Before Kate could stop me, I pulled out my phone, unlocking it and opening the texting app. Steve would probably be too busy to take a call, but the best I could do was leave a message for him to read later.
"Amelia, don't!" Kate lunged for me but I dodged out of the way, tucking my phone behind my back before she could grab it. My back hit the wall and I stared at Kate, who leaned against a shelf that had braced her impact. She was starting to breathe a little heavier. "Do not. Tell him."

"Or what." It came out more like a challenge than a question.

"Or..." Kate hesitated for a moment, brow furrowing as she scrambled to come up with something. Then she set her jaw. "Or nothing. This isn't up for debate. Believe me, Amelia, that his security is more important than the truth."

"Not good enough."

Kate saw the phone in my hand, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. Her eyes widened. Without warning, she blurted, "SHIELD thinks you're a threat!"

"What?"

Having just pulled out my phone again, I went stock-still. My blood went cold, and my eyes slid from the phone up to Kate's expression. Brown eyes wide and focused on mine.

It wasn't an empty threat.

"If you do this, they will bring you in," Kate continued slowly, her hands up. Her face was pale but controlled — that outburst a last second decision. "SHIELD thinks your dormant right now, but if they believe you're acting against their interests, knowingly? There's already been talks of bringing you in as an asset. Making Rebel Columbia a part of our force"

I swallowed thickly. For a moment, I was utterly speechless, a combination of shock, horror, fear. So this was it, this was the consequences of my actions in December. I should've known the other shoe would drop, should've expected it — and yet I was completely blindsided.

"And you know what that means," Kate continued, nodding her head slowly once she confirmed she had my full and undivided attention. "An asset is not the same as an agent. It means you'll never see your family again. No privacy, no freedom, no aspect of your life that doesn't belong to them. To protect you. And to protect the world from you."

My normal life hung in the balance. Desperation coursed through me, the desire to keep it that way at all costs.

A part of me wondered if she was trying to manipulate me, scare me with a threat, but my previous interaction with SHIELD told me they were fully capable of what she said — and her own earnesty, desperation rang true. There was a kind of worry in her eyes, the pinch in her brow, that had my chest clenching up in dread.

But I didn't want to betray Steve by not telling him. Was it betraying him? I didn't know, but that's what it felt like, this choice Kate presented me. Hardly a choice, to be honest. She had me backed into a corner, literally and figuratively.

Steve had made an effort to be honest with me at every turn, and it felt wrong that I couldn't do the same. Sure, there were still secrets, but they were personal secrets about ourselves that (hopefully) affected no one else. This? This was game-changing.

I couldn't do that to Steve. "Why are you telling me this?"
"Because I don't want to see a kid like you end up that way, and I'm doing you a favor with this warning," Kate said. "One that no one else is going to give you. A lot of your... alleged actions have had international consequences. Your origins are mysterious enough to be a security threat. You don't have a lot of chances left, Amelia, before SHIELD decides you're more useful in their hands."

"They'd take in a kid?" I remember Coulson's words, how he had seemed so against using a minor in any way. How I had to lie about my age just to be taken seriously. Apparently, Coulson's team was the exception, not the rule.

"They've done it before," Kate simply shrugged, like the ethics of it were hardly a surprise."SHIELD has no official file on Amelia Fletcher. Yet. It can stay that way, but that's up to you. And I'm telling you right now, Mia, you don't want this. Your family, your friends? They'll either think you're dead, or find out what you really are."

I didn't know what was worse; having Aunt May think I was dead again, knowing the truth. The expression in her face, the fear in her eyes, too afraid to even touch me, get close to me. Not seeing me as her little girl, but as a ticking time bomb, a terror threat in the making.

And even for someone like Peter, who knew the truth; I doubted he could be convinced of another fake death, but SHIELD was beyond his reach. Even if he knew I was still alive, we'd never see each other again. Not him, or Michelle, or Ned, or Dmitri... not even Steve.

My entire life falling to pieces.

"Please," Kate said, holding her hands out to me. "Don't make that mistake. Tell me you won't do it."

Turned out I didn't need to say anything. I just dropped my phone, slumping against the wall. But I didn't break eye contact with Kate. She won this battle, but the war wasn't over.

I hated myself for it. The self-loathing ran hot, bitter, deep. I didn't want to do this to Steve, after everything he'd done for me.

Seeing my silent surrender, Kate took a deep breath. Something flickered across her face — Pain? Regret? I couldn't tell, and it was gone in a flash. Seemingly to relax, but I suspected she was more relieved than she let on. A year long operation. I couldn't imagine how hard she had to work just to get into this position with Steve. I wondered if any attraction she showed him was actually real — if she had any idea how much this might hurt him.

You know, aside from the fact that his supposed allies were absolutely spying on him without impunity.

But still. I'd seen the way Steve looked at her. He liked Kate. Or he liked the character of Kate, as played by this nameless SHIELD agent.

"Thank you," Kate said, with a slight nod of her head, straightening her shirt and pressing her hands into her back like she just carried several heavy boxes up a flight of stairs. And just like that, she went from all hard edges, rough government agent to exhausted nurse on her break.

Her gratitude, although subtle, still seemed genuine. It surprised me. Considering the tense moment, I figured she'd just forgo with all formalities completely.

I still didn't say anything. My phone was still in my hand, and I reluctantly put it in my pocket again. I didn't move from my position on the wall, but I watched Kate go back to the table, put the
chairs back in place, fixing the perfect image she had so painstakingly constructed.

She glanced at me. "Are you going to finish your salad?"

I just stared at her.

Realizing that I wasn't going to move, Kate closed her eyes and hung her head. "C'mon, Mia. It doesn't have to be like this. I'm not your enemy. You can trust me."

Absolutely not. I didn't move, just thought over my options again, picking apart Kate's words carefully. There had to be a loophole of some sort. *Something* so I didn't end up losing both my secret identity *and* my free will. The vehemence in which Kate spoke had struck me deeply, and for a woman who seemed so confident with herself, there had been a pathos there that felt a little deeper than the *Kate* act.

"How do you know so much about being an asset?" I asked quietly.

"Because," Kate said, inhaling through her nose. "I've been there. And I don't want you to go through the same thing, Mia. I'm just... I'm trying to protect you, do you understand?"

She held my gaze for a long moment. Another battle of wills. Internally, I cursed. Kate was smarter than I thought. Even with my fate hanging over my head like Damocles' sword, I was still thinking of a way on how to clue Steve in without giving myself away. Although, now that Kate knew I knew, I wasn't sure how they'd think it was anyone else...

But Kate was three steps ahead. In a harder tone, she repeated, "I said, *do you understand?*"

Despite myself, I flinched. I didn't like orders, and I especially didn't like the way Kate said it. Old memories bubbled beneath the surface, echoes of the Crucible, but I stuffed them down again.

This was not the time.

"Yes," I muttered, blinking first. I hated that, too, hated giving in, hated that I was putting myself before Steve. Unable to deal with the shame, I turned my attention to the window, feigning boredom, as if this whole affair was now a waste of my time. "Fine. Whatever. I'll keep my head down."

"It's for the best, Mia." Kate said, her own tone stiff but diplomatic. She turned my seat towards me and gestured. "Now sit. We're finishing this meal."

*God, was she serious?* I looked from Kate, to the chair, to Kate again. She was.

Hell no.

"If I'm going to be stuck here for the next twenty-four hours, can I at least get my stuff from Steve's apartment?" I asked, and tried to sound at least a little bit mollifying, although it might've come off as whiny. Before Kate could protest, I pulled out the key Steve had given me. "You don't have to break in this time."

That earned me an irritated look, and I tried not to look too pleased about it. Kate huffed, releasing the chair. "Fine. Let's make this quick."

When she went to open the front door, I finally peeled myself off the wall and followed her into the hallway. Kate waited in the hallway, arms folded, while I unlocked and let myself into Steve's apartment.
When she followed inside, I threw her an annoyed look. "You want me to show you his bedroom, too? Never mind, you probably already know where it is."

"Ugh, just go already," Kate just let out an irritated sigh and gestured for me to continue on by myself. Flicking my hair over my shoulder, I went on, heedless and relieved to have a few moments to myself, in familiar territory. Kate remained behind, still looking severely inconvenienced, waiting in the foyer.

"Can we pick up the pace, please?" Kate eventually called, loud enough to be heard throughout the apartment. Barely a minute had passed and that was already too long by her.

When silence answered, Kate scowled and yelled, "Mia? Hello?"

It was too quiet, and Kate didn't even wait for a reply before boldly striding into the apartment, heading straight to Steve's room. As annoying as Mia was, she had been right about one thing: Kate knew the entire layout to the last inch.

When Kate arrived at the open doorway, however, she skidded to a stop, then rushed in with a flurry.

At the opposite end of the bedroom, past the bed with the duffel bag still on top of it, the curtains fluttered.

The window, wide open.

Kate stuck her head out the window, wide eyes sweeping across the exterior.

The streets below, completely empty.

Amelia, gone with the wind.

Kate slammed the window closed. "Shit."
I had no idea what I was doing.

After escaping Kate, I had wandered the streets of DC for hours, making sure I had no tail. I was tempted to throw away my phone, but I didn't want to lose my only connection to Steve at this point — sure, SHIELD was most definitely tracking me through it, but if Steve called or texted me and I didn't answer? That would turn into a problem fast.

The walk also served to clear my head a little. MJ's bracelet rattled against my wrist. It was the only thing I took from my bag before I jumped out the window to escape Kate; now it served as a constant reminder to the thoughts in my head. My hands started to shake again — not just from the Winter Soldier, but now from Kate's warning. My own debilitating fear warring against my better nature, the overwhelming desire to tell Steve the truth.

I still hated myself, but I hadn't given up the possibility yet. Kate didn't control me. SHIELD didn't control me.

I just had to be careful from now on.

Unfortunately, it still left me in the position of not having anywhere to go. My first thought had been to find Dmitri, but considering Kate's warning and the fact that Ms. Hawkins hates my guts, I decided it was better to stay away for now. But DC was unfamiliar to me and I had no idea where else to go. I didn't know anyone here. Not anyone I could trust, at least. No place that was truly safe.

Where could I go? What could I do? My hand went up to clasp the compass hanging around my neck. I came to a stop at a street corner, looking down to study the casing. It seemed stupid, thinking this compass had an answer, but I couldn't help it. I felt utterly, completely lost.

Running my thumb over the cool metal, I flicked the cap open. The little black needle swayed back and forth, but remained pointed towards true North.

I looked up as the walk sign blinked on. An idea had occurred to me.

I still had one option left.

The sky was turning orange and pink as evening drew closer. The faint beginnings of starlight began to twinkle, as the sun glowered red, sinking towards the horizon. The streets turned dark and warm, the air cooling, and passed under the thick shadows of silhouetted trees. There was more traffic here, closer to downtown DC, but the added pedestrians made it easier to blend in.

Twenty minutes later, I now stood in front of the VA center. A low gray building with a spacious, friendly lawn, lights filtering through frosted glass. A part of me was surprised it was still open,
and I hesitated going inside.

What was I afraid of? It was either here or a long bus ride back to New York, which I wasn't ready to go through with yet.

Right now, I had neither the money nor the wherewithal to go anywhere else.

It occurred to me, just as I was stepping through the doors, if it would be weird for a teenager to be seen here. I wasn't exactly the usual clientele, and I didn't know anyone here.

Well, just one person.

The interior was a large, quiet lobby, empty at this time in the evening. A woman commanded a desk to my right, but she was too involved in a phone call and I slipped by unnoticed. Ahead, a wide hallway stretched out, splitting off in two directions at the end, with benches lining the center and the walls between. The furniture was made of creaky wood, but the walls were painted a warm tan, and I could hear a waxer buzzing somewhere down the building. Along the walls were doorways — some opened, some closed. An open one to the right held a conference room of sorts, with a podium at the front. In front of it, an array of folded seats, filled with a variety of people, men and women of a wide range of ages and ethnicities. Their backs were to me, and for the moment I felt safe in my anonymity.

However, the speaker had full view of the doorway and anyone that passed. Sam Wilson addressed the group at large, his tone calm and guiding, but not without that trademark smile. There was a round of chuckles when he made a self-deprecating joke.

As I passed, our gazes met. I kept walking.

It was another fifteen minutes before the meeting ended. The sound of chairs scraping on linoleum floor, being stacked, chatting conversation growing louder and echoing down the hall, followed quickly by a mass exodus of the group. I sat in a corner, next to a bench, using it as a shield as I studied the slow, shambling procession.

I looked back at the compass in my hands. The needle was now pointed towards me.

At least it was warm in here. I had rolled up the sleeves to my green jacket. I felt safe in my little corner. Would Kate think to look for me here?

Of course, that was assuming my phone wasn't being traced.

"Hey there," A warm voice brought my attention back up. Sam approaching me, apparently the last to leave the group meeting. The door was closed behind him. "It's about time you two finally showed up. I had a feeling you'd be the one to get Steve to keep his promise."

Perhaps it was my wordless shrug, or half-hearted smile, that gave it away. As he came to a stop next to the bench, Sam's genial expression started to slip. His eyes cast up, looked around, before settling back on me. "I take it the big guy isn't with you, huh?"

I gave a silent shake of my head.

"I see."

A stretch of silence followed, as Sam settled onto the bench, looking down at me with a slight frown. It was only then that I realized my hands were shaking; I closed the compass, letting it drop and hang from its cord, and pressing my hands against my knees, afraid to look up at Sam. I didn't
know if he had noticed, and I didn't want to know.

"So!" he spoke first, breaking the ice with a slightly more chipper tone, although it sounded a little forced. "Must be pretty bad for you to have come all the way here on your own, then."

I just nodded my head. It wasn't really a question; Sam didn't sound surprised or accusing, like I was inconveniencing him in any way. Just observant; either Steve told him of my earlier episode today, or he could tell from my current state that I wasn't okay. Right now, either was possible. I wasn't sure what I looked like, but it probably wasn't good.

"Do you...want to talk about it?" Sam asked, a bit more hesitantly. I doubted my wordless answers were very encouraging.

I didn't know how to respond to that. Right now, talking felt very difficult. I swallowed, and it felt like there was a big rock stuck in my throat. Like even the tiny of action of speaking seemed like overexertion, and if I tried, it might end with either me crying or having another panic attack. Neither option seemed pleasing.

Still, I didn't want Sam to leave, so I just nodded again. Tiny, a little ashamed with myself. Why was I like this?

"Hm," Sam pondered that for a moment, and I glanced up to see him making a grimace; it took me a moment to realize he was being comical, and relaxed slightly. "Alright." he shifted so he was leaning an elbow on the armrest. "Does Steve know you're here?"

I shook my head.

"Is he at work? Can you reach him?"

A nod and a shake. Technically, I could reach him, but not in a way that would matter to me. A text wasn't going to cover this; neither would voicemail.

"Does he know what happened?"

Yes.

"Hm," Sam hummed to himself, finger tapping the armrest. "Must've been pretty hard for him to leave like that, when you needed him."

Another nod. Stiffer, and I had to bite my lip. I didn't want to think about that.

I didn't want to think about anything.

But Sam's voice was soothing, gentle, guiding. If he was frustrated with my type of response, he gave no sign. "And this... event that happened, was he there, too?"

Yes.

"I'm sorry if these questions seem repetitive, Mia, I just want to understand better. I don't know you that well, or what you've been through," Sam said with a slight bow of his head. "But — and correct me if I'm wrong — whatever happened, it left you pretty shaken. Shaken in a way that doesn't just fade after a few hours and a nap."

Again, not a question, but I nodded anyways; it was true, and I understood.

"Moments like those can make you feel vulnerable; scared, sad, or angry. It can make you do
reckless things, for example:” Sam gestured around the room. "Running around in a city you don't know very well. But it feels safer than what's in your head, what's hunting you. It feels so real that you have to run away from it."

Yes. I couldn't communicate to Sam that it was not one, but two bad situations that led me here; right now, though, the conversation applied more to the museum, to my panic attack.

Even if I could talk, I wasn't sure how I could explain the whole Kate thing to Sam anyways.

"And now? Do you feel safer, staying here?"

That one took longer to consider. I gave a hesitant shrug. At the very least, I liked Sam more, and the air was much more at ease than either in a lonely apartment or stuck in the same room as Kate.

Sam gave that answer a good appraisal. His brow furrowed for a second, and he scratched his chin. "Do you want to stay here until Steve gets back?"

Stay somewhere warm and relatively safe and anonymous for a night? It sounded like a dream. Still, I felt embarrassed having to be in this position, and I briefly considered lying. The VA wasn't open 24/7. I couldn't actually stay here.

Perhaps sensing my indecision, Sam added, "Look, I'm not trying to force you into a decision. But if you really want to stay here for the night, I'm totally cool with that. I'm pretty sure we've got some spare blankets in a closet around here." Then he leaned with a conspiratorial whisper, smiling, "And just between you and me, the breakroom's got a new TV and a very nice couch, if I do say so myself. Much more comfortable than sitting on this old-ass linoleum. I'll even throw in a pizza. What do you think?"

I looked up at him, brow furrowing in surprise. "Really? You'd do that?"

It was the first time I'd spoken, and my voice was gravel and sandpaper. I cleared my throat, shaking my head. "I mean, thank you, but I don't want to ruin your night —"

"Are you kidding?" Sam laughed. "How can I say no to late-night pizza? The only caveat is that you'll have to watch the Louisville-Minnesota game that's playing tonight."

I blinked, confused, frowning slightly. "...Basketball?"

"And she knows her sports," Sam grinned, and tapped me lightly on my shoulder, with an encouraging tone. "C'mon, you know you want to."

I was at a loss. It wasn't every day a man urged to be inconvenienced. Hell, it seemed like Sam was even enjoying the prospect of it. And to be honest, pizza did sound really good…

At last, I gave a tiny nod. "O-okay."

"Yes!" Sam pumped his fist. If I didn't know any better, I'd say Sam was more excited about this than I was. On top of it all, I couldn't tell if it was an act. He seemed that genial. "Alright, get your butt off the ground, I'll show you where the break room is."

It was startling just how… easy Sam made it all seem. Just like that, he led me to another room; small, but cozy, with a large plasma TV on one wall and a very long couch on the other. The room was also equipped with a small kitchenette, sink, and fridge. The couch was an old, soft brown leather, but it squished pleasantly under my weight, and I felt obliged when Sam told me to take my shoes off before tucking my legs beneath me.
There I stayed, flipping through the channels to find Sam's game while he went left to close shop. I heard distant voices as he said good-bye to the secretary making her own way out — a somewhat extended conversation, I heard laughter and the jovial tone of light flirting. I wondered if she knew I was here, or that Sam was staying. Either way, she, too, eventually left.

I had just found the NCAA newscast when Sam walked back in, cell phone in hand. For a second, I felt like panicking, instantly believing a call to Steve, until Sam finger-gunned and said, "Gonna go pick up the pizza. Keep an eye on that game. Memorize it. I want to know everything I missed when I get back."

I agreed, which might have been a mistake. I knew very little about basketball and when I started to watch, I realized I didn't understand any of the terms or phrases the commentators were using. Still, I listened, and tried to make sense from what I was hearing to what I was watching. It was the least I could do for Sam.

Sam would return twenty minutes later with two pizza boxes. I heard the car before he entered, the door opening, then the smell of glorious meat and cheese before he finally entered. "Say hello to the best pizza you'll ever find in DC.

I was already standing up to receive him, and Sam laughed as I practically snatched the top box out of his arms. Lifting the lid, I was hit in the face with hot steam and the sight of pepperoni-and-mushroom pie, and I had to resist the urge to just slam my face directly into the open box.

"I'm guessing that you probably eat like your old man does, so I thought it was in my best interest to order the two-for-one special." Sam seemed pretty proud of himself for that forethought. He set the other pizza box on the table (containing sausage-and-onions) before going to the nearby counter to grab some napkins next to the sink. But I was too hungry to wait.

Sam turned, only to stop in his tracks, forlorn paper plates in hand. He smiled, but it was slightly uneasy at devouring taking place. "Jeez Louise, when's the last time you ate, Mia?"

"Few hours ago," I said through a mouthful of pizza. I swallowed before I continued more coherently, "Salad. Didn't even eat half of it."

Sitting down in a nearby armchair, Sam just nodded slowly, "Hmm, yeah, you don't seem like the low-carb type. Speaking of! Since I delivered the goods, now you have to tell me how the hell Minnesota is already beating Louisville."

I did my best to recite what I heard from the commentary, not understanding a word of it. At least I knew I had remembered it correctly when Sam just nodded along like it all made sense. Afterwards, I was too busy feasting to pay attention to the game, but Sam was completely wrapped up in it.

It was funny how food just took my mind off of everything. In fact, I realized I hadn't been thinking about anything distressing at all since I'd been in the break room, and I wondered what kind of trick Sam pulled on me. Of course, as soon as it occurred to me, I began to feel a little queasy, but then Sam whooped at a three-point score and I was distracted once again.

When there came a pause in the programming for commercials, a lull fell over the room. Sam was still eating, but I found myself staring in a corner of the room.

Before I could reconsider, I blurted, "Why are you doing this?"

"Hm?" Sam looked up from his pizza, confused. "You mean, this? Just seemed like the right thing
to do, that's all."

I didn't like that answer, even if it may have been true. "But you didn't have to go all out. I would've been okay with just, like, a candy bar from a vending machine."

"No, you wouldn't," Sam's rebuke caught me off guard with how casual he said it. At my startled expression, he said, "Would you have survived? Yeah, sure. But would you actually be better? Probably not. Are you telling me you'd rather have a Snickers than the eight pieces of pizza you've already eaten?"

Hm. I bowed my head, crunching a paper napkin in my hand into a ball. "No."

"Exactly." Sam wiped his own hands, setting down his paper plate. "As for your question, I'm doing all this because I want to, because maybe that's just the guy I am. If one of my friend's kids showed up here, all alone and with no place to go, you better believe I'd do something about it. You're important to Steve, Mia, which makes you important to me."

Ah, shit. Well, that certainly satisfied my curiosity. In fact, I stopped saying anything at all — as comforting as it was to hear that Steve really cared about me, Sam had also reminded me of why I was here. The same guilt I'd been trying to forget was back in my face again.

Sam just chuckled. "Sorry, did I lay it on a little too thick there? I'm just trying to tell you what's obvious to me, not trying to make you uncomfortable or anything."

Another thought occurred to me. Not really thinking, or attempting to address that comment, I once again blurted, "What do you do when you're forced to make a hard decision?"

Sam blinked. "What kind of hard decision?"

"Like," I pressed my lips together, trying to find the right words without repeating my exact situation verbatim. "If someone gave you two options; lie to a good friend, o-or end up in prison, and everyone you care about knows your worst secret. But you also don't want to lie to your friend, because you know he needs to know."

"And what kind of lie is this?"

"The kind that's supposed to keep him safe. But it doesn't. Not really."

Sam tilted his head, brow furrowing. His jovial demeanor started to slip away, perhaps realizing I wasn't posing a light-hearted hypothetical. "That's, uh, a pretty rough situation. Rock and a hard place, huh?"

I felt embarrassed for having word vomited, so I just averted my gaze and nodded silently.

"I don't know. I guess if I really valued my friend's trust, I'd figure out a way to tell them the truth," He shrugged, sitting back in his seat and folding his arms. He considered for a moment longer. "Without getting caught, of course."

"They might find out anyways," I said. "A secret never stays a secret for long."

Sam eyed me, pressing his lips together. "Sounds to me like you already have your answer." At my confused expression, he elaborated, "Well, you just said that if I did tell the truth, my own secret gets out. But if a secret is going to come out inevitably… then, I mean, why suffer through it? Either way I'm gonna end up in prison."
"Oh," Only too late did I realize the flaw in my logic, and nodded to myself. Was it really inevitable that Aunt May, and the rest, would find out the truth about me? I didn't want to consider it; at the same time, there seemed like a sort of truth to Sam's logic; it was destiny, it was fate.

Inevitable.

"Maybe I do want them to know," I conceded, screwing up my lips as I studied my hands. "But I want them to learn it from me."

"Then you'll have to beat this other guy to it." Sam said, like it was the easiest thing in the world. "They can't threaten you if you've got nothing to hide. Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"That leaves the other half of the equation. Is it worth going to prison for?"

"I guess that depends on you, how much you value the truth, and how if this good friend of yours can break you out again."

"Oh." I blinked, surprised. "I… I didn't think about that last part."

"I mean, you always gotta have your partners in crime," Sam just shrugged, and gave a ne'er-do-well grin. "For me, personally, if someone like Steve ended up in prison, I'd totally break him out, no question. And then I'd never let him forget it for the rest of his life. I'd like to think he'd do the same for me. Friends don't let friends rot in prison, is what I'm saying. So, why the big question?"

I didn't understand what he meant at first, before realizing he meant the whole thing. Self-conscious, and maybe worried I'd given too much of myself away, I just laughed quickly and said, "Oh, its, er, it's nothing. Just homework for my philosophy class."

"They give you homework over Spring Break?"

"Gotta keep us on our toes."

"Bastards."

✮✮✮

I woke to low voices.

Early morning light filtered in through the small windows above me. Opening my eyes, I squinted until the blurry shapes took focus, and found the break room empty. The TV shut off, the pizza boxes and related debris cleaned away. I pulled at the blanket Sam had given me — another one, folded up, served as a pillow.

I had fallen asleep some point late last night, when the game was still playing. In all that time, Sam had never asked me any more questions about what happened, or why I was there.

On the other hand, he tried to explain the true wonders of basketball to me, so it was a mixed blessing.

He was still here. It was his voice I was hearing outside in the hallway, low and muffled, a private conversation.
The other voice I recognized instantly.

Steve.

My first instinct was to shoot up and go out there to see them, but then I hesitated as my ears picked up on their words.

"...said whatever it was, you knew about it…?"

"...was there. Didn't want to leave but…"

"...pale as a ghost, man…"

"...sorry. Thank you for watching out… figure out a way to make it up to you…"

"...no worries, man, just glad to help…"

Ah, an Adult Conversation™. The kind you weren't supposed to overhear, but did anyways. I couldn't decide whether those words were comforting or not; at the moment, I was suddenly overcome with the fear that Steve was angry with me. I had a feeling that Sam would've told him, but I didn't know when — had he done it after I was asleep? Or maybe when he left to get the pizza? Or hell, when I was alone in the break-room and he was locking all the doors to the VA.

Whatever it was, Steve was here now. Afraid that my actions might have ruined whatever goodwill I had already achieved thus far, I slowly rose from the couch, wincing at the cramp in my leg, before walking out.

"Ah, she rises," Sam announced when he saw me — Steve's back was to me, and he turned as Sam said, "I'd watch out for that one. She ate a whole pie and a half in less than an hour."

"Duly noted," Steve replied with a smile. I couldn't help but notice it was a little thinner than usual.

"I'll see you later, then?"

"Better believe it," Sam gave a tiny salute as he spun around Steve and started heading towards the door, jacket over his shoulder. From here, I could see that there were already a few cars in the lot, and the ringing of the telephone from the lobby. "And Mia! Stay out of trouble for me, will ya?"

I gave a tiny wave. "I'll do my best."

When Sam passed through the doors, I turned to find Steve appraising me with an unreadable look on his face. At once, that guilt came back in full force, and for a second I was tongue-tied. I couldn't say what I wanted to say, so instead I said, "I'm sorry."

Steve furrowed his brow, bowing his head but keeping his eyes on me. "Are you okay?"

"I — " My mouth hung open for a second, nothing come out. That wasn't the response I expected from him. At last, my shoulders slumped, and I tucked my hands in my jacket pockets, not knowing what to do with them. "I-I guess so. Better than yesterday, I suppose."

By the end of my sentence, my voice was little more than a mumble, my gaze dropping to the floor. When Steve didn't say anything immediately, I risked a glance back up him, tensing in preparation.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Mad at you?" Steve threw me a mildly curious look, then shook his head. "No, I'm not mad at you, Mia. Disappointed, maybe. I wish you'd called or texted me when you ran out, let me know
what was wrong."

"I didn't know if you'd pick up."

Steve conceded the point with a nod. "That's fair, and I should apologize too. I shouldn't have left you like that. But I still would've preferred to have heard from you than learn it from Sam."

Last night's conversation with Sam echoed back at me. A hand reached blindly for the compass around my neck. I bit my lip and looked away again. Feeling stupid, I could only mutter again, "I'm sorry."

"I am glad, though," Steve's voice was accompanied by an arm around my shoulders. "That you found a safe place to go."

"Yeah," I said quietly, not really proud of it, as Steve guided the way towards the doors. He smelled as if he just took a shower, but I caught a whiff of something a little more… acrid beneath the fresh scent. It smelled familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it. "Does he know? Sam?"

"He knows enough," Steve said, which meant more than he did before. "He understands that the last few days have been… a challenge. I've been thinking a lot about what happened, and what to do about it."

There was something left unspoken in his words. "And?"

"There's actually a friend I want you to meet."

I couldn't help it. "Another one?"

Steve cast me a wry look. "We're not prank ing her this time."

"Her?"

"You'll see."
That's right losers! Two chapters for the price of one! *dabs*

I ended up writing it all in one chapter originally, but it was a 10k long beast and considering the amount of information/story I want to convey, I felt it was too much to consume in one go.

Also I felt bad for missing a week, and now you know why it took so long lmao. I am keeping on schedule, I just forgot pacing ;P

Steve was being cryptic for whatever reason, so most of the car ride was made in silence.

I was still battling with myself, hands clenching and unclenching. How the hell was I supposed to say it? Hey, Steve, your cute neighbor is actually a SHIELD spy and she's totally been spying on you for the past year? By the way, SHIELD kinda sucks?

Scenery of metro DC slowly transitioned to woodsy Maryland, but I didn't notice. It wouldn't go well. But the longer I thought about it, I couldn't see a situation were it would. This wasn't just another uncomfortable truth I was unwilling to face; this was a life-changing reality. As far as I knew, Steve trusted SHIELD. At least, more than I did, which was saying a lot.

Just tell him just tell him just tell him just tell him —

God, just rip the band-aid off.

Finally, I found the will to open my mouth, to form the right words.

My phone buzzed.

I jolted, so caught up in my own thoughts I forgot about my surroundings. Pulling out the phone, I glanced at the text message I'd just received.
A vice clamped around my throat, so when I swallowed it felt like I was choking. Jesus, if I ever needed an answer to *Is SHIELD spying on me?* Now I had one.

Kate's timing was impeccable. Closing my eyes, I tucked the phone away. One again she had me cornered. Whatever courage I had summed up had been whisked away as soon as it came. How could I tell Steve anything when I was being watched all the time?

I needed a safe place. Probably close my phone in an airtight box, toss it in a river first, *then* tell Steve in a nice, public area with lots of witnesses.

Something else occurred to me. Pulling out my phone again, I opened my text messages — swiping away the mystery texter — before opening up the conversation with Aunt May.

I deliberated for a long five minutes before entering:

*When I get back, I want to talk to you about something.*

Short and sweet. Maybe too vague, but with the definite probability of SHIELD monitoring all my messages, I couldn't afford anything else.

Three little dots appeared only a few seconds later. My heart lurched into my throat, but I told myself not to panic just yet.

*Sure :) Is there something wrong? Is the trip going okay?*
Sighing tensely, I replied:

*Trip going fine. Nothing wrong.*

*Just have something important to tell you when I'm home.*

*Don't want to talk over phone?*

*No. Better if face 2 face.*

*Not urgent but personal.*

*OK*

*Let me know if you need anything*

*Love you <3*

I could sense May's confusion in the way she added 'Love you', and I doubted my 'not urgent' helped matters much.

Despite the unease in her answers, I felt a great sense of relief. Or slightly less guilt. Hard to say, but I *did* feel a bit better. I was doing something. I had set myself on a course I couldn't back out now. And I suppose, if anyone deserved to know the truth, it would be Aunt May.

I also had given myself plenty of time to actually form, you know, coherent words to make when I actually got around to talking to her about it. Time to prepare for any potential fallout.

"We're here," Steve said, pulling the truck into park in front of a small red-brick house. Rose bushes rustled in a gentle breeze, and I studied it from my spot in the car for a moment, while Steve got out.

The neighborhood we were in was quaint suburbia, with oak trees lining the road on either side, their branches casting out and budding leaves beginning to form a canopy that would soon cover the entire road. The other houses resembled the one we parked in front of, modest homes but refined, all with clean lawns and some variety of garden or shrubbery around them.

As I stepped out, I noticed that there was an old car parked in front of the garage — a vintage red convertible Porsche, the kind you only take out in warm weather. It was perfectly maintained, but as we passed by it on the way to the front door, I noticed its registration sticker on the windshield was out of date. Several years out of date.
I was still looking at it, admiring the gleam of the metal bumper and the highly polished badges. Its circular headlights gave it an almost innocent look, but the vibrant red seemed to denote a certain type of energy. I didn't know a lot about cars, but I could tell this definitely not the kind you had on a measly budget.

A woman in scrubs answered the door. She was maybe mid to late-forties, a redhead with some gray starting to show. At the sight of Steve, she burst into a great smile. "Oh, hello Mr. Rogers! How unexpected! Ms. Carter will be so thrilled! Come in, come in… oh, you brought a friend, too, how exciting…!"

Ms. Carter? My attention switched from the car to the house as we were ushered inside by the friendly caregiver — guessing by her clothing and the nametag (which read Barbara). But I couldn't see the vintage car as being hers.

"You have perfect timing," Barbara said as we entered. "This is one of her better days."

The first room was a living room, slightly cramped but comfy, and notably empty. I noticed the picture frames on the mantle, in particular a framed triangle of an American flag, and a case of old war medals. There was a distinctly floral, musty smell to the place, not unpleasant; perhaps from the presence of old furniture. I didn't fail to notice the gramophone, not unlike the one Steve had in his apartment. Before I had a chance to get a good look at any of the artifacts, Barbara was already bustling off down the hall past the staircase, talking as she went. Steve ambled after her, completely at ease, and nodded for me to follow.

As I followed him, I caught that weird scent I picked up on him earlier. Faint, barely noticeable after he had taken a shower. But this time, I recognized it.

Gunpowder.

The house looked perfectly kept, not a single piece out of place. In fact, it looked mostly… unused, and I didn't understand the notion until I followed Steve through a doorway in the back of the house. He was already speaking to someone inside — not Barbara, who had already left the room. "...Hey, there's my beautiful girl…"

A soft chuckle replied, weathered and feminine. She had a distinct British accent. "...Steve, you rascal, you should've called…"

"And ruin the surprise? I couldn't." If I didn't know any better, I'd say there was an uncommon fondness in Steve's tone, soft and friendly and almost… sad. I hesitated before entering, unsure of what I was walking into. I could make out half of Steve's silhouette from the door-frame, but couldn't see past him to who he was talking to. Just the end of a bed, and windows that looked out into the garden behind the house.

On cue, Steve said, "I brought someone with me today, Peg. Someone I want you to meet." He turned and, spotting me lingering in the hallway like a leper, he smiled and opened out his arm, gesturing for me to enter. "Don't be afraid, she doesn't bite."

"Not anymore," the faceless woman said, in a voice that smiled.

I peeked into the room first, before stepping in completely. Steve didn't rush me, but he seemed mildly amused by my uncertainty.

"Peggy, meet Amelia Fletcher." Steve said, putting a hand on my back to encourage me to step further into the room, so I was standing directly in front of the bed. "Mia, meet Margaret Carter. Or
Peggy, as her friends call her.

My eyes fell on the old woman lying on stark white sheets, gazing up at me with a curious look. She had to be at least ninety years old, if not older… But her dark brown eyes were sharp, and I had the deep sensation that she missed no detail as her gaze traveled up and down.

"My, my," She murmured, a smile pulling at thin lips. She tilted her head in the same kind of fond manner that Steve used. "Aren't you a bonny sight. Come here, dear, let me get a closer look at you."

She lifted a frail hand, and I shuffled over. A sudden shyness overcame me then, and I ducked my head, a flush rising to my cheeks.

Beneath it, my mind was racing. Peggy Carter. *The* Peggy Carter! One of the most renowned intelligence agents in history — I knew she was still alive, but it never occurred to me that she and Steve would remain in contact. But of course they would, wouldn't they? She was the unseen member of the Howling Commandos, the guiding hand that directed them where to go. And, you know, possible love interest of Captain America. But that was the furthest thing from my mind at this moment.

Beside her bed was a wooden chair and a tea cart. Taking a seat, I found my attention slipping to the framed pictures by her bed. Two of them were of her in her younger years, the 50's perhaps, with two young children, a boy and a girl. The third was a wedding portrait — her in a white dress, standing arm-in-arm with a dark-haired man in dress greens and a crutch, under a rose-covered arch.

"I've heard so much about you," Peggy said, shifting upwards in her bed. Steve was at her side in a moment, helping her up to a sitting position, readjusting her pillows. She just faffed him off with her hands. "Oh, enough of that, Steve, you mother hen. Does he do this with you, too, Amelia?"

Now it was Steve's turn to look embarrassed, and my own shyness abated in the moment to give a smile in return. "He's not usually this bashful."

"Hey," Steve said, but it only made Peggy laugh.

"Well, I'm pleased to see he's found another handful to watch out for," Peggy said, still chuckling, as Steve came to sit at her other side. I noticed her other bedside table was loaded with medication bottles. "And, from the way I hear it, finally one who can keep up with him."

I threw a look his way; Steve didn't have a lot of friends, and even the ones he did have I knew he didn't talk of me much. But it seemed Peggy knew plenty.

Normally, with any other person, it might've bothered me. But something about this was different. Not that Peggy knew, but that she was the only one Steve trusted enough to tell.

Hell, I didn't even bother to correct her with my nickname.

"Ah, yeah," Steve rubbed the back of his neck, with a smile that said he might have had a few regrets. "What can I say? Peg knows how to pull the truth out of me."

"Oh, please," Peggy rolled her eyes. "Like I had to say anything to get you to talk. You just went on and on — you should've seen the way his eyes gleamed when he talks about you, Amelia, I swear you'd think he was a different man entirely..."

"The bullying never ends." Steve said with a forlorn look, but it was only half-hearted.
"Bully? I don't bully," She sounded so offended that for a second I thought she really was, but then she grinned and smacked him lightly with her hand. "You were never any fun. Amelia, do you want to know what Steve originally thought 'fondue' meant —"

"She doesn't need to know," Steve quickly interrupted.

"Oh, I disagree."

"Peggy, don't do this."

"Do what? Reveal to your lovely new ward how truly worldly Captain America was? Everyone always talks about the man, but never the boy behind the mask…" Peggy sighed ruefully, shaking her head. She cast me a look out of the corner of her eye and winked. "He was much easier to fluster back in my day."

Steve dropped his head into his palms. When he straightened again, he looked as though he were about to say something, when a knock came. Barbara peeked in and said, "Mr. Rogers? Would you mind, er, helping me with carrying some boxes from the garage? They're a bit too heavy for me."

"Of course," Steve replied, and stood up. Before he disappeared out the door, he looked behind him and said, "Please behave."

When he was gone, Peggy leaned in and whispered. "Was he talking to you or me?"

I couldn't help but smile. "Probably both."

"Ah, a good answer," Peggy gave me the most mischievous grin I'd ever seen; definitely not one I'd ever witnessed on someone her age. It seemed to lift years off her age, and for a moment I could see the young woman still hidden beneath, with the fire and whipcrack energy of an intrepid spy. Straightening, she pressed her hands against the sheets, flattening them out across her legs. "Now that we're alone, Amelia, I must ask you a very important question."

"...Sure?" My stomach lurched with fear. I had no idea where this was going.

"Are you truly a super soldier?" Peggy fixed me with a solid look, quizzical and uncertain, but not hostile.

*Oh.* Jolting slightly, I stammered, "Uh, y-yeah. I mean, yes, I am. I figured Steve told you."

"Oh, he did, but I had to admit I was very curious," Peggy replied with a delicate shrug. "I never thought I'd see another one. We all thought Steve would be the first and last to ever be made. Or born."

I didn't know what she was implying, if at all, but I immediately fell on my guard. "I'm not, you know, his daughter. If he told you that, too."

"Oh, he didn't have to," Peggy chuckled, shaking her head, gray curls bouncing. "I can tell just by looking at you, you don't bear any resemblance to him. Superficial features, perhaps, but no, your face is too different. Rather, you remind me of someone else…"

"I-I do?" I perked up, surprised.

Peggy looked beside herself, lips pulling down. "Yes, I think so, but I'm not sure…" Her eyes traveled around the room, as if searching for an answer, before landing back on me, eyes narrowing with focus. She reached out, cupped my chin with her hand. Her skin felt dry and papery against
my skin, light as a butterfly's wing. "It's your eyes, I'm sure of it. They look just like —"

She shuddered, a cough interrupting her. She withdrew her hand to cover her mouth, but the wracking didn't subside. Her whole body shook violently, and I started out of my seat, growing alarmed. My first instinct was to call for help, because I didn't know what to do — until I remembered the tea tray behind me. There was a glass of water already poured and I grabbed it and quickly offered it to her. "Here, here, drink this."

I had no idea if it would actually help, but Peggy complied nonetheless, wrapping both hands around the cup. I still kept a hold of the bottom, unsure if her shakey grip could hold it after a fit like that.

She was still drinking when Steve returned, Barbara right behind him — rushed in, really. Steve's eyes were alight with undisguised worry. "Sorry, I heard the coughing. Are you okay, Peg?"

He came to sit next to her again, taking the cup from me. Peggy withdrew, her eyes still squeezed shut. Her breath was wheezy, a little thicker than before, and when she opened her eyes again, her gaze seemed unfocused, confused, when they landed on Steve. "...Steve? Y-you're here? You're alive?"

I took a step back, dismayed. My attention cut to Steve, who only returned my look with a small, sad shake of his head, all too knowing. Barbara, by the doorway, only bowed her head.

"Of course," Steve said, fixing a small, soft smile on his face as Peggy stared at him with wide, glassy, brokenhearted eyes. "I couldn't leave my favorite girl behind."

Peggy, once so bright and sharp, seemed to have wilted. Her tears and expression were fragile, and it seemed she had forgotten me — and what she had been about to say — entirely. Steve continued to soothe her as she apparently relived a moment that seemed all too familiar to him.

Feeling suddenly very awkward and out of place, I excused myself to the bathroom.

Although small, with no room to pace, I was glad for the privacy when I shut the door and leaning on the sink. A vulnerability had hit me then, in Peggy's room, that I didn't know how to interpret. Seeing her forget everything so quickly, looking at Steve, an old friend, as if meeting him for the first time in years...

I knew exactly what that felt like.

*One of her good days,* Barbara had said. Perhaps too soon.

After taking a few minutes to recompose myself and about three years worth of baggage that wasn't appropriate at this time, I willed myself to leave the bathroom.

From the hallway, I could hear Steve still talking with Peggy, in a low, almost private voice.

It didn't escape my notice how easily they bantered with each other, the light flirting and the warm air between them. Despite their appearance, Peggy and Steve were the same age; contemporaries. As far as I could tell, she was the only one he still had from his old life.

That remembered him.

It was then, I began to understand the loneliness Steve felt. The kind of isolation it was to be born in another time, to have already lived a life, and now made to live a new one entirely — with all the faces you knew and loved just a distant memory to everyone around you.
The thought left a cold, bitter hollow in my chest. How Steve managed to handle it with such grace, I had no idea.

Returning, I caught their conversation echoing into the hallway. Thanks to the shorter distance and thinner walls, I was able to hear much better than earlier this morning.

"If you don't mind," Steve cleared his throat. "There's something I wanted to ask you about, Peggy. From... the war."

"Oh?" came Peggy's reply, confused, still a little wheezy. "What is it?"

"It's about Bucky. Bucky Barnes."

Ah. That's when it hit me, why we were here. What Steve had meant when he said he'd been thinking about what happened.

If anyone might have answers, it would be Peggy.

Instead of entering, I stood just outside the doorway, listening carefully. Steve was asking this while I wasn't there, and a part of me thought that might have been the reason for his timing. Either way, I didn't want to interrupt, or miss any information.

"Bucky Barnes?" Peggy repeated. "You mean, Sergeant Barnes? Yes, I-I remember him. He tried to flirt with me once, it was very terrible. Why do you ask?"

"Do you remember how he died?"

"Oh." Peggy went silent for a long moment. When she spoke again, her register had dropped. "Yes. The train. He fell, inside enemy territory. Declared Killed in Action. He was given a hero's funeral back home. They buried an empty casket in Arlington... You've never asked me about him before, have you?"

Steve made a humming sound, contemplative. "No, I haven't."

"Why's that?"

"Not sure. Guess I thought I had come to terms. But recently..." His words trailed off. "Did the Army, or anyone else, try to recover his body after the war?"

"Hm," Peggy went silent again. "Attempts were made. I know the Howling Commandos certainly tried. We believed deeply, as you did, to leave no man behind. But our efforts were blocked. When the war ended, everything changed. The territory Barnes died in was conquered by the Russians when they came in from the East in the war. They claimed that land for their own, built a wall, among other things, so we couldn't get access, not legally. And I suppose the Army, or the SSR, didn't find it worth the effort. They had a new enemy now, and they weren't going to risk lives for... well, a dead man."

A long silence followed where Steve made no reply. There came a rustle, blankets shifting, and Peggy whispering, "I'm sorry, Steve. I didn't mean to reopen any old wounds. It's just what I remembered."

"You're fine, Peg. It's not your fault. I'm glad you tried."
We left shortly after that.

When I finally reentered Peggy's room, I was not surprised that she didn't remember me. Steve would introduce me once again, but the conversation wasn't the same as before. Peggy was back to lying down again, too weak to sit up anymore. On a brighter note, we ended up sharing tea and biscuits for breakfast, and it was then I realized I was starving. Barbara would return to usher us out — that Peggy needed rest.

It was during that conversation my phone would buzz; a text from Dmitri, to my surprise, that gave me pause when Steve later asked me what I wanted to do. Go home, or do some sight-seeing?

I was afraid he would shoot down my idea when I posed it, but Steve actually relented without a fight. He didn't seem too bothered by the idea of visiting Dmitri. "Sure, I don't see why not. I have to stop by the, er, office anyways. But if anything happens, anything goes wrong, you promise to tell me right away?"

"Will you pick up?"

"Absolutely."

"Then yes," I replied as we stepped back out onto the street. "If anything happens, I'll call you. But nothing's going to happen."

Steve cast me a look, as if he knew better. But it was light-hearted, only teasing. "Yeah, because you avoid trouble so well."

"I try," I pouted, but slid into the truck without complaint. In fact, I felt a bit elated, despite the turn of events in Peggy's house. Had it been a little depressing, that second conversation? Yeah, I couldn't deny it. My curiosity still raged at who I reminded her of before that cough took her by surprise. On top of it all, I was still exhausted from yesterday, and sleeping on an actual bed felt really tempting.

At the same time, going back to Steve's apartment felt too soon, not when I still hadn't decided how or where I was going to tell him, and I didn't want to be within Kate's radius again so soon.

Especially not if she was going to threaten me again.

Besides all that, there was a certain relief to seeing Dmitri again. Around him, I felt normal, or about as normal as I could get. With all these questions still raging in my head, his presence was like a well-needed break.

Steve would drop me off there. Dmitri's mother's place in DC was, of course, impeccable. A late 1800's townhouse, it had three floors, all of which belonged to her. The exterior was a stone and brickwork with manicured shrubbery on the front lawn. All the windows I could see were shielded with gauzy lace curtains. There was even a maid, who answered the door when I rang the bell.

Dmitri came trotting down the steps of a large, winding staircase that seemed to occupy the exact center of the building. Looking up, I could see all the way up three floors to the top of the house. In jeans and a t-shirt, no shoes, Dmitri looked remarkably mundane under the dark coffered ceilings, the glossy hardwood floor and the overstuffed settee in the living room behind him.
"Not going to lie," Dmitri said after we shared a brief hug. "After all those missed text messages, I was afraid you weren't going to come."

"Oh right," I flushed, glancing away. "It's been, uh, a weird few days for me. Sorry about that."

"Oh?" Concern flickered across his face. "What happened?"

"Ah, well," I made a face, stuffing my hands in my pockets and wincing slightly as I tried to think of an elegant way of putting *I had a panic attack over a dead guy.* "It's kind of a long story, but it's fine now, don't worry."

"Are you sure?"

His uncertainty touched me, the anxious worry that other people didn't push for with me. I tried to smile to ease him, "Yeah, I'm —"

"Dmitri!" A voice shouted from up the stairs, cutting me off with a sharp ringing that made me flinch. "Have you seen my blue notebook?"

"No, Mum!" Dmitri called back with an eyeroll; a safe bet since Diana couldn't see it, as her footsteps echoed down the stairs. He cut me a look and said in an undertone, "She's been looking for it for the past hour. I've been made to help her."

"How chivalrous of you."

That earned a snort, which Dmitri quickly smothered as Diana reached the landing, coming to an abrupt stop when her eyes landed on me. She was dressed to the nines, as usual, in a crisp white blouse and a black pencil skirt — perfectly tailored, with a kind of quality fabric that was both sturdy and delicate at the same time. Diana's flushed cheeks and a few flyaway curls revealed the state of disarray she was truly in. "Oh. You again."

Not even feigning politeness this time. Well, at least she was being upfront about her dislike this time. I opened my mouth to attempt a cordial greeting on my part, but Diana just lifted a hand, waving me away as if I were some annoying fly. "Agh, I don't have time for this nonsense. Dmitri, I need to find that notebook before meeting my source today, I can't leave without it!"

"Yes, mum," Dmitri sighed as she rushed off to the left, disappearing deeper into the house. He gave me an apologetic look. "Sorry, this was not how I imagined today would go. She's not going to leave unless I find it first."

"I can help?" I offered with a shrug. I didn't like Diana, but if finding this damn notebook meant she'd leave faster, then I was all for it. "Three eyes are better than two. Er, I mean, six are better than four…"

"Forgot how to count so soon?" Dmitri flashed me a grin as he led the way to the right, into what looked like a library. "How soon your qualities as a tutor leave you."

"Ha-ha. If I'm that bad, then that means you must be worse."

Dmitri paused as he considered it, then shrugged, unbothered. He looked to me. "Who needs math when you're beautiful?"

"Oh, that's good," His joke made me laugh — but Dmitri only smiled at me, a pink in his cheeks
before he eventually looked away. I would only wonder, too late, if he wasn't actually talking about himself in that moment.

Of course, it would take me eons to come to that conclusion, and by then I'd missed my chance to bring it up again in a not-weird way. As it was, Dmitri quickly busied himself with searching the library, and I followed suit. As he scanned the shelves, I checked around the seating area, under the velvet couch and ottoman, the loveseat, the stacks of books on the coffee table. Many were reference books, or historical biographies from the 20th century — mainly around the Cold War. They were only of mild interest to me, but I kept my focus on any book that was thin, blue, and small. I had only caught a brief glimpse of Diana's notebook before, but it was enough to know what to look for.

"That man you were with at the museum," Dmitri would call from the other end of the room, over the grind of drawers being opened and closed as he searched the cabinets under the shelving. "Steve, yes? You said he was family, but you never mentioned him before."

"Oh," I said, looking up from the pillows I'd removed from the couch. The underside didn't even have a single crumb or penny hiding within. How did Diana keep such a clean house? How did she lose anything in such a clean house? "Yeah, I guess you could say it's a recent development. He's not actually related to me, but he's a friend of my… mom."

A lie? Yes. But a feasible one, even if Steve himself didn't know much about her aside from what I'd told him.

But apparently Dmitri hadn't recognized Steve, so I doubted he could call me out on this particular lie, either. He replied, "Ah, I see. He lives here, then, in DC?"

"Yeah, does some mysterious work," I replied, replacing the couch cushions. "I haven't figured out what it is yet. He likes his secrets."

"Hm, I know the feeling," Dmitri laughed at that. "My mother tells me very little about what she does, too. She never tells me what she's working on or who she talks to. I think she does it to protect me, but it makes it, er, difficult to talk to her sometimes."

"Yeah." I muttered as I glanced over the side table in front of the window, took a half-hearted look into its one tiny drawer. Nothing but coasters. "I know that feeling pretty well."

"All I know," Dmitri sighed as he gave up on the cabinets. "Is that its big. 'This is going to make a lot of important people angry,' Mum said once. That's why she needs her notebook — she keeps everything in there. Of course, even if I do manage to find it, I'm not allowed to look inside."

As much as I didn't like Diana, I couldn't deny her line of work sounded interesting. Intrepid reporters were the kind of people who'd risk their lives for a story, for the truth. I'd met a few in Sokovia, and I knew the danger involved; the fact that Diana Hawkins, with her level of fame and acclaim, could manage such a lifestyle and still look like a superstar, I didn't know.

"After we find the stupid thing," Dmitri said at one point, already looking done with the whole ordeal. "If, I should say — I suggest ice cream. She won't let me have any because of my diet, but she can't stop me if she's not here."

I grinned at that. "My lips are sealed."

"Oh, I know. She would kill you for letting it happen. Then me, for being so stupid as to trust you."

It was clear after five more minutes of searching that the notebook was not in the library. We were
just moving on to the next room when Diana came storming past.

Now wearing heels that clicked across the floor at hair-trigger pace, she shouted, "I can't wait anymore! If I miss this, I'll lose my source. Dmitri, if you find it, text me immediately!"

And just like that, she flew out the front door, a storm of frustration and determined energy.

It wasn't until we passed the front stairs did Dmitri paused and point to another bag lying on the steps, that hadn't been there before.

"Agh, she forgot her second purse, hold on…” Dmitri muttered something under his breath in Russian as he grabbed the forlorn designer leather bag and rushed out the door after her. "Hey, Mum!"

I had just darted out the threshold, following Dmitri as he went after his mother. Diana, meanwhile, was already getting into her car, a sleek black sedan, slamming the door shut — apparently haven't heard her son calling out.

"Hey, Dmitri, wait up!" I called after him. I didn't know what it was about this family, but somehow I was constantly chasing after them today.

Dmitri was already halfway down the front steps when he turned to face me, an expectant smile on his face.

At the exact same time, Diana's car exploded.
A great fiery plume in the sky.

"Amelia Fletcher, right? I'm Special Agent Barrigan, I'm in charge of this investigation. I'd like to ask you a few questions about what happened."

The explosion knocked us off our feet. I had just enough time to grab Dmitri and pull him back before the worst of the blast hit us. Even from forty feet away, the heat was searing hot, and the stone steps beneath me heated in a flash.

"Yeah," I mumbled, arms around myself, staring at my shoes. Red and blue lights flashed outside. "Sure."

Ash and debris rained down on us, little metal pieces and shreds of paper. It burned my skin, but I didn't feel it. Something warm dripped down my chin, onto my shirt. Smoke clogged the air, thick, choking, acrid. I coughed, my eyes watering, and I squinted through the ashen haze.

All I saw was Dmitri scrambling towards the burning, empty shell where his mother used to be.

"Can you tell me what happened right before the car exploded?"

A woman sat in front of me, dark hair swooped back in a prim bun. She sat on the coffee table in front of me, legs crossed with notebook in hand to take notes. Her eyes watched me carefully, but
with a neutral expression.

Noon had come and passed in the hours following the explosion, but I wasn't hungry. Sitting in this room for hours, alone, all I could smell was the remnants of smoke, of burning, long after the fire department had put out the flames. I sat in on the couch in Diana's little office. It was a mess, papers everywhere — and that was before the police showed up. All around me were agents, detectives in black coats with 'FBI' labeled on the back in big, white block letters.

Diana's desk was surprisingly neat compared to the rest of the room. It had only an ink blotter, a lamp, a framed photograph, and thin laptop. Someone with her kind of work-load, I imagined a much bigger, more heavy duty set-up. There was a printer on a nearby shelf, and loose paper was everywhere. A nearly-full shredder sat next to her desk, next to an overflowing trash can. The floor was covered in debris, papers and notes and drawers — it seemed Diana had upended her office in search for her notebook, and didn't bother to pick up.

I looked away again, closing my eyes. "Dmitri had just run outside to give Diana — er, Ms. Hawkins, her purse she forgot. She'd just closed the door, so she didn't hear him calling out. I'd just come out the door after him when it — when everything —" I shook my head. "We tried to help, but there was nothing we could do. We called 911."

*Dmitri, running for the car. My ears were ringing, so I couldn't hear him shouting — screaming — but I knew what he was saying. The same word, over and over again.*

*I grabbed his arm before he ever made it off the steps. He resisted, trying to throw me off. His sleeve ripped. I hung on as he kept fighting me, dragged him back as he continued to call out.*

"And where was her son, Dmitri, during this?"

"He was with me the whole time." I glanced to my left, to the room next door. The kitchen, where Dmitri sat at the table, clothes rumbled and ashen, head in his hands, shoulders shaking softly. Another agent was trying to console him, but it was clear by the look on his face that Dmitri wasn't responding to any sympathy right now.

I looked back to the woman in front of me. Agent Barrigan. "He wanted to get closer, to-to save her but… I wouldn't let him. There was fire everywhere."

*Traffic on either side of the road came to a complete stop. The two of us just stared at the blackened crater in the street; Dmitri eventually stopped shouting and collapsed. tears streaming down his face. All I could do was hold him, as neighbors, drivers, and passerby all stopped and gawked.*

A soft breeze blew through the open window. Nearby, an evidence tech was picking up shards of glass with tweezers and placing them in a plastic bag. The explosion had blown out all the windows on the block.

"And why were you here, Amelia?" Agent Barrigan asked, drawing my attention back once again.

Less than an hour ago, I had been hugging Dmitri on the stoop, smiling and laughing at dumb jokes, suffering through Diana's antics just to spend some time with him. "I was just visiting. He texted me earlier, inviting me over. I used to tutor him back in New York."

"Is that where you live? New York."

"Yeah. Queens."
"And why are you here in DC?"

"Spring break, visiting family." My mouth stumbled over my next words. "M-my dad is coming to pick me up. He lives here."

I didn't know how to explain Steve. He'd already been called, right after the police arrived, before the FBI took over. This was probably all over the news now. My mind was still grappling with how quickly everything happened — had Steve even made it to work before he got the call?

"You're estranged from your father?" Agent Barrigan cocked an eyebrow, scribbling something down.

I threw her a pointed look. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"It's just a question, Amelia. We have to cover all our bases."

"It's Mia."

"What?"

"Call me Mia," I said, leaning back on the couch, hands lying limply in my lap. The desire to fold my arms in a defensive position was strong, but I had no strength left. Although Dmitri wasn't strong, it felt like I'd used all my energy from holding him back. "And yeah, I guess you could say we're estranged. We were trying to fix it, though. You know, father-daughter bonding, have a relaxing trip, and all that." I snorted, but it was humorless. "Look how well that's going."

Agent Barrigan frowned, sympathy flickering across her face. She set down her notebook to study me for a moment. "I'm sorry, Mia. Did you know Diana Hawkins well?"

"No. I'd only met her twice before, at a dinner, then at a museum." Memories of Killian flashed in my mind. I blinked them away. "She didn't like me."

"You two had animosity?"

The word made me grimace. The act stretched the bandage on my chin — something had hit me in the face when the car exploded, and the first responders that had arrived afterwards had cleaned me up. Some of it, to evidence. "I guess. Maybe we got off on the wrong foot, I don't know. She saw my tattoo and I guess that was it for her. I was that bad influence she never wanted her son to hang around with."

"And how did that make you feel?"

Barrigan sounded like a therapist, and I tried not to laugh. "Kind of annoyed? I don't know, it didn't bother me much. Dmitri liked me, and that was enough. It's not like I hate her or anything. She's just unpleasant to be around."

The words felt toxic on my tongue. I didn't realize until afterwards I was still speaking of her as if Diana were still alive. It hit me like a train, and something in my chest locked up.

God, she was dead.

Diana Hawkins was dead.

I watched her die.

Fingers went cold, throat locked up. Something behind my eyes started to burn. "But I never
"Hey, you did the right thing, Mia," Agent Barrigan rested a hand on my knee, just the tips of her fingers. She leaned in to speak softly, as if our conversation was private and not surrounded by a dozen other federal investigators. "You called for help and got inside where it was safe."

When I didn't say anything, Agent Barrigan sighed and withdrew her hand. "Would you like to take a break? I can get the rest of your statement later."

"No, no, I'm fine," I muttered, straightening up. I could still hear quiet sobbing in the other room. I knew I was Barrigan's best shot at getting a full witness report at the moment. And I wanted to help. "What else did you have?"

Barrigan hummed, checked her notes. "Alright. Did you notice anything unusual or suspicious when you first arrived this morning? Anyone that seemed out of place?"

I was silent as I scanned my memories, only to shake my head. Barrigan continued, "What about right before the explosion, just when you stepped outside? Did you see anyone? Maybe someone rushing away after the car exploded?"

Again I shook my head. I'd been so caught up with Dmitri that I didn't have time to notice the outdoor surroundings before the explosion. "It was too hard to see afterwards. The wind blew the smoke right towards us and the sound blew out my hearing… But I didn't notice anyone by Ms. Hawkins car when she got in. The street was empty."

"You saw nothing in the air? No projectiles?"

My melancholy subsided for a moment, staring up at Barrigan in surprise. "What, like a rocket?"

Barrigan raised her eyebrows, but her expression remained calm. "I don't know, did you see one?"

"No." I said, brow furrowing. "I didn't see anything in the air or flying. The explosion came from the car itself. Maybe… maybe underneath it."

"Underneath it?" Barrigan repeated, and in such an intensity that it had me tensing a little. She quickly wrote that down before looking at me again. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I think so. I mean, it was so fast, but I could see how the car went upwards like, the blast came from below like…" my breath caught in my throat, afraid to say the word. I dropped my shoulders. "...like a bomb."

It wasn't like it was unprovable. The car had been thrown upwards and landed nearly ten feet away from its original position. One could see where the original blast took place, the ground blackened and scorched, compared to where the wreckage now stood.

Agent Barrigan didn't say anything, just continued to write. I watched her for a moment, before asking, "It was a bomb, wasn't it?"

"Our techs are still checking to confirm that," Agent Barrigan said without looking up from her notes. "But yes, it is a possibility. Did you know anything about what Ms. Hawkins was working on recently? Did she ever discuss it around you?"

"She hated me, so no," I said dryly. "Dmitri told me earlier, before she went outside, that she was working on some big project. That she was leaving to meet some, I don't know, a source of hers. One that she couldn't afford to miss. That's why she left in such a hurry and forgot her purse.
Dmitri and I were helping her find her notebook before she decided to leave without it.

"Notebook?" Agent Barrigan tilted her head up at me. "What's so special about this notebook?"

"I don't know, she keeps all her notes in it, I guess," I felt ridiculous answering these questions, as if I were the foremost expert on Diana Hawkins life. I had only caught glimpses of it, and to be honest I wasn't too curious about learning more about her personal affairs. "I'd only seen it once before. Just this small blue notebook that fits in her purse. We never found it."

"Hmm." Barrigan frowned to herself, then leaned back and called out to someone by the staircase. "Hey, Dean! Anyone spot a blue notebook anywhere?"

A male called down the hall. "Blue notebook? Uhh, negative, Barrigan."

"Just keep an eye out for me, will ya?"

"On it!"

Agent Barrigan returned to me. "So did Diana Hawkins seem nervous to you today? Did her behavior strike you as unusual?"

I shrugged. "No more than usual. She was upset she couldn't find her notebook, enough that she didn't even care that I'd showed up."

"Hm," Barrigan hummed again, tapping her pen against the page. "Thank you, Mia, you've been very helpful. Do you mind if I have your contact information, in case we have any follow-up questions?"

After I relayed the information, Special Agent Barrigan thanked me once more before getting up and leaving the room. "When your father arrives, you'll be free to go."

Left to my own devices, I just sat there like a lump, playing numbly with the bottle-cap bracelet and watching as everyone moved around me. Agent Barrigan went off to share information with her colleagues. Someone came by with a glass of water for me, but I let it stand on the table, untouched.

I couldn't hear Dmitri crying anymore.

I wanted to go to him; at the same time, I didn't want to move. When the explosion first happened, Dmitri kept trying to push me away from him, and protested about going inside, even after he'd lost the will to fight back. I wasn't sure I was his favorite person to see at the moment.

And if I were him, I'd probably want to be by myself, and not have to sit back and watch as the FBI tore apart my whole house.

My eyes wandered the room once more. A tech went by, kicking up some paper as he went, clearing away the floor near a shelf on the wall.

A bit of blue peeked out from underneath.

I had just opened my mouth to speak when the front door banged open, and a team of men in black suits walked in.

Everyone in the vicinity stopped what they were doing to stare at the intruders — clearly, not FBI, I thought to myself, considering their very different aesthetic. While the FBI here were all
professional and hard at work, many had frumpy clothes or wore old suits. Special Agent Barrigan, the head investigator, looked the sharpest of them all, but even she couldn't hold a candle to the identical-looking team that poured in at once.

"Hey, this is an ongoing crime scene —" Barrigan barked out, storming up to face them.

"Take it easy, Agent Barrigan," The man at the front was shorter than the rest, bald with tan skin, glasses, and a nice tie. He pulled out a badge from his inner coat pocket. "I'm Agent Sitwell. We're with SHIELD, and we're taking over this investigation."

Everyone stared.

I was beside myself in frozen silence, heart pounding. SHIELD? My heart jumped a beat. Why the hell was SHIELD interested in Diana's murder? Didn't they have bigger fish to fry? Honestly, the only reason why I thought the FBI got took over from local police was because Diana was such a big fish, that she was a famous reporter. Or, you know, because it really was a bomb so of course they'd be involved.

But SHIELD…?

I clearly wasn't the only one who thought this was unusual. The other FBI agents didn't move from their spot, even as the SHIELD guys started throwing pointed looks. Barrigan was standing her ground, and so was her team.

My eyes cast down to the notebook hiding under the shelf. Then back up to the confrontation before me. Everyone was watching the argument in the hallway. No one turned their heads when I slowly rose to my feet and started edging towards the opposite wall.

"What?" Agent Barrigan demanded, while the rest of the FBI shifted around her, quiet mutters flying around. "On whose orders?"

Now standing next to the shelf, I could only see Agent Barrigan's back through the office doorway. Her hands were on her hips, head bobbing animatedly. Without looking down, I stretched out my fingers behind me and gently bent my knees until I was almost crouching.

"The Director, of course," Agent Sitwell said with a polite smile. The rest of the SHIELD men showed their badges, too. They weren't too shy about flashing their concealed weapons in the process, either. "Fury, you know him? A little bit higher on the ladder than your own boss, Barrigan."

Still watching them, I leaned back a little, feeling along the edge of the bookshelf behind my. Fingers tracing the hardwood, searching beneath the dusty little crevice between the shelf and the floor. Where is it, where is it...

But Barrigan wasn't having it. "How is any of this your jurisdiction —?"

"If you want to make a complaint, take it to your supervisor," Agent Sitwell replied, still with that same smile, completely unflappable in Barrigan's clear anger. "In the meantime, I'm going to have to ask you and your men to clear out. We can take it from here."

As he said that, another line of people came marching in; SHIELD techs and analysts, I imagined as I stood up with everyone else. The FBI were abuzz, shuffling around in confusion as Barrigan tried and failed to negotiate once again.

Heart skipping at the sight, I nearly stood up again in alarm. Then my fingers brushed against
something soft and smooth — ha! Got it. When SHIELD agents shuffled into the room, I returned to a standing position, tucking both hands behind my back and pressing my shoulder-blades into the shelves behind me, the edge digging into my skin. The techs only glanced my way once before claiming the space, setting up heavy briefcases and canvass bags on the coffee table and chairs.

"We're gonna have to ask you to leave the room, miss," one of the agents said to me. "This is SHIELD evidence now."

I nodded mutely and dropped my arms from behind my back, hands empty. The bracelet clattered against my wrist, and I tucked my sleeve over it to quiet the noise. In the hallway, I bumped into Agent Barrigan, who still looked pissed, arguing with Sitwell. "Oh, sorry —"

Sitwell glanced from one tall lady to the other — me. He still had that smile on his face. "You're one of the witnesses, yes? The friend of Mr. Hawkins over there?"

"Y-yeah," I frowned, glancing at Barrigan before returning to Sitwell. "Do you want my statement, too?"

"No, no, we'll just take whatever the FBI gathered," Sitwell gave me what I assumed to be a reassuring look, but it had the opposite effect. In any case, Barrigan scoffed, as if she'd rather do anything but give Sitwell her notes. Still, he held out his hand. "Miss Barrigan?"

She glared at him. "It's Agent." And slapped her little pad into his hand before stalking out.

Sitwell didn't take his eyes off me, maintaining that serene expression without a flinch. "If you remember anything else, please contact us, Mia."

With that, he handed me a business card, before puttering away. I didn't recall giving him my nickname.

As I was considering my exit, my phone buzzed — a text from Steve. Outside, on the corner. They won't let me get any closer.

Sighing, I sent a quick response back before reconsidering. Instead of heading towards the front door, I went to the kitchen.

A SHIELD agent, a woman, had taken over the previous FBI's place — but she was getting about as far as the last guy, it seemed. As I approached, she sucked in her teeth and made off for a glass of water, leaving Dmitri to sit at the table, his head hanging.

Touching his shoulder, I spoke quietly, "Hey… I have to go soon. Are you going to be okay?"

The look Dmitri gave me when he lifted his head was all the answer I needed. Heart aching, I sat down in the seat opposite him, taking the agent's spot. I didn't take my hand away. "I can stay, if you want. I don't want you to be alone here with…" I glanced around the kitchen. SHIELD agents going through the silverware cabinets, the fridge, the trash. "... these guys."

Dmitri surprised me by shaking his head. His voice was choked, raw, just barely intelligible. "No, I'll be okay. I-I'm waiting for Mr. Fowler, the family attorney He's Mum's only…" he coughed, hiding the way his voice broke. "Was her only friend."

Well, that was a relief. It was bad enough he had a bunch of strangers going through his home, I couldn't imagine having to bear that, completely alone. In a foreign country on top of it all. "Does your father know yet?"
Dmitri shook his head. "I haven't been able to reach him. Mr. Fowler says he'll take care of it, but..." He pressed his lips together and squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't know."

Highly aware that I was surrounded on all sides by government agents, I said, "Well, you can call me any time, okay? You need anything, just ask."

Eyes still closed, Dmitri nodded silently. Lifting one pale hand, he took mine still on his shoulder, pulling it away to hold it in his lap. His body was slumped, broken; the delicate and refined frame of a ballet dancer, crumpled and falling apart. But he held onto my hand so fiercely his hand shook. I didn't say anything, just wove my fingers through his, and tightened my grip.

We sat there, together, in silence.

"Ahem."

Both of us looked up to the female agent standing before us, coffee cup in hand. She was glaring at me, and only used a jerk of her chin to tell me to skedaddle.

Not about to be intimidated, I glared back, and decided to take my time as I stood up and turned back to Dmitri, still holding his hand. Just to stick it to the agent, I spoke in Russian. "Помните. Просто позвоните мне. В любой момент."

Dmitri's only sign of surprise was a blink. Then he nodded again, giving no answer as to whether he would or not, and gently released my hand, letting his own drop, limp again. I pretended not to notice the agent still glaring at me as I walked away, giving Dmitri one last squeeze on his shoulder before leaving.

I couldn't get out of that house fast enough.

The sight of the afternoon sun nearly stopped me in my tracks when I hit the sidewalk. The late, warm air and the sun lowering in the sky was so vastly different than when I was last outside. Jesus, how long had I been trapped in there?

I could see what Steve meant when he said that he couldn't get close to the house. The entire block on which Diana's house stood was completely blocked off by sawhorses on either end, manned by police cars and fire department vehicles. Other cars lined the streets closest to the house — agent's vehicles. Aside from the vans marked with obvious logos, I couldn't tell apart SHIELD from the FBI.

The edges were packed with an audience, curious bystanders and news crews alike. People wanted to know what happened, people wanted a good look. This was a rich, quiet neighborhood, who the hell gets attacked here? Did someone really die? Had someone caught it on video? Where's the body?

It was only seeing them did I realize I couldn't leave the block that way. The reporters and journalists were starving for any information, and if they saw someone like me, a witness who just walked away, they were going to come at me like hounds. And I was done answering questions for today.

Walking down the street, where my actions were hidden by the larger movements of the law enforcement around me, I slipped into the small alley between two townhouses — cutting across the lawn of Diana's neighbor, jumping over their garden wall; startled a German Shepherd on the other side; booked it to the next wall and vaulted over before the dog could take a bite out of me; then cut through the alley so I was on the next block behind the Hawkin's place; and finally made
the long way around back to the street, from behind.

Steve was leaning against his truck, parked about half a block behind all the gathered news trucks. Traffic had to be diverted around the mess, and there was plenty of honking and shouting. It was very different than the comparatively quiet interior of Diana's home. He spotted me just as I turned the corner and crossed the street. As I got closer, he straightened, brow furrowing as he glanced towards the street I was on, to the one I just exited. "Are you okay?"

It was the first question he asked; I was starting to get used to it, except this time the intensity startled me. It wasn't the quiet concern and disappointment from early this morning. This was the blatant fear and worry of a man who got the call that his kid was a witness to a murder.

I paused, thinking to myself. In all the time I was stuck in that house, not once did anyone say the word 'murder'.

Or 'assassination.'

"...Yeah." I mumbled, scratching at the thin bandage on my jaw. Steve took my chin between two fingers to get a better look at it, turning my face away. "It's just a flesh wound. I got hit with... shrapnel." the word was hard to say for some inexplicable reason. "I got lucky."

I wasn't an idiot. I knew if I'd been any closer to that blast I'd probably be filled with holes right now. Surviving the explosion had nothing to do with skill.

I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Again.

Either way, Steve didn't make a comment. He let go, studying me for a moment longer. "And your friend...?"

"He's," I inhaled deeply, unsure how to describe it. "Pretty bad. Really bad. Not hurt, but..."

He lost his mom.

I knew only too well what that was like.

Thankfully, Steve seemed to understand. He drew me in a hug, and I just stood there, trembling quietly. Ever since the bomb, I felt strangely numb; even though I knew Diana was dead, that I was never seeing her again, it didn't feel quite real. I hadn't had such a close brush with death in a while that I was starting to wonder if I even understood the severity of the situation. A part of me seemed like it didn't.

It felt wrong, somehow. But I couldn't turn it off, either.

"I just want to go home," I whispered into his shoulder, closing my eyes. Before, I wanted to cry. Now the tears wouldn't come.

✮✮✮

The sky was completely dark by the time we made it back to Steve's apartment.
Traffic had been atrocious throughout the city, not just in Diana's neighborhood. Downtown seemed to have it pretty bad, too, and when Steve turned on the radio to fill the silence in the cabin, the local news station was reporting on a wild police chase through downtown. A runaway driver that apparently escaped. Civilians and police alike had been killed in the rampage.

I just dropped my head into my hand, leaning against the door. What the hell was going on today? It seemed like all of DC was just losing its mind.

Then the report switched to breaking news — Diana Hawkins, Pulitzer prize winner and world-renowned reporter, pronounced dead by federal officials. Steve quickly changed the channel before the report could describe the cause of death.

It wasn't until I was climbing the steps up to the apartment, just in front of Steve, did I hear a door above opening and closing, and my heart skipped a beat.

Oh shit.

Kate.

I came to an abrupt stop on the stairs, turning around to face Steve. I was only a few feet below the landing, just out of line of sight. "Steve, I have to tell you something."

Steve blinked at me, hand on the railing as he began to frown. Perhaps he noticed the sudden panic in my face. "What's wrong?"

Until now, I had completely forgotten about Kate. Diana's death had completely overwhelmed every previous issue that had been plaguing me today, and only now I realized my mistake. The missed opportunity.

"It's about —"

"Oh, hey guys," Kate's voice cut me off.

I spun around again, back stiff and straight, as Steve came up next to me with a small smile. Tired, but not entirely unguarded. "Hey, sorry if we woke you up, I know its late —"

"Oh, it's no worries," Kate giggled lightly, gesturing with the basket of laundry she was carrying. "Just got back from a late shift, decided to do some chores."

As they exchanged a brief conversation, I just stood there in glowering silence, finger tapping impatiently on the handrail. Idiot idiot idiot. I wanted to kick myself, as I watched Steve's expression, the smile, the laugh. He had no idea. He had no idea and it was my fault.

I hadn't told him about how SHIELD had taken over Diana's murder investigation, either. I was still digesting it myself, and thought I'd have enough time to explain it to Steve once I could speak again. He hadn't pressed the issue; maybe he didn't think anything suspicious about it at all. Or maybe he did, and was keeping it to himself so as not to upset me.

Well, ship sailed.

Kate, for her part, pretended not to notice me at all, aside from her brief greeting. As Steve made to sidle past her, she said over her shoulder. "Hey, by the way, I think you left your stereo on."

Steve did a slight double-take, glancing towards the door, then back at Kate. For a second, he lost that bashful smile.
Instantly, my hackles were up — as if they weren't already, but now something felt really off. It wasn't until Kate mentioned it that I actually heard it, too; soft band music, muffled and echoing from Steve's apartment door.

Steve's eyes flicked to me, and I gave only the slightest shake of my head. Neither of us had been in his apartment since we'd left the previous day. Not once had he ever played music.

It was only a moment of silent communication. The look on Steve's face was neutral, but a dangerous neutral; the kind where he didn't want you to know he knew something was up. And with the flick of a switch, that old smile was back, and he shrugged at Kate, like he'd made a mistake. "Oh, right. Thank you. Uh, actually —"

Kate had just been about to turn back down the stairs when he caught her attention again. Steve held up one finger as he padded his pockets with the other. "I think I left my keys in the car. I'll be right back."

And with that, he backtracked down the landing and began down the flight of steps again. I turned to follow, but he held out a hand to stop me, still with that forced, too-light smile. "No, no, its okay, Mia. Just… just stay with Kate, I'll only be a sec."

I was a little disappointed, but didn't argue as Steve continued his way down. I settled myself with the fact that we were at least on the same page; it was a diversion. Something was wrong with the apartment, and he was going to check it out another way.

Staying behind was just to protect me, I knew, but I couldn't help but feel it might've been different if I'd just been smart enough, fast enough to tell Steve the truth beforehand.

When he vanished from sight, I turned to face Kate. With her on the landing and me a step below, our gazes met exactly. She met me glare for glare.

"You didn't tell him," Kate said. It was a simple, flat statement. But with the way it was phrased, if I didn't know any better, I'd say she sounded relieved.

I didn't bother to feign ignorance. "I was going to."

Kate's dark eyes flashed dangerously, and she leaned forward as I stepped up onto the landing next to her. Setting down her dirty laundry, she dropped her voice to a whisper, "Mia, please, you need to trust me —"

"Are you serious right now?" I whirled around on her, hissing.

I hated that I had forgotten, but this was a new kind of angry. To be honest I was a little preoccupied with the new problems I was facing right now, to be dealing with Kate again. The fact that she was still trying to convince me meant she wholeheartedly believed in her task, at least as far as I had it figured, and I had enough.

"Of course I'm serious!" Kate snapped, completely misinterpreting my tone. Still, she kept her voice in an undertone as we rounded each other in front of her door. "This is my job! Don't stand there and tell me SHIELD wouldn't honestly do its damnedest to protect one of its greatest assets."

"Yeah, by spying on them. That's a funny way to show how much you trust someone."

"It's not about trust," Kate said, inhaling deeply. "It's about safety. Captain America's health and well-being is essential to SHIELD, and we're willing to do whatever it takes to make sure its interests are properly taken care of."
"Does SHIELD also take over FBI murder investigations?" I demanded, the image of Sitwell's infuriatingly calm smile still embedded in my mind. "Where does safety come into that?"

Kate paused. She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, please," I wasn't going to fall for it. "It's been on the news all day, I bet. Diana Hawkins killed in a sudden attack and now SHIELD's kicked all other agencies off the case. Why are they interested in her death?"

"What? That's not..." She shook her head. For a split second, Kate looked genuinely surprised; as if this was the first time she ever heard this information. At her reaction, a seed of doubt wormed its way into my chest. Did she really not know?

And just like that, it was gone. Kate inhaled and straightened up. "I'm not informed of every aspect in SHIELD's activities. I have to keep my focus —"

_BANG._

Something like a clap of thunder interrupted her — three small bursts in succession, distant and muffled, shaking the walls and floor. Kate and I jumped in surprise, turning our heads towards the noise. The sounds had been instantly recognizable.

And they had come from Steve's apartment.

Gunshots.

My blood went cold.

Apparently coming to the same conclusion, Kate whipped around and reached into her laundry basket. I jumped back when she pulled out a black handgun, my instinct wanting to run.

But Kate didn't turn the weapon on me. Instead, she threw open her front door and ran into the hallway. "Stay here!"

I didn't listen. Only afterwards would I consider the possibility Kate said that just to protect me, but at the moment it just sounded like she wanted me out of the way. Probably both.

Whatever the case, I was almost directly behind her when Kate busted down Steve's door.

One, two, three kicks and it crashed inwards, flying off its hinges. "Captain Rogers!" She called as she entered, gun held up as she slunk in at a measured pace.

Steve's head appeared around the corner of the dark foyer, looking alarmed to see Kate in her pink scrubs and a gun. I hesitated in the doorway, relieved to see that Steve was okay.

"Captain," Kate said, approaching him quickly, gun turned towards the outer wall, where the gunshots had originated from. In an even, but slightly urgent tone, she continued, "I'm Agent Thirteen from SHIELD Special Service."

"... Kate?" Steve asked, belatedly, still taking in the sight of the gun in her hand.

"I'm assigned to protect you —"

"On whose order?" Steve demanded, brows drawing down into a scowl as Kate surveyed the living room. I stepped in just as she cleared the space, and noticed the floor by the record player was
covered in dust, three gaping holes in the wall behind a corner seat.

Kate came to a stop as she turned towards the kitchen. A small, almost imperceptible gasp escaped her lips. "His."

At Steve's feet lies the prone body of a man — in torn dark clothes and covered in blood and wounds, I almost didn't recognize him until I saw his face. The eyepatch.

Director Fury.

Kate — Agent 13 — dropped down next to him, checking Fury's pulse before pulling a radio from her hip that I hadn't spotted before. "Foxtrot is down, he's unresponsive. I need EMTs."

While she spoke, Steve's eyes landed on me and he started, as if just realizing I was there. With a jerk, he took my arm. "Mia! Get away from the window, it's not safe —"

As if he needed to tell me. I complied, nodding dumbly, throat locked up with fear; Steve didn't let go of my arm. It was only with him placing me between himself and the wall did I realize he was carrying his shield. Had it been in the apartment this entire time? I felt stupid for not noticing it before.

Heart pounding, I looked out the window next to the ruined wall. There was a building across the street, it's rooftop several floors higher than ours. And at the corner, the hunched figure of sniper. Street lights gleamed off the scope.

My heart stopped in my throat. I only had a chance to point, gasping, "Steve —!"

"Do we have a twenty on the shooter?" Agent 13's radio crackled.

Steve's eyes flicked from me to the window where I had once been standing. The way his eyes narrowed said he saw what I did; the sniper bolted, disappearing from sight. As he turned, the streetlights glinted off a metallic arm.

"Tell them I'm in pursuit," Steve said, before launching himself through the window.

A curse few from my lips as glass shattered everywhere. I covered my face, and when I looked up again, I saw that a window on the other building had been smashed through from where Steve had landed. I took a step towards it, inclined to follow.

"Mia!" Agent 13 shouted from the kitchen. "I need help!"

I paused, indecision in my gut. I already knew, too late, that I had missed my chance to tell Steve the truth; as I reluctantly turned back around, I wondered what the fallout of that would be. If only I had remembered during the car ride back…

Well, it was too late now. I steeled my resolve, rearranging my priorities. Steve was fine, for the most part; Director Fury was not.

"What do you need?" I called back, coming around to enter the kitchen.

"I need you to find me a first aid kit!" Agent 13 told me, still kneeling by Fury's side. She had lifted him gently to feel underneath him, and her hand came back bloody. Agent 13's face blanched. "And some blankets! We need to stop the bleeding immediately!"

I only nodded once before taking off, unable to speak. There wasn't much I could say anyways. My
mind was still reeling from what just happened.

I came to a stop down the hallway; the apartment was almost completely dark aside from the kitchen, and I didn't bother to turn on any of the lights as I went through. Didn't need them. Throwing open the folding doors, I scanned the shelves.

As I pushed aside random boxes and crates, I realized my fingers had gone cold.

First Diana, now Fury. I realized I was breathing too fast, and had to take in a deep breath and hold it, trying to calm my nerves. It wasn't a coincidence, was it? It couldn't be. Two attacks in such a quick succession, SHIELD's involvement, something had to be going on.

The blue notebook burned into my back. Unable to take it any longer, I reached behind me and pulled the thin book from where it was tucked into the waist of my joggers. The elastic, stretchy material had held it firmly in place ever since I picked it up at Diana's. My shirt and oversized jacket had hidden the shape of it against my back.

The cover was slightly moist, thanks my sweat. But I didn't notice as I quickly surveyed the hallway around me. Agent 13 couldn't see me from where she was in the kitchen, and she was preoccupied, talking into her radio. SHIELD was on their way.

I couldn't let them find this. I had no doubt I'd be searched, and the book would be discovered. If they happened to open it, there was no way I could convince them it was really mine.

They'd search the whole apartment.

My heartbeat pounded in my ears. Where the hell could I hide this, where SHIELD wouldn't find it?

At the end of the hall was a window, a fire escape.

Time was wasting. Glancing over my shoulder, I rushed past Steve's door, then the bathroom. Trying to keep as quiet as possible, and hopefully not get caught in what would look like another escape attempt, I gently slid the window open and slid outside.

It was the opposite end of the apartment from where Fury had been attacked. Here, the place was quiet, almost peaceful. The fire escape didn't even so much as shudder as I dropped down into a crouch, taking a quick gander to figure out my options.

There was nothing around me. As most fire escapes were empty due to safety protocols, there weren't exactly a lot of places to hide something. I started to panic. I didn't have time to fuck around. A man was dying, and as much as I didn't know or trust him, I didn't want him to die.

The notebook burned in my hand. I had a feeling more than one life was at stake right now.

Then I looked down, and smiled.

The apartment below Steve's had a small grill in the corner of their fire escape landing. Against fire code? Hell yeah, but one man's lawbreaking was another girl's opportunity to break even more laws.

Moving fast, I dropped down a flight of stairs as fast as I could without making a sound. Opening the grill, I found it cold and empty — hardly the season to be making use of this. I slipped the notebook beneath the metal grate and closed the lid, praying that the neighbors didn't suddenly change their mind in the next few days and have an illegal barbecue.
Then back up the fire escape and through the window I went.

"Mia! You there?" Agent 13 called again, voice rising an octave in her urgency. Maybe even panic. "What the hell's taking so long?"

"I'm right here!" I came rushing back, blankets under one arm and a red box in the other. I dropped down next to her, out of breath. "Sorry! I couldn't find — the kit was in the bathroom under a bunch of — never mind, doesn't matter! What do you need?"

"Blankets first!" Agent 13 took one and padded it beneath Fury's back. She took another and started tearing it into strips. "Get me any gauze you have in there, any bandages. We'll need to move him into a recovery position so he doesn't breath in any blood he's lost. Can you do that?"

I felt a twinge of annoyance at the question but didn't argue the point. I didn't need to prove to Kate that I already knew basic first aid procedure — now was not the time. As I opened the first aid kit, nearly snapping the top off its hinges in my haste, I kept glancing down at Fury. He was unconscious, unmoving, eyes closed, but I could still catch the slight wheeze of his breath. There were numerous fresh lesions on his face, and his left arm appeared broken. A little older, blood having already dried — not sustained from the recent shooting.

Almost as if he'd been in a nasty car accident.

My hands shook slightly as I handed Agent 13 pad after pad of gauze. She kept applying them to Fury's chest, but they were soaked almost instantly. "Help me put pressure on the wounds!"

I did as I was told, holding down the gauze, then strips of padded blanket, over Fury's chest. Blood seeped up and through my fingers, horribly warm.

I couldn't tear my eyes away. Fury's wounds were in a small cluster in his chest — perhaps only inches apart entering his back. Expert shooting, center mass, done blind through a wall.

It was sheer mastery.

Even if I hadn't seen the form on the roof, I could've guessed who it was.

I didn't say anything to Agent 13. How could I? My visual had been too quick, too blurry — and the sniper gone too soon. The glint of his arm had been only a brief snapshot before vanishing into the night. Really, I only knew it because my gut told me it was true. Unless Steve actually managed to catch him, and prove me right, I was only guessing. Paranoid guesses.

The Winter Soldier was here. He was in DC.
art by me :)
The Potomac was beautiful in the morning.

The sunrise cast the rippling waters in vibrant pink and orange; the Lincoln Memorial, just on the other side of the shore, glowed in brilliant yellow. It cast out a long black shadow across the water. The same Lincoln Memorial I had visited only two days ago with Steve, when everything felt right and normal for once in my life.

Now it looked tiny and distant from the Triskelion; I sat alone watching the sunrise from a board room, thirty floors up. The walls were soundproof, and the carpeted floor muffled sound. The only noise came from the slight creak of the chair I was sitting in, or the ping when I touched the fancy class table. It was a nice change after a long night in the hospital.

A long day and night.

I had waited outside while doctors and nurses performed emergency surgery on Director Nick Fury. There was a private viewing; for loved ones, I guess. But only SHIELD agents arrived. A dark-haired woman and the Black Widow, who only glanced at me once before entering, and not at all when she left.

I didn't ask if I was allowed to watch. I didn't want to.

The surgery had lasted for two desperate hours. But it hadn't been enough.

Steve had stopped Romanoff in the hallway just before she could disappear. They had a hushed conversation, but even surrounded by dozens of security personnel, I still managed to pick up on their conversation twenty feet away.

"Why was Fury in your apartment?" Natasha had whirled on him first.

Steve appeared taken aback. "I don't know."
Nearby was a man refilling a vending machine. Natasha's eyes narrowed. "You're a terrible liar."

And that was the end of it; from the other end of the hall, a man in a tactical suit called Steve; he was tall, with cropped black hair and a jawline that could cut diamonds. He had a deep, gravelly voice, and I didn't fail to notice how his shirt revealed thick biceps, a level of muscle that said you didn't want to end up in the wrong side of a fight with him. Everything about the guy seemed to be hard lines and chiseled edges. Like the others, the man seemed to be a member of SHIELD — ordering Steve for his presence back at base, wherever that was.

The man seemed to be the one in charge around here. He, along with a team of agents dressed in black tactical gear and weapons, escorted us out of the hospital.

I'd learn his name was Rumlow. He had only spoken to me once. He seemed friendly enough, giving me a sympathetic smile when he introduced himself as I sat in the hallway. "I guess you could say I'm a work friend of your... er, Cap. We serve on the same STRIKE team."

"Oh. Hi." I had shook his offered hand; his was larger than mine, and thickly gloved. For the first time in a while, I actually felt dwarfed by someone not a super soldier. I frowned as he released my hand; he hadn't used a strong grip. It had been just firm enough to give an idea, perhaps a deliberate way of letting me know how strong he was, how much he was holding back. "What's STRIKE?"

"Stands for Special Tactical Reserve for International Key Emergencies," Rumlow had replied, then winked. "It means we handle the really tough bad guys."

He probably meant to be reassuring, but I only felt condescended to. It was around that time I started to figure out just what Steve really did for work. And for who.

It was also the last I saw Steve.

But he was somewhere here. The Triskelion, SHIELD's HQ in the heart of DC, heavily protected on an island in the Potomac; there was only one bridge on or off. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, half a dozen helicopters circled the sky. The whole place was on high alert after Fury was pronounced dead; I had the distinct feeling that not even the President of the United States had this level of security.

The AC had already kicked in, selling cool air across my exposed arms. SHIELD agents had taken my jacket, covered in Fury's blood, to have it cleaned. My hair, still drying, dripped water down my back. After they had removed all the blood from my skin, I had been able to take a shower at one of the locker rooms here. I regretted having only brought a light change of clothes; the skull graphic on my tank top felt pretty tasteless at the moment.

They still had my shoes, though, and I didn't have a second pair. For hours I had been waiting here, watching the sky turn from black to blue.

I spun mindlessly in the swivel chair.

"Amelia, right?" behind me, the singular door opened. Caught off guard, I spun in my seat to stare at the man who just entered; late-sixties or early seventies, he was tall and bespoke in a gray suit; tailored, Italian. He was the kind of man who aged well, it seemed, with a full head of nearly blond hair and a handsome face that echoed of a former youthfulness. A pair of tortoiseshell spectacles perched on his nose, seeming to add a slight grandfatherly note to his otherwise professional look. He seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't recall the last place I might have seen him.
I could only nod silently. He looked so dignified, so elegant, that I felt a blush rise to my cheeks. I'd just been caught spinning around in a chair, like some errant child waiting to see the school principal.

If he at all disapproved, the man gave no indication. He offered a kind smile as he shut the door and approached the opposite end of the table. "I apologize for the wait, it's been, er, a trying time here at SHIELD."

I tilted my head, frowning. "Who are you?"

The man blinked up at me, appearing startled for a moment. "Oh, right, of course." He chuckled and shook his head. "I guess it speaks to my arrogance how I simply expect everyone in this building to know who I am. Allow me to introduce myself — Alexander Pierce, Secretary to the World Security Council and... and current head of SHIELD."

These last words were strained. For a second, Pierce's eyes filled with emotion, before he looked down again, placing both hands on the back of the chair in front of him. Taking a moment to recompose himself, Pierce sighed and said, "Sorry, I'm still not used to... well, anything, at the moment. Life comes at you fast, as the youth say these days."

That got me to giggle despite myself. Then I stopped, crushed by embarrassment. Laughing at a time like this seemed inappropriate.

But the name did strike a chord with me. I'd heard of the World Security Council, but only in relation to the Incident. And, of course, their decision on how to solve the alien invasion attacking New York.

That sobered me up pretty fast. "The same World Security Council that ordered a nuke on Manhattan?"

"I was against that so-called solution moment it had been suggested," Pierce said, with a sudden firmness that said he disapproved of the implied accusation. He leveled me with a straight stare, tucking his hands behind his back. "Fury and I had both agreed on that part. To mark New York as a total loss was a grievous error on the Council's part, and I am still ashamed that I allowed the nuclear option to ever get as far as it did. I'd also like to offer my condolences; I was informed recently that your mother died in the same Incident. I can only imagine how you must feel towards the Council at this moment."

That surprised me. I figured SHIELD would do a background search on me, but Pierce said it in such a sympathetic way that made it seem like he, I don't know, actually cared. He gave off every sense of being an in-the-blood politician, but his level of candor was unexpected. And, to be honest, maybe even unprecedented.

"You don't seem so bad," I eventually relented, feeling bad for assuming the Council was just this evil hive mind of power and idiocy.

Alexander Pierce seemed pleased by that, and laughed quietly. "Well, I'm glad I met someone's approval today. Fury had made leading SHIELD seem so... simple. But finding the righteous path to take in the midst of all this mess is by far one of the hardest things I've ever done."

I didn't know what to say to that, beyond a mild agreement. It was at this point I realized that, despite all this talk, I still didn't know what he wanted. Or why Alexander Pierce, former Secretary and current head of SHIELD, was now talking to me. "I guess it must be pretty bad if it's you talking to me, and not anyone else."
Pierce conceded the point with another humble nod. "I'm here because someone killed my friend, Amelia. And you tried to save his life."

Something tightened in my chest. "He still died, though."

"And yet, you tried nonetheless."

"Well, my other option was just stand there being useless, so it seemed like the obvious choice." I also got yelled at by Agent 13, who had a gun, and that was a pretty convincing argument for me.

"Well, I envy your level of clarity in times of crisis," Pierce said, still with that sad, soft smile. He ambled his way around the table, walking along it until he pulled out a seat only a few from mine. With the sigh of a much, much older man, he sank into the chair, hands clasped and head bowed. "It is the rare person that can carry both discipline and grace under pressure. I find that I am not one of those people, which is why I'm here to talk to you, Amelia, about what happened. I need to know everything before I can figure out what the right move might possibly be."

He came for my statement. The head of SHIELD came to personally hear my statement for himself.

I tried not to feel daunted. But images of Fury's body, his blood on my hands, still filled my head. And this was Fury's friend, now facing me.

No one, besides the paramedics, had asked me what happened yet. Being left up here to stew for the early morning hours had me thinking I was in trouble, like SHIELD was prepping me for an interrogation.

But the look Alexander Pierce was giving me right now, he wasn't here to interrogate. He just wanted the truth.

So that's what I gave him. Taking a moment to collect my thoughts, my eyes dropped down to MJ's bracelet, and as I toyed with it, I was thankful SHIELD hadn't taken this away for evidence, too. I summarized what happened up to the point when Agent 13 busted the door down. I began to describe what I had seen inside, and quickly found myself too speechless to continue.

Pierce simply inclined his head and completed it for me. "You found Director Fury unconscious. Correct?"

"Y-yeah," I pressed a hand to my face, closing my eyes. This time, I wanted to focus on the visual, on the memories that for now seemed permanently ingrained in my consciousness. "He was bleeding pretty bad. His arm looked broken and there were lacerations all over his face. I didn't see the gunshot wounds immediately. He was wearing black and it was dark and… the blood didn't show very well. Agent Thirteen got to him first, checked his pulse, called for EMTs on her radio. That's when I spotted the sniper on the roof."

Something in Pierce's expression changed. Not drastically, but for a second that grandfatherly warmth was replaced by a cold intensity. His eyes narrowed for a second, frowning. "Are you referencing the person you believe to be responsible for Fury's death?"

That was a very long-winded and diplomatic way of saying 'Fury's killer'. I pressed my lips together and nodded. I swallowed to clear my throat, and found that it was stuck there. I winced a little, and said, "He was in the right position, beyond the wall where the shots originated from."

"And how long had passed between shots fired and you noticing him?"
"Thirty seconds. A minute at the most."

"And why would the shooter stay behind like that?" Pierce said, a small but distinct note of doubt in his tone.

"To make sure he hit his target." I replied at once, heedless of the disbelief he was throwing on my story. It didn't occur to me how unlikely it was, because I already knew from experience how it would make sense. "The sniper shot blind through a wall. He wouldn't know immediately if he'd hit Fury or not. He was waiting for a visual to confirm the kill, or to try again. Either he got it, or he realized he was spotted, so he ran."

Pierce nodded once, appearing to accept this. Then he asked, "You thought it was male? Why?"

"Because — because he looked like it," I frowned, shaking my head. "Tall, broad-shoulders, you know, male physique. Wait, didn't Steve get a visual on him?"

"Captain Rogers confirmed it was a male, but I wanted to hear it from your perspective," Alexander Pierce said, leaning back and folding his arms. "I'm not challenging your story to be hostile, Amelia. I'm making sure I understand all the facts; from the sound of it, you and Rogers confirmed physical description separately." he paused, canting his head to the side, then added, "Rogers also reported that the man had a metal arm. Does that sound familiar to you, Amelia?"

My heart skipped a beat. Steve hadn't said that to me; we hadn't spoken much at all since he came back from trying and failing to catch the sniper.

At both times I was elated and terrified. Steve knew. He knew I was telling the truth.

It also meant he knew about the Winter Soldier.

But he had said nothing to me. Nothing when we were surrounded by SHIELD.

Why?

"M-maybe," I said at length, my eyes drifting back to Pierce's face. Still as serious as ever; he didn't seem to notice my second of hesitation. "He was too far away for me to really tell. I saw a glint of metal, but that could've been from his weapon or his scope."

"Hmm," Pierce mused on this, pressing two fingers to his lips as he cast his gaze about the room. Meanwhile, my heart was thudding hard in my chest. If Steve hadn't said it was the Winter Soldier — and I couldn't be sure if he really had or not — then neither would I.

How could I explain how I knew what that was? The last time I brought up seeing the Winter Soldier, SHIELD had blown me off. Me and my entire statement had been wiped from the records to clear their own asses.

At least, that's what Coulson told me.

"And afterwards, you aided Agent Thirteen in giving emergency first aid," Pierce continued after a long moment. "She ordered you to fetch materials, which you did, and did your best to stop the bleeding while waiting for the EMTs to arrive, and Captain Rogers to return. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And what were you doing in the period of time when you and Agent Thirteen were separated?"
I blinked, caught off guard. "What do you mean? I was looking for blankets and a first aid kit, like she asked."

Pierce stopped musing to face me again. The frown had returned, the same doubt he was using earlier. This time, though, it didn't seem superficial. "Agent Thirteen noted there was an extended period of time, a little under ninety seconds, where she could not see you or observe your actions. I want to know what you were doing in those ninety seconds."

"I was… I was looking for the first aid kit," I repeated, straightening a little and pressing my hands flat against my knees. If I clenched them, showed any defensiveness, Pierce might pick up on it and assume some kind of guilt or lie.

Pierce looked unconvinced, and didn't hesitate to ask: "It took you that long to find it?"

"I was unfamiliar with the apartment," I responded, just as quickly. "I'd only been there a few days. Steve wasn't there, so I couldn't ask him where it was. I figured it was either in the closet, which is where I got the blankets, then the bathroom, or the office. That's where I looked. I came back as soon as I had everything."

I knew why Pierce was asking. He suspected that I was up to no good, which I was. But was it really unbelievable to take ninety seconds to find a goddamn first aid kit? Hoping I sounded innocent enough, I posed the question: "Is it really that strange? I thought I was pretty fast. It took longer for the EMTs just to get the stretcher through the door."

Pierce chuckled, dropping his hands. "Ah, fair enough. Sorry, Amelia, I'm just making sure every second in the timeline has been explained."

"I understand." I knew if it had been my friend killed, I'd go just as hard to find out everything that happened. Considering my paranoid ass, I shouldn't be surprised that Pierce was questioning every little thing. "Can I, er, can I ask you something, Mr. Pierce?"

"Oh, please don't call me that," Pierce gave a laughing wince, shifting in his seat uncomfortably. "Makes me sound old. But yes, go ahead."

I hesitated, biting my lip. "Is SHIELD still watching me?"

Pierce blinked at me. "Why would we be monitoring you? As far as I know, you've never had a run-in with SHIELD before. Have you?"

I rubbed my hands together, considering my answer very quickly. Pierce didn't know. Of course he wouldn't. Fury was head of SHIELD at the time I'd worked with Coulson's team. Even if it was off the books, Fury was informed; he had to be. But what were the odds of him passing off relevant information to Pierce before he died? Alexander Pierce and Director Fury were friends, but how much did Fury trust him?

"No," I said. If Pierce didn't know, he didn't have to. And if he did know, then he'd know that I stuck to the story SHIELD gave me to begin with. "Not that I'm aware of, at least. I don't know, I just thought, because of Steve —"

"That we monitor any and all that have a place in his life?" Pierce finished for me with a leading tone. He gave me an appreciative look, to show he meant no offense. "Yes, we do, Amelia. But only cursory checks. You have nothing to fear from us, I promise. We do what we must to protect our assets, and I can assure you, SHIELD does not consider you a threat or a target in any form."

"Oh. Okay."
"I understand that you and Captain Rogers share a… familial relationship?" Pierce raised a single eyebrow.

"I — yeah," I ducked my head, embarrassed by the way he worded it. "This trip was supposed to be a sort of father-daughter thing, but uh —" I caught myself, only too late, at the slip.

"Oh?" Pierce looked interested in this. It felt like we’d strayed from the actual statement part of the conversation, but I couldn't help but wonder if he had more than a professional interest in my case.

"Yeah, it —" I stuttered, shaking my head, scrambling for a way to save this line of thought without giving myself away. Did SHIELD know I was a Super Soldier, outside of Coulson's team? I couldn't imagine I'd be a non-threat if they did. As friendly as Pierce appeared, I wasn't sure I could trust him to know that if he didn't already.

Finally, I managed, "... It's not going too great."

"No," He agreed with a small, sad chuckle. "No, I can't imagine it would be. I do have another question for you, Amelia. Do you have any idea why Nick Fury was there in Captain Roger's apartment?"

"No," I said. "I had suspected from the music playing, that tipped us off, that someone was probably inside. But I never would've guessed it was the Director."

"Have you ever met Director Fury before?"

"No."

"And did you know that Steve's apartment was bugged?"

I swallowed. I could've guessed. "No. Is that part of SHIELD monitoring for his protection?"

"SHIELD doesn't bug its own assets," Pierce replied, and from his tone it seemed like he really did not like this revelation any more than I did. "I can tell by the look on your face that surprised you, but SHIELD does have boundaries, Amelia. There are lines we won't cross. No, Fury did that, on his own. And I'm trying to understand why."

I wasn't sure I was ready to believe him, but Pierce said it with such conviction that I believed he believed in a SHIELD with clear ethics and morals. "Maybe Fury had a different idea of how SHIELD should run."

"Maybe," Pierce said, in a quieter tone. "Or maybe he preferred to work outside of it."

I didn't know what to make of this. Here was Alexander Pierce, trying to find the person or people responsible for killing his friend — now suspecting the same man, placing distrust on him. What the hell was going on? "I thought he was your friend."

"So did I," Alexander Pierce fixed me with a wan, sad smile, a smile that knew too much. Pulling off his glasses, Pierce squinted at them for a moment, before tucking them into his breast pocket. "But it seems I didn't know Fury as well as I thought I did. But! I suppose that's it for me. Thank you, Amelia, for your patience. I'll make sure your personal effects are returned to you as soon as possible. And something to eat. I bet you're pretty hungry, huh?"

It hit me then I hadn't eaten since yesterday morning. "Oh. Yeah. Thank you."

"Ah, don't worry, it's the least I can do," With a slight grunt, Pierce rose out of the seat. As he
headed back towards the exit, I relaxed in my seat.

So, that was the end of that. Two statements in two days. I wasn't sure how much more questioning I could take before losing my mind.

"Oh, and one more thing," Pierce suddenly stopped just as he opened the door. He closed it again and faced me. "Where were you the morning of Fury's death?"

"I — I was..." I did a slight double-take, swiveling in my chair to face his new position. Pierce's expression was enigmatic. I had no idea why he was asking this. "I was at a friend's house."

"Diana Hawkins' son, yes?"

My stomach dropped out of my chest. "Y-yes. How did you — ?"

"Sitwell told me you were there," Pierce gave me a knowing look, as if I were playing dumb. "I'm sorry, Amelia. I can only imagine what it's like to witness two terrible deaths in one day. Did you know her well?"

"N-no," I shook my head a second after I spoke, brow furrowing together. "If you already knew, why did you ask?"

"Because," Pierce said. "Diana Hawkins was killed the same time Fury was attacked on the road by unknown assailants. Perhaps this is just an old man talking, but I'm not the kind of person who believes in coincidences."

I swallowed. "Y-you think they're related?"

"I think it's worth looking into," Pierce said. Then he fixed me with an enigmatic expression. "While you were there, you didn't notice anything strange, did you?"

"Aside from murder? No."

"So you saw nothing of interest, even in her home?" When I shook my head, Pierce added, "We're aware that Hawkins was working on a big story, but we found no evidence of it in her house. No writing, no notes, not even on her computer. SHIELD has reason to believe something may have been stolen."

My body went cold.

Did he know about the notebook?

"If someone wanted to steal her work," I said at last, my hands gripping the arms of the chair to keep myself calm. The metal was cold against my exposed skin. I set my jaw, looked Pierce straight in the eye without blinking. "Maybe they should've checked to see if it wasn't in the car with her first."

"Hm, fair enough," Pierce said again, his brow drawing together but the look in his eyes remained the same. His eyes glanced down, to my left. Then he smiled.

"What?" I asked, feeling slightly unsettled. Or, rather, a lot unsettled. I couldn't shake the feeling that Pierce knew somehow. I didn't need to look to know he'd glanced at my tattoo. In the back of my mind, I wondered why he never commented on it.

"Oh, just thinking to myself," Pierce replied, and with a click, the door opened. He finally broke
eye contact as he shook his head and laughed softly. "For a moment, you looked just like your father."

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Steve came by half an hour later with my clothes. And some beef stroganoff.

"Sorry, it was all they had at the cafeteria," Steve apologized with a chuckle as I took the contents from his arms. That wasn't what caught my attention, however.

I stared at the suit he wore. A muted dark blue, lacking the red and white stripes of his classic look, with only the silver star remaining true to the original. It was not a look I'd ever seen before, but at once I could tell it was not the first time he'd worn it. The knees and shoulders shown slight signs of wear, and the leather straps that made up his shield holster were perfectly fitted and pliable.

He'd worn it before. And he was wearing it now because he was here for business.

Steve seemed to notice what had caught my attention. He looked down at himself, then back at me. His expression shifted to one of contrition. "I'm sorry, Mia. I couldn't tell you. But maybe I should have."

"It's okay," I said, although it felt a little bit like a lie. It wasn't like I could criticize him; I had my own secrets to deal with. "I should've told you, too. About Kate."

"You tried to," Steve pointed out, and at my look of surprise, his mouth quirked to one side. "When you stopped me in the stairwell, that's when you were going to tell me, right?"

I nodded.

"And that's why you ran away last night, when you figured it out."

I nodded again, then grimaced. "It wasn't just that I found out. I confronted her about it, and that's when she said she was SHIELD, and that I couldn't tell anyone —"

"You confronted her in her own apartment?" Steve raised his eyebrows. "That's… bold. Reckless, but bold."

If that was meant as a critique, I didn't appreciate it. "If I knew she was SHIELD from the get-go, I wouldn't have tried it. Anyways… Agent Thirteen said if I tried to tell you, then my secret was out."

"She threatened you?" Steve took a half-step forward, eyebrows shooting up. His light tone from before vanished in an instant. The sudden intensity had me backing up a little. He glanced away, clearing thinking this over. "And you still tried to tell me anyways."

"Not soon enough," I muttered, shrugging.

"You might have," Steve fixed me with an appraising look. "If you already knew I worked for SHIELD. Seems like we both would have benefited from being more honest with each other." he just sighed, shoulders sinking. "I suppose it wouldn't have changed Fury showing up…"

Or someone killing him.
I set the items on the counter. The container of beef stroganoff was still warm, and despite my mood, I started to salivate at the smell. "Yeah, I guess not." I frowned at him. "What are you going to do now?"

"Right now?" Steve set his hands on his belt, looking super enthused. And by that, I mean not at all. "I have a meeting with this Alexander Pierce. After that, we'll see. Get you back home to New York before the end of the day. I think it's best to call this, er, vacation quits."

"It was nice while it lasted," I offered with a half-smile. I meant it; there were a lot of ups and downs, but despite it all, I didn't regret it. "I'm glad we did it."

Steve seemed surprised by this, before he, too, smiled. Not a full one, but just as sincere. "Well, that's — I-I'm glad. I wouldn't have blamed you if you didn't. But I'll check back with you soon, okay?"

He placed a hand on my shoulder as he said this, and squeezed when I nodded. Just when he was about to leave, however, Steve paused. "And, uh, don't talk to anyone while I'm not here, okay? I don't want SHIELD to ambush you."

"Oh," I had just slipped on my jacket, frowning. "Pierce already came by earlier to talk to me."

A look crossed Steve's face. Not necessarily fear, but something close to it. "What did he want?"

"My side of things, apparently."

"And what did you tell him?"

"Nothing I didn't say before." I said. "Pierce told me what you saw, but I never got a good look at the shooter."

I said this without breaking my gaze. Steve held it, only blinking once, and an understanding passed between us. I hadn't said anything about the Winter Soldier. And neither had he.

Steve opened his mouth to say something, reconsidered it, and closed it again. After a moment of thought, he exhaled through his nose. "Good. That's... that's good. Just hang tight for a bit, okay? It'll be over soon, I promise."

Then I was on my own again.

I didn't know how long this meeting was going to take, but I figured, if my wait time was anything to go by, it was going to be a while. So I took my time eating and getting the rest of my clothes on. I folded my spare clothes, the one I had been wearing yesterday, into the overlarge jacket pockets. They were so thin it barely weight it down.

There wasn't a clock in here, but my phone said the time was passing by very slowly. Service was limited here, and I didn't have the password to their wi-fi. Not that I wanted to give them even more access to my phone...

Rumlow had been the one to escort me in here. According to him, I wasn't allowed to leave until I got to okay from the higher-ups. I assumed this meant Pierce, but he hadn't said anything about it when he'd left earlier. Maybe they still had to verify my story through other channels.

Whatever it was, I was getting pretty sick of being stuck in here.

About fifteen minutes later, I got a phone-call from a mystery number. Like the typical millennial,
I didn't answer any unfamiliar caller IDs. I deliberated if it was worth the possibly awkward call with a telemarketer.

But would I really get one right now? Deciding to take my chances, I picked up my phone and answered: "Uh, hello?"

"Are you safe?" Steve's voice crackled through, loud and panicked.

"What?" I jolted, rising out of my seat. "Yeah, I'm fine. What's wrong? Whose phone is this?"

"STRIKE team just tried to take me down." He was panting, out of breath. The phone buzzed like it had been dropped too many times. "Something's going on, something —" a loud noise interrupted him. "Mia, listen to me very carefully, you can't trust them, you can't trust any of them, SHIELD has been compromised —"

Just as I was turning towards the door to see if there was anyone outside, I froze. "What?"

"— it's not safe here. Can you get out on your own?"

Pressing a hand to my head, I thought fast. "I could, yeah. Going to be hard, though."

"Well, it's about to get a lot harder." A loud bang. "Mia, I need to know that you're going to be safe. I don't know if I'll be able to get to you —"

"Don't worry about it, I can figure something out —" It was hardly my first rodeo. Steve sounded upset enough, so I tried my best to keep my voice calm.

"— Copy that." Steve's voice was sharp but even. In control, already thinking ahead. "We meet again in twenty-four hours, at the wall, do you understand?"

The wall? Oh, the Freedom Wall. "Understood."

I had no idea what was going on. SHIELD, compromised? By who? How long? Already my brain was kicking into high gear, sorting through the crisis suddenly arising. Steve was being attacked. I was trapped up here. He couldn't get to me.

I was on my own.

"Good. After this, throw away your phone. Keep your head down, don't draw any attention." A pause as he took a deep breath. "And Mia?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry," He seemed to be talking to himself now, his voice pained. "I never thought this would happen. This is my fault."

That was when the emotion got to me. My throat clamped up, and I tried not to sound too choked or scared. "I-it's okay, I'll be fine —"

"I know, I know. But things are going to get a lot worse before they get better. Whatever happens, Mia, I want you to know," Steve's breath was picking up again. In the background, I heard shouting. "I'm with you to the end of the line."

Behind me, a muffled smash. Alarmed, I spun around and looked out the window.

Someone had just jumped out of the elevator twenty floors up.
The shield was instantly recognizable.

Captain America had just left the building.
As Steve Rogers smashed through the glass ceiling of the atrium and came crashing down to the floor below, he wondered if he'd made a grievous mistake.

Not the jumping-out-of-the-elevator part, no. As far as reckless choices went, that was a relatively low key example for him. No, rather, it was what lied beyond the elevator, far out of reach.

Steve winced as he climbed to his feet, surrounded by startled SHIELD agents. Mostly suits and analysts — all too stunned by the mere sight of Steve and his entrance to try to stop him, when he bolted for the garage. Still, even as he scrambled for his motorcycle, an alarm rang out: total lockdown. No one enters or leaves.

That didn't stop him, however, as he tore out of the garage, flying through the closing gates and spilling out onto the bridge at breakneck speed.

The gate clanged shut behind him with such a force he felt the bridge shake. Breathing hard, Steve glanced over his shoulder. At the glittering silver-blue Triskelion that loomed over him.

One of those many glass floors, stood Mia, on her own. Trapped as he left her in an impossible situation.

Steve wondered if he was going to hell for this. If he didn't, then he should, because he was having a hard time living with himself at the moment.

So was SHIELD, apparently.

A black shape cut across his vision; Steve switched attention to the quinjet that had suddenly arrived, swooping in low and coming to a stop, hovering over the bridge 500 meters in front of him. Steve heard an order announced through loudspeakers, but wasn't listening. He was already reaching for his shield.

Leaving Mia to escape while the Triskelion was under lockdown was his fault. Leaving her behind at all, Steve could hardly bear. Every instinct in his bones was telling him to turn back, to just get in there, and bust her out.

With a great leap, Steve launched himself from his motorcycle, catching the wing of the quinjet and scrambling up and over. Before the pilot could try to shake him off, Steve slammed the shield into the spinning blades of the engine.

But for whatever reason, he couldn't. Because SHIELD had him cornered. Because the only thing Steve knew to do right now was get out; Get out and get that flashdrive, the drive Fury died to give him. Because Steve knew if Mia stayed with him, she might be in even more danger. If he went back, he'd get caught, or trapped, which wouldn't help either of them. Steve also knew, without ever having to ask, that Mia was not as inexperienced as she pretended to be sometimes. Steve knew better than to consider her completely helpless. Mia was possibly even more dangerous than
he gave her credit for. In the end, she was someone who could take care of herself.

Steve had a choice, what to prioritize: Fury's sacrifice, or Mia's life.

The drive was vulnerable. So was Mia. Fury had died for it. But Mia was still alive.

Unlike the drive or a dead man, she could still fight.

It was a pragmatic maneuver. Something Natasha would do.

Nothing Steve told himself, however, could change the fact that he felt like a coward. That he felt as if he had just betrayed one of his core beliefs.

A soldier never left a man behind.

Mia could handle herself. But she shouldn't have to.

As Steve leapt from the failing quinjet, he made a quick prayer to God; protect Amelia, keep her safe when Steve wasn't strong or brave enough to.

And pray that nothing happened to make him regret this decision even more.

The quinjet crashed onto the bridge, blocking the main entryway; it would serve as a temporary roadblock to anyone that followed him on land.

With one last look to the building, guilt a coiled snake in his gut, Steve turned and ran.

✮✮✮

"Can I have that on rye? Oh, and don't forget the extra mustard. Oh! And the banana peppers, lots of those…"

Peter was idly swiping through his Instagram feed as Ned made his traditional and complex order to the aggrieved Mr. de Maggio behind the deli counter. Mr. de Maggio was patient, however; Ned's big sandwiches also meant big prices, and Ned always paid without complaint.

Peter grinned when he found that the Daily Bugle had liked his close-up of Spider-Man in action; one step closer to an intern photographer.

Mr. de Maggio's assistant took Peter's order, which he gave in a half-minded mutter. He was too engrossed in his phone, in the brief messages Mia sent to him, trying to piece together the mystery that was her Spring Break vacation.

He had been checking Mia's Instagram profile every day — although Peter maintained light but regular communication with her via text, Mia was always frustratingly terse. Her photos told a more detailed story of what she was up to in DC. Stalking her profile was better than asking the same question over and over and hoping for a different answer.

Mia never used her account much — certainly not as much as Peter, who posted multiple times every day, every week — but he was always pleased to see something she posted.

Over the past few days, a few new photos filtered in: a shot of the Lincoln Memorial in the early
morning here; the Freedom Wall with its undulating waves of golden stars there; a plate of spaghetti; an old records collection next to a gramophone (Mr. Rogers'...?); a rooftop photo of a sunset over the DC skyline, illuminating the Washington monument in the distance; and a selfie of Mia wearing a Captain America baseball cap and flipping off the camera.

Mr. Rogers himself was noticeably absent in all her photos, not that Peter was surprised. That didn't bother him; what bothered Peter was the fact that Mia didn't put any comments or description in her photos, or any hashtags so people could find them. The only reason she even got any likes from her short friends list, whoever in school was lucky enough to find her private profile; Mia followed exactly three people on Instagram (Peter, Ned, and Michelle). He couldn't figure if her lack of effort was due to not understanding the app, her difficulty with writing, or simply because she just didn't really care for the popularity or digital acclaim.

Peter was betting it was the last one.

Over the past week, Mia had been posting almost every day. She was, by all accounts, enjoying a pleasantly average vacation. Peter had been enjoying the regular updates up until two days ago, when she suddenly stopped posting completely.

Least to say, Peter felt a bit odd about it.

Which was why he was on the app now, waiting for her to post something. Despite her very small album, Mia tended to post in the early mornings or late evenings. It was verging on noon now and Peter wondered if something had happened on the trip.

Well, something did happen in DC; a reporter lady got killed. Diana Hawkins, a name vaguely familiar to Peter, had died only yesterday.

"I'm sure she's just having fun times with her totally-not-a-superhero dad," Ned said when Peter voiced his concerns. Ned took his overstuffed sandwich from Mr. de Maggio with a quick thanks, and they headed with their lunches to an outdoor table. "I'm still surprised you even managed to get her an Instagram at all. She stopped using Facebook after she died."

"Because Facebook disabled her account and wouldn't let her back on it again," Peter said with a roll of his eyes. "Also, I think she just forgot the password after two years and didn't want to admit it. But that's not the problem. I just get this bad feeling, Ned. Something's up."

"What, like she's in trouble?" Ned asked around a mouthful of lettuce, ham, and peppers. A woman sitting nearby glanced at him and wrinkled her nose in disgust. Ned swallowed his bite and continued, utterly oblivious. "How bad can it be when you've got a certain Captain out there to watch your back?"

It was a fair point. Privately, Peter was always worried about Mia's safety. Sure, she wasn't your friendly neighborhood superhero, but whenever she did get in danger, it was always high-risk, life-threatening events. There was no mildly unsafe middle-ground for Mia. Either she was living a completely normal civilian life, or in a constant, violent battle for survival.

"Maybe she figured out what her dad does for a job," Ned joked. "Well, besides being an Avenger."

"Ha," Peter gave a single, humorless laugh to show how amused he was by that. But then he thought; what if it was true? When Mia was really quiet, it usually meant she was processing some deep, uncomfortable truth. Like the time she figured out he was Spider-Man.
That had been an uncomfortable experience.

"Well, what else could it be?" Ned asked, throwing Peter an annoyed look of his own. "It's not like she's gonna get kidnapped again."

Oh, if only Peter could tell him. Kidnapping would be the least of their problems.

"You could also, you know," Ned added, raising both eyebrows at Peter with a decidedly unimpressed expression. "Call and see if she's okay — like a normal person,"

"What am I gonna say? 'Hey, Mia, I've been stalking your feed and you haven't updated in two days, are you feeling alright?" Peter posed sarcastically. "I'm just gonna sound like Big Brother."

"Aww," Ned said, before a teasing grin pulled at his face. "But don't you know? Big Brother cares about you, Peter!"

"Oh, shut up."

They continued to eat in peace for a few minutes; Peter was glad for the silence, to stew in his consternation. He was almost tempted to tell MJ about it, but he was afraid she'd do the opposite of Ned: just throw wild conspiracies at him, like the government was monitoring all their communications and marked anyone so much as mildly abnormal as a threat to their power. Amelia, of course, would be at the top of their list, being a super soldier and all (not that MJ knew that, of course). Being related as they were, Peter would only pose as another danger, so cutting off all communication with him would be considered as an act of protection.

...Yeah, that probably wouldn't help.

Just as Peter was done freaking himself out, Ned started frantically tapping his shoulder. "Pete, look!"

A small crowd had gathered in front of an array of TVs in the storefront next to Mr. de Maggio's — each screen was projecting an identical image, from a local news channel. Something had interrupted the main programming, a nationwide alert. Both boys got up to get a closer look. At first Peter thought it might've been a storm warning, but then he recognized the headshot of Captain America.

Peter stared.

Beneath the face, in large white text, read: FUGITIVE FROM LAW. IF YOU SEE THIS MAN, CALL 911 IMMEDIATELY.

A collective gasp ripples through the onlookers. Peter and Ned exchanges stunned looks. Holy shit, Captain America was the country's Most Wanted.

Watching for a minute more, Peter waited for any sign, any word on Mia. He expected her to be marked a fugitive as well, but in a twist, Peter was surprised to see that she got no mention at all.

What the hell was going on?

Peter reached for his phone.
Chapter Sixteen

As Steve made it across the bridge, the entire Triskelion went into lockdown.

Emergency lights flashed red. There was thundering above and below me as agents burst into action, running through the hallways, all hands on deck. The PA sparked with a torrent of chatter, calling a dozen names I didn't know to a dozen floors each with their own name. I just stood there, watching the scene below, my jaw agape, phone hanging loosely in my hand.

Next to me, the TV on the wall came to life. An image of Steve's face took up half the screen, with words scaling down next to it. \textit{Captain Rogers, Priority Level One, hostile and highly dangerous, known collusion with Director Fury in criminal acts, obstruction of justice...}

Holy shit, this was really happening.

A click, a ding. I turned as an agent stepped into the room, a man of medium height, his hair awry and face red from a recent trek. He looked me up and down once with a scowl, before saying, "Secretary Pierce wants to see you immediately in his office."

I could only imagine why. Still, I swallowed and asked, "What for?"

The guy was red-faced and blustery. Initially, I thought he was just out of breath from running over here. At my first and immediate refusal, the agent snorted, scowling. Beneath the anger, though, I noticed he was still sweating, his eyes flicking from side to side as if he suspected to be ambushed by the invisible army of ninjas I'd brought with me.

"Wh — You know \textit{why}, now let's go," He replied with a curt tone, gesturing sharply with his hand for me to obey. The agent was decidedly on the larger side, with a barrel chest and a heavy step, but by his apparel — a black nylon SHIELD jacket, cap, and the lanyard around his neck, I guessed he wasn't a STRIKE team operative. Pierce had sent one of his larger agents to get me; he should've gotten someone with more experience.

But I didn't move. "What's happening? Why is Steve Rogers a fugitive?"

The agent's scowl deepened, and he lifted a hand to his ear. "Yes, she's being uncooperative."

"Uncooperative? I'm just asking a question!"

But he wasn't paying attention to me. The agent received an order on his earpiece, too small and far away for me to catch; he nodded once. "Understood."

I didn't know what he was told, but I didn't fail to notice how his right hand started drifting to his belt. I couldn't see a weapon, but I'd be stupid to assume he wasn't armed.
"C'mon, Fletcher," the agent said, his voice drawing my attention back to his face. His eyes were set on mine; when I shifted back on one foot, an eyelid twitched. "Now, please. Don't make me do this the hard way."

Jesus. This guy was wired; it only hit me, too late, that he was afraid of me. That his order might’ve been an approval to use deadly force.

Of course, I wouldn't figure this out until *Blitzkrieg Bop* by the Ramones started to play.

"The hell is that!" The agent demanded, whipping out his pistol before I even had a chance to react.

"It's my phone, relax!" I said, raising my hand to show the StarkPhone still in my hand. I had held onto it after Steve's call had come to an abrupt end; if I knew it'd freak out this SHIELD agent so much, I would've thrown it out as soon as I could.

I didn't even get a chance to look at the caller ID, but I already knew who it was. Peter's ringtone.

"Don't answer it!" the agent shouted, his gun on me. The sight made my heart skip a beat and just like that, a switch flipped in my head. In the back of my mind, I noted that it was a Glock. With a jerk of his weapon, he motioned to the table. "Put it down, pass it over to me."

"Okay, okay!" I kept my hands up and, very delicately, leaned over and slid the phone across the glass table. It came to a stop only a few feet away, closer to me than to him. Peter's face, smushed up against his camera, glowed on my screen. "It's just my cousin! Can you just, not point that thing at me?"

I was too busy thinking about the gun to consider why the hell Peter was calling me at this exact moment; his timing couldn't be any worse. For whatever reason, the phone call had set off the agent, turning him hostile before I could even negotiate the situation. Then again, maybe I never had a chance.

Keeping a wary eye on my, the agent crept closer, taking one hand off the gun to reach for the phone. He made very sure to keep the weapon between himself and I. Still with my hands up, I took a half step back so he could get closer to the phone without that weapon actually touching me.

I waited, not moving or saying a word as the agent inched closer. The phone made it so he was within arm's length of me, the gun only two feet away from my chest. His hand reached for my cell, which was still playing music. The fun, punk rock jam was the only sound in the tense room.

The agent, who had been watching me the entire time, made the mistake of glancing towards the phone.

That was all I needed.

I sidestepped to the right, so the Glock pointed past me, and dropped both of my hands. My left hand landed on top of his weapon, my other clamped down on his left wrist so he couldn't jerk away from me.

In one smooth motion, I disassembled the Glock — first releasing the magazine, then pulling the slide back to eject the chambered bullet. When I forced his trigger finger down, the gun only clicked.

The agent grunted in surprise, but it was too late for him. His head whipped back to look at me and he tried to jerk away on instinct, but in my vice grip he couldn't move at all. Before he could think to attack me, I removed the slide with a pinch over the release button, pulling it forward — then
throwing it back into his face as hard as I could.

The slide piece slammed directly between the agent's eyes. His head snapped back with a grunt and he dropped like a sack of bricks. I remained standing, what was left of the Glock still in my other hand.

The attack hadn't knocked him out completely; the man shifted on the grounded, dazed but awake. My heartbeat was even as I stepped forward and slammed my foot down, just as he lifted his head.

The agent slumped. He didn't get back up.

In less than five seconds, it was all over. I almost felt bad for this guy; maybe a STRIKE force guy wouldn't have fallen for my trick so easily. I just needed to get him in range to grab his gun, and that would be it.

The gun was clammy in my hand — not from my sweat, but from the agent's. I looked down at the empty grip in my hand.

Holy shit. He actually pulled his weapon on me.

SHIELD thought I was a threat.

I didn't know if this was a new development, or if Pierce had lied to me.

As I was staring at the Glock, I realized my phone was still ringing.

"Shit." I grabbed it up, flicking my thumb across the screen and bringing it to my ear. "Peter?"

"Mia! What the hell is going on!" Peter whisper-shouted into my ear; wherever he was, I assumed it was public. I could hear the chatter in the background. "Everyone's saying Steve Rogers is, like, this enemy of the state! It's all over the news!"

As I bent down to collect the pieces of the Glock, I pinned the phone against my cheek and shoulder. My eyes glanced to the TV screen on my right; damn, SHIELD was fast sending out that message. Although hearing Peter's panic made my heart skip a beat, my hands remained steady as I put the Glock back together. It only took a few seconds longer than field stripping it. "I-I don't know, Peter, some bad shit's going down. I'm stuck at SHIELD headquarters and —"

"What?!" Peter's yelp nearly blew out my eardrum. "Oh, my god, they have you hostage? I-I'll get over there, right away —"

"No, no!" Now I was starting to panic. I stopped what I was doing to grab the phone and speak directly into it; I couldn't let Peter do this. "Peter, listen to me! Do not get involved, do you understand? I don't even know what the fuck is going on, so I want you to stay home and pretend everything is normal, okay? Don't give SHIELD a reason to think you're a threat! I can handle this, alright?"

I looked up, noticing the little black dome in the corner of the room by the door. Realizing that SHIELD probably just saw everything, I quickly grabbed the unconscious agent and dragged him over to the corner. The only blind-spot in the room was directly under the camera.

Peter's breathing was loud and heavy on the other end. He seemed to deliberate this for a second, reluctant to give in. I didn't blame him — if our positions had been switched, I doubted anything would've stopped me from coming to save him.
"Are you sure?" He finally asked, his voice choked as he swallowed thickly.

"Yes," my voice didn't waver. I set the Glock down to search the unconscious agent, keeping my eyes on the door as I did so. So far, no one had passed the glass entrance, although if they did, they'd have a clear view of what just happened. I couldn't hang around here for long. I pulled the lanyard from around his neck, then took his gun holster. "Peter, if you're seeing this news, then so is Aunt May. You need to stay with her, okay? She'll go ballistic if she thinks both of us are in danger. And if SHIELD comes knocking? You need to be there."

Mentioning Aunt May seemed to calm Peter down a bit. I was terrified of the idea of Peter coming to DC just to help, but I was even more scared of leaving Aunt May alone with any SHIELD agents that might show up. Someone had to be there to protect her in case anything happened. "Okay. Yeah, I guess I can't — what's going to happen, Mia? What do I do if they show up?"

"Pretend you don't know anything." I said. The holster went around the hip and leg as a belt. I kept my movements quick and efficient as I first removed the belt, then donning it, adjusting the straps to fit my thinner girth. The tightness of the belt was reassuring — I liked the feeling of being armed. The more weapons the better. "Get a lawyer if you have to, but don't tell them anything. You can't trust SHIELD. Don't call anyone, don't send any messages or emails to anyone about this. They're monitoring everyone, everywhere. As far as either of us are concerned, this call never happened. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Peter," As I took the earpiece from the agent, I hesitated. "You can't call me again. After this, I'm going dark. I can't risk digital communication so long as... all this is happening. So don't assume something is wrong if you don't hear from me in a while, okay?"

"I — okay," Peter said, although I could tell he didn't want to. "Mia, I — are you sure about this? This sounds — I can't think of anything worse right now. I mean, SHIELD, the government, how can you — "

"I know," I said quietly. I thought about lying, about projecting a level of confidence in this situation I didn't really have. Gamble with the chance that Peter would believe it, and not use any doubt as an excuse to come after me. "But this is way deeper than any of us know. To be honest, I'm not sure at all. I don't know how this is going to end. But I'm going to feel a lot better about it if I know you're at home, safe."

As I pulled on the lanyard and put the earpiece on, I holstered the Glock and was just about to stand up when I hesitated. A teenager walking through the Triskelion, looking like I did and clearly armed, was going to raise a lot of red flags, and fast. I glanced down at the agent again. At his nylon SHIELD jacket and cap.

"Fine, okay," Peter replied, and his voice started to sound crackly. At first I thought it was bad reception, but then it hit me; SHIELD had caught onto our conversation. "Just remember — check under — truck — "

With a buzz of static, the call ended. I looked at my phone, the red bar over Peter's scrunched up face. The goofiness was only a small comfort to the fact that SHIELD had just killed my phone.

Well. I wasn't going to need it anyways.

Not another second to waste. Crushing the phone in my hand, I tossed the shattered remains into a trashcan as I headed for the doorway. Chatter filled one ear while I shrugged on SHIELD's nylon
jacket, pulling my hair into a ponytail before slipping the cap on. The coat was just a little too big for me, but it covered the top of my holster, hiding it from immediate view. I took off the compass and tucked it into my green jacket. From a passing glance, I could hopefully pass as any SHIELD agent.

"...Fowler is down in Room 23B..." the operator said. They hadn't heard my conversation with Peter, at least through the earpiece, and I wasn't about to push any button to respond. After a brief pause, the operator said, "Subject has moved him out of view, sending backup to last known location..."

Well, that's my cue.

The keycard allowed me to open the door and as I glanced down, I read the name 'Fowler, G.' under a picture of the man I just stole it from. As long as no one looked too hard at me, maybe I could slip through SHIELD’s security.

I went off at a brisk pace down the hall, taking a guess and heading down the way I originally came, towards the elevator. Through the earpiece, I could follow the movements of the incoming back-up. I quickly ripped the bandage off my chin, hiding it in my pocket and hoping that the scrape had healed enough to not be noticeable.

They were fast; I was just coming around a turn when five of them appeared. Three male, two female, trotting down the hall at a quick pace.

More armed security, still no STRIKE agents. I wondered where they were.

The back-up security came so close one almost shoulder-checked me in his rush. I barely dodged him, keeping my pace steady and not looking over my shoulder.

My heart skipped a beat, so sure that they'd spot me, spot the stolen ID.

Not one gave me even a second glance. They continued around the corner and I continued down the hall, unmolested and out of sight.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I had passed muster.

Now all I had to do was get out of the Triskelion. And find my way off this goddamn island.

That was the hard part, I knew. Even if I got outside, I'd still have to cross the Potomac somehow. The bridge wasn't an option. I couldn't just walk across it, I'd be a sitting duck. Swimming would be just as dangerous. I had to get out without anyone noticing me.

As I began down the emergency stairwell, I thought fast. I'd cross that bridge when I'd get there; right now, I just had to focus on getting out of the building first.

It was the best plan I had.

My other option? Shooting my way out. Violence, fighting, even death. I wasn't a stranger to it, but I knew the odds. I was in the lion's den, surrounded on all sides. If I picked a fight, I wasn't getting out of here alive.

Just as I hit the first landing down, the chatter in my ear exploded with activity from several different voices.

"...Agent down, agent down...! Please be advised... subject is on the loose... repeat, Rebel
"Columbia has escaped custody...!" I almost smiled at the use of my code-name. Guess my escapades in Florida hadn't gone unnoticed after all. "...Red Alert, we have a highly dangerous individual is somewhere in the building — all agents on high alert. Still trying to confirm location, need eyes on subject..."

Good, they had no idea where I was. My satisfaction quickly abated, however, as I heard the order of agents being sent out, followed immediately by the sound of racing boot-steps. Incoming agents, somewhere below me.

"Be advised, subject is female, sixteen years of age, blonde hair, white bandage on chin, wearing a green jacket and blue jeans...She has stolen SHIELD credentials, and is considered armed and dangerous...! do not approach alone, all agents, switch to back-up channel Alpha...!"

With that, the commlink in my ear went dead. Heartbeat quickening, I jumped down the last steps until I reached the second landing below the floor I started from, and entered the door, just as half a dozen men and woman came charging past, continuing up the steps past me.

Damn.

I now stood on the twenty-first floor, suddenly surrounded by people in lab coats. Several looked up at me in surprise as they passed, perhaps from my bursting in, before returning to their clipboards and tablet screens.

Their lack of concern surprised me, but then I remembered; these were analysts. Their job wasn't to catch or stop people like me.

It also made me feel slightly better about losing the use of my earpiece. Still, I didn't get rid of it. I figured I might as well keep looking the part.

Glad that they had more important work to be doing, I took a right and headed down in a direction that would hopefully get me out of here. As far as I could tell, the floors of the Triskelion were largely identical, all with the floor-to-ceiling windows, brightly lit, grey-blue walls and tiled floor. The minor difference here were the screens and holograms covering the walls, geared more towards the work of engineers than it was for guests' benefit. Every ten feet, Steve's face was plastered on a red backdrop. Mine was nowhere, but I wondered how long it would take to change that. I had never applied for a passport or driver's licence — would they use my school picture?

The thought almost had me snorting aloud before I managed to smother it. To my left, the wall was entirely glass. I could see the Potomac below, DC stretching out before me; beyond all that, miles and miles of green forest.

So close. Yet so far.

I didn't run. Even though the instinct to just tear ass through the Triskelion was strong, I made myself walk. A strong, confident gait, not looking anyone in the eye for more than a second, avoiding gazes in general. Looking like I knew what I was doing, knew where I was going, even though the truth was the exact opposite.

As I strode ahead, I made a note of every security camera I passed and made sure to keep my head angled down and away as I went along. If SHIELD had facial recognition software, and they probably did, I was about to make it a lot harder for them to find me.

No one questioned me. Most of the analysts, scientists here didn't even look up. Those that did hardly seemed interested in me. A combination of my height, my clothes, and my general
appearance made me look like an agent; once again, I was glad that I looked older than I was.

I came upon a lobby some thirty feet down, a large, open break-room, where scientists were milling around, drinking coffee, reading newspapers. They seemed so relaxed in comparison to the three agents entering from the other end, talking amongst each other in frantic whispers.

Oh shit.

I had just walked in. My black jacket contrasted heavily with the white lab coats. Directly ahead of me were two elevators. One had just opened.

The three agents hadn't spotted me yet. Keeping my gaze straight ahead, I tried not to move too fast as I made a beeline for the open elevator.

Two analysts got out, leaving the elevator empty as I ducked in. It was an external lift, with glass walls revealing the landscape outside. Despite being brightly lit, I was highly aware I was walking into what was basically a kill box.

A lab coat entered, then another. Both called out for different floors — I realized there were no buttons for me to press on the wall. Panicking, I thought fast before calling out, "Garage," before the doors began to shut.

I was out of the woods. No one called out after me.

Just then, a hand appeared, slipping in through the closing doors. The elevator paused, then opened, and the three agents slipped in. There was slight grumbling, nodding of heads, as everyone moved over to make more room. Six people in the elevator was a little uncomfortable. I shifted myself as far into the back corner as I could, trying not to stare or look too awkward.

The elevator doors shut, and we started to go down. Seconds passed by in complete silence.

"Hell of a thing going on," One scientist remarked casually, a man with thick glasses. "Who knew, Captain America?"

Another labbie intoned their mild agreement. One of the agents replied, "Yeah. But SHIELD can handle it. He won't get far."

For a second, I thought that would be it. That's when one of the agents glanced over his shoulder, spotted me. Mid-thirties, maybe, dark hair, sharp gaze. The gaze of a killer. I locked eyes with him, going stiff.

But he just smiled at me. "First day, huh?"

I couldn't breathe. The best I could manage was only to give a tiny smile back, nodding as I swallowed thickly. God, if he looked down and noticed my sneakers, or the ID, I was screwed.

"Don't worry, just let us old-timers take care of it," the man winked. "Hey, what's your name?"


"No need for that, Agent Leeds. Just Garcia works for me." The agent — Garcia — laughed, offering a hand to shake. I took it, hoping my skin wasn't too sweaty. His eyebrows shot up. "Those are some cold hands, Leeds. Just relax, okay? SHIELD has this well-in hand."
I only gave another tight nod, trying to appear reassured but probably looking like I was having a heart attack.

The elevator had just left its first stop when the three agents all winced at once; they were receiving an order, but I couldn't hear it.

"Wilco," the agents voiced in near perfect unison. As the elevator made its next stop, Garcia looked back at me and said, "Hey, Leeds, you got any other orders? You can stick with us, better to work in a group, yeah?"

Ah, great. Unable to think of something on the spot, I could only squeak out a tiny "Sure."

Then, deciding to risk it, I asked, "How do you switch to the emergency channel? I kind of missed that class in training…"

Garcia just laughed. "Slept in, Leeds? It's alright, it's a hell of a day to be learning the ropes. There's two buttons on your comm, right? Hit the small one three times, and you're in the club."

I smiled thanks, feeling up to my earpiece and found the smaller one beneath the large round button used for speech. I tapped it three times, and a beautiful new crackling filled my ears.

"...All agents, focus search on floors twenty-five to nineteen. Clear every room, including facilities, storage, containment…"

With a jolt, I recognized the voice as Kate — Agent 13. Was she taking point on the search?

Garcia sent a check through the comms and I gave him a thumbs up to show I heard. He nodded once, grinning back, before leading the way off the lift. Steeling my nerves, I followed.

Shit. Guess there was no way to back out now, not with more people in the elevator. Couldn't draw attention to myself.

"On Server Level 2, making my way east to west," Agent 13 reported.

"Coming in from the north," Garcia replied without missing a beat. "Haven't spotted anything so far."

"Keep an eye out. She's a wily one — take it from someone who learned the hard way." Agent 13 said. Someone's laugh crackled through. She snapped, "Shut it, Weiss."

The laughing stopped immediately.

I remained in the rear of the group, glancing about frantically as we entered what looked to be some massive server room — towers upon towers of computer data, sectioned off into smaller, extremely air-conditioned rooms. Most seemed to have glass walls. Throughout the air I could hear distant banging as doors were slammed open, then shut again. A repeating chorus of "Clear." Came through on the earpiece. I didn't have a lot of time. If Agent 13 spotted me, I was dead.

My feet echoed off a grated metal floor — there seemed to be a crawl space beneath, filled with wires and tubing. Probably how all these servers connected to the rest of the building. Tunnels, perhaps, for maintenance.

Getting an idea, I picked my gaze back up, following the agents for another ten feet before a hallway opened on my right. They continued forward without looking back to make sure I was still following; without missing a beat, I made a sharp right and started heading down my own way.
Praying they wouldn’t notice my absence too soon, I kept walking until I found a promising door. At the very end of the hall, the walls became opaque, not revealing what was on the other side. A nearby door marked 'JANITOR' and slipped inside.

Just as I hoped, the floor here was grated as well. The room was small, and I had to turn on the light to figure out what I was doing. Pushing aside mop buckets and a shelf full of tools and supplies, I finally had a grate clear for opening.

More 'Clear's rattled in my ear, muffled booming and distant footsteps echoing outside. Slipping my fingers through the small holes, it only took one good heave before the metal grate came loose. I peered down, squinting into the darkness. Not only were there maintenance tunnels, there was narrow ladder dropping into the floor below, maybe even beyond. It was dark, lit intermittently by blue lights — the hole was just wide enough for a single human male. It was enough for me.

I had just slipped one foot down when the door burst open.

My head whipped up, looking directly into the face of Agent 13. She had a gun in one hand, other hand on the door. Her brown eyes went wide.

It was hard to say which one of us looked more surprised.

For three long seconds, we just stared at each other.

Waiting for the other to make the first move.

My entire body went cold. The weight of the gun at my hip came to the forefront of my mind. Could I take her out before she could let out the alert?

"Agent Thirteen, did you find anything?" The same voice crackled in both our ears.

I wondered if I could drop down the hole before she could shoot me. If it was worth it.

Agent 13 didn't lift her gaze from mine. Her weapon was pointed at me — an instinct, perhaps. But I watched, stunned, as she began to lower it.

At the same time, she raised a hand to her ear. "Negative. Room clear."

She dropped her hand, nodded at me. A fraction of an inch. Down. Up.

Then Agent Thirteen stepped back and closed the door.

I waited three long seconds before inhaling, gasping for breath. My heart was pounding so hard that I couldn't hear the following chatter on the ear piece. What the hell just happened? Why had she let me go?

Maybe it had been the look on my face. Judging by the vertigo I felt, all the blood had drained from my face.

I looked down. Noticed my shaking hand holding up the grate.

Right. I had a great escape to complete.

As I slipped down the ladder, Steve's words echoed in my head: trust no one. I wondered if that applied to Agent 13 as well. I couldn't fathom her reason for letting me go, but I couldn't help but
feel a little heartened, alongside my suspicion.

Even if she wasn't on my side, or had ulterior motives — I had another shot at getting out of here alive.

Another shot was all I needed, true intentions be damned.

I slid the grate back over my head, dragging it back into place, before starting my descent. As it turned out, the ladder dropped another two floors beneath this one, and I made quick work of that. As soon as I could make out the bottom, I let go of the rungs and dropped down the rest of the way, landing lightly on my feet in a crouch.

Luckily, no cameras down here. There was only one direction to, forward in a low crawl. I had never crawled through air ducts before, but I imagined this must be very similar — if not for the too-warm piping and the grate over my head. More server towers above me. Despite the air conditioning, each tower radiated heat like a furnace. I was mildly tempted at sabotage, to slow them down, but figured I better keep my hands to myself, lest I give away my position.

I had gone (mostly) undetected so far. I didn't want to ruin it now.

I could hear footsteps moving around here, too, but the room I was under seemed to be empty. The further I went, the darker it got, as I entered beneath tiled floor and disappeared from view completely.

About thirty feet down the tunnel split into three directions. To the left and right seemed to span the width of the building. The path directly ahead lead to a dead end, but I noticed the yellow lever. A hatch.

Taking my chances, I continued forward.

Once I got to the hatch, I tested the lever. It gave easily, opening inward. I was pretty cramped, and had to wince my way backwards to make room. Just as I pulled the hatch open, something whisked by not the other side, followed by a gust of air.

Startled, I lifted an arm to protect my face, but nothing came at me. Blinking, I looked again. The hatch seemed to open up into a wide cavern…

I risked sticking my head out for a peek. Not a cavern. A shaft. An elevator shaft. Looking up, I saw the lift that had just passed.

I looked down. There were yellow lights dotting every ten feet or so — for each floor. Down, down down, until the dots merged into a single line on all four corners. An interior elevator, going all the way down to the garage.

Perfect.

On the wall below the hatch opening, inside the shaft was another ladder, inlaid into the wall. Glancing back up, I guessed at the height of the elevator. It seemed paused way up, maybe the fortieth floor? I hoped it'd give me enough time to get to the garage without meeting an unhappy end with the bottom of the lift.

Taking a breath to steel my nerves, I slipped out of the shaft, gripping the rungs. Another descent, this time a long one.

In the end, it took me a little under three minutes to reach the base — had a few close calls with the
elevator coming down, where I had to straight up just let go of the ladder and drop several dozen feet before catching a rung again and trying not to get my arms ripped out of their sockets.

At least it made things quicker.

My feet hit the floor, the sound echoing up the shaft into nothingness. The elevator was twenty floors up. I tried not to let the rush get to me as I pried the sliding metal doors open, just a few inches to check if the area was clear.

I saw and heard nothing — just a dim expanse of personal cars and large, Humvee-type tactical vehicles. Keeping to a crouch, I crossed onto the cement floor. I spotted cameras in the far corners and kept my back to the wall on my left. Time to find the exit.

The garage was huge. It seemed to span the entire floor plan of the Triskelion, just one large, open room filled with vehicles. As I slipped between the first line of cars parked against the wall, I could just make out the opposite end, what looked like the gate to the bridge.

It was, of course, closed. As I peered out past the bumper of the sedan I was kneeling next to, I also noted the guard station next to the gate. Two men manned the interior, protected by glass.

Well, walking out of here definitely wasn't going to be an option.

"We have a lock on the GPS in Roger's tactical suit. Boxing gym in downtown DC. Mobilizing STRIKE teams, Alpha and Bravo." A burst of chatter in my ear. It had been largely quiet as I descended the elevator shaft, but the burst of noise coincided with the elevator doors behind me sliding open and half a dozen men filing out.

"Copy that." I ducked back down, heart leaping into my throat, as another half dozen agents appeared from my right, from another elevator. I recognized Rumlow with his black hair and muscle shirt, getting into one of four identical civilian SUVs. Only they weren't civilian, because they had a much higher ground clearance; almost a full two feet off the ground. It was accompanied by larger, thicker wheels that would be harder to tamper with. Tactical vehicles disguised to look like civilian vehicles.

The engines began to rev as the STRIKE team all got into one or another vehicle — I counted about twenty agents in all. I noted a good half of them looked a little beat up, with very freshly tended wounds; as if they just got out of a fight. Jesus. I guess this is what the STRIKE team was up to.

I crept forward between parked cars, watching as the four SUVs started moving, forming a long line in front of the gate. There was chatter, angry chatter, as they argued with the guardsmen at the door.

Keeping to the left side, where the cars blocked me from view from the guards, I scrambled forward and under the SUV at the rear of the line. I had just pulled myself up, clinging to the bottom of the chassey, as gate rumbled open. Tossing aside the hat, I tucked my hair into the collar of the nylon jacket before zipping it all the way up.

The floor shook, and then the SUV above me glide forward on smooth suspensions. I was sure, when it slowed down, that we were about to be stopped because the guardsmen had detected something off about this car, but no, it continued on with only a breath of hesitation. No one knew I was here.

The sound of tires over gravel was deafening, especially as they picked up speed. The light
changed and the air got cooler as we crossed the bridge. Being *this* close to rushing pavement as I clung to the underside of a vehicle going forty miles an hour was what I'd like to call an uncomfortable experience. I just prayed we didn't hit any bad potholes on the way. It was taking all my upper body strength to remain in this position, not to hover an inch lower. The entire front of my body was pressed against the chassey, and I didn't dare pull my head back to see what was coming ahead. I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed for the best.

There was talking on the earpiece but the road was so loud I couldn't make heads or tails of it. There was white noise and crackling as I left the perimeter of the building's radio waves; the voices got fewer, and I realized I was listening only to the STRIKE team communication now.

The journey seemed to last forever. My hands were covered in grease, the nylon jacket protecting most of my clothes, but no doubt ruined now. The air smelled heavily of gasoline fumes and tarmac; it was hard to breathe, and I made myself hold my breath for periods of time so I wasn't inhaling so much of it.

Finally, finally the cars eventually came to a stop, pulling over to the curb. I had no idea where we were, could only guess by the twenty-thirty minute ride time that we were still somewhere in DC.

As the engines died, I could finally understand what they were saying on the comms.

"...Rogers last known location. Keep an eye out, move in groups. We start from the east and cover each floor…"

"New objective from mission control." A new voice said. I recognized it as Agent Sitwell. "Extract Hawkin's son from her residence by this evening. SHIELD wants to interrogate him in the Triskelion, we believe he knows more than he's saying..."

My heart launched into my throat. *Dmitri.*

"Wilco," Rumlow replied from outside the vehicle. I watched as his boots paced away. "Shaw, O'Brien, take care of the kid. Shouldn't be too hard to handle."

More footsteps walking away, and when I was sure they were gone, I gently lowered myself to the tarmac and rolled out. Getting to my feet, I started removing the nylon jacket as I looked around. We were parked outside of a residential district, surrounded by brick apartment buildings, somewhere in downtown DC. The street was filled with pedestrians and no one seemed to notice when I appeared from underneath one of the SUVs. Unzipping the SHIELD coat, my eyes fixed on the veranda leading inside the YMCA. Was Steve really inside? Could I find him before the rendezvous point?

Could he help me with Dmitri?

I would never find out.

Just as I was shedding the SHIELD coat, the passenger door next to me opened.

Out stepped a STRIKE agent, tall and blond, looking at his phone. He looked up, spotted me standing right there. His eyes went wide, then narrowed.

Immediately, he reached for his gun.

I was faster. Snapping out with the coat, I whipped it around his hand just as he pulled out his weapon. The dirty, weighted fabric wrapped around his wrist and I jerked it in and down. The gun clattered to the tarmac.
But the STRIKE agent wasn't so easily disarmed. With a jerk, he ripped the nylon coat from my
grip, pulling out a knife with his free hand. Man, SHIELD did not fuck around with these guys.

I just managed to dodge his first strike, skipping away from him and the SUV. My instinct told me
to pull my weapon, but I didn't want to cause more noise. A gunshot would be a big indicator to the
other STRIKE agents that there was a problem.

Stepping onto the sidewalk, pedestrians nearby took a second to notice what was happening. Heads
turned, fingers pointed, voices called out and people scattered in growing alarm.

I did my best to avoid them as the blade came for my face again. It was a huge blade, some sort of
carbon steel combat knife, whatever the hell — the wind whistled as it sailed past my ear. I
grabbed the offending arm as it passed by, twisting his wrist and wrenching the blade from his
grip.

The STRIKE agent struggled against me, coming in hard to ram me with his shoulder. When that
didn't work, he slammed his left fist up into my rib-cage once, twice — but at that point I already
had his weapon. The agent grunted in alarm as I flipped the grip in my hand and directed the blade
back at him.

The blows to my chest ached; he definitely cracked a rib or two, but I wasn't about to let it slow me
down.

Despite the fact that I was the one armed now, the blond agent still went on the aggressive. He
lunged for me, an obvious move, and I stepped back. But that wasn't what he was going for.

His hands clamped down on the lanyard around my neck. Too late, I realized I was still wearing it.

Before I could react, he pulled hard. I stumbled, gasping as the ribbon went taut around my neck. I
choked, and he pulled tighter, dragging me in closer.

Halfway there, I recovered from my surprise and sliced the lanyard with the knife. The sudden
break in tension made him stumble backwards, catching himself against the side of the car. His
shoulder landed on the side mirror and it snapped under his weight.

I took the second to pull back and catch my breath, coughing and rubbing my sore neck. My skin
burned from where the lanyard dug into my throat.

Apparently seeing that I had a gun, the agent dove in low, reaching for it.

I just barely twisted out of the way, so his hand grabbed uselessly at my coat. I slashed downwards,
cutting across his arm and earning a yell in response. Distracted by the blood gushing from his
wrist, and onto my shirt, the agent was open for my following kick, and he landed on his side to the
cement.

Before I could think of bolting, he scissored his legs and knocked me over.

I landed awkward, trying to avoid falling on my own knife. That was a mistake, as I landed on my
front — the STRIKE agent was already on top of me, stomping the blade out of my hand and
grabbing my jacket from behind.

With a great heave, he pulled back on the jacket, twisting it and lifting me up at the same time. I
snarled, writhing hard, but it was no use — my arms were still twisted, locked in the sleeves of my
jacket, pinned behind my back. But the agent made the mistake of spinning me around, turning
towards the SUV.
Maybe he meant to open the door, stuff me inside. He never got the chance. As soon as the vehicle was in three feet, I picked up both my legs off the ground and slammed my heels into the metal siding, pushing back off as hard as I could.

The impact through the agent off balance and he cried out, falling backwards. I landed on top of him and tumbled off, the jacket slipping off my arms. The knife was only a few feet away. The agent spotted his gun near the front passenger wheel.

We moved at the same time. He lunged for the gun.

I was faster. With my leg, I kicked out, sending the weapon skittering under the SUV and out the other side.

There were voices in my ear. I could only make out a few words between my pounding heartbeats. 
"...negative… dumped suit… no trace on Rogers…"

The information hit me like a bullet train. Steve wasn't here.

I didn't know if I was relieved or not.

In the end, that second's pause was a mistake. I reached for the knife too late.

The agent, switching tracks without his gun, instead grabbed my extended leg and pulled me back, just as I was reaching for the blade. I yelped as I was jerked back several feet.

The agent continued pulling me back, at the same time climbing to his knees. I twisted around on the ground and, with my free leg, kicked him.

Once in the chest, another in the face. Blood spurted from a broken nose. Finally, he let go.

Gasping, I scrambled up and grabbed the knife. Spun around as I heard him getting up, too.

I turned just in time to be tackled head on. The agent's momentum sent both of us flying into an alley beyond the sidewalk. I crashed hard into gravel, the backs of my arms and shoulders taking the worst of the fall. My skin stung from the impact — no doubt that drew blood. But I figured I still looked better than the guy trying to pin me down.

I was in the worst position to be in. This guy had at least forty pounds on me, if not more, and I couldn't easily shift his weight off of me.

Even worse, when I brought my arm up to stab him, the agent saw it coming. He grabbed my wrist with both hands before the blade could enter his chest.

For a moment, we just laid there, him on top of me, unmoving aside from our trembling grips straining against each other. I was hit with a wave of deja vu. The last time someone had me pinned like this was the Winter Soldier.

Too bad this STRIKE agent wasn't as strong as him.

My left hand was reinforcing the grip of the blade. I let go of the handle, and grabbed the agent's shirt front. Yanked him towards me as hard as I could.

His shoulder sank into the blade.

The man let out a cry, this time one of real pain. Blood dripped down the blade, and he slammed a backhanded fist across my face in retaliation. But it was too late. I could already feel his body start
to slacken.

My head snapped to the side. The strike bruised my cheekbone, and I tasted blood in my mouth. His fist had caused inside of my cheek to cut against my teeth.

The agent was breathing hard, his weight falling into me as he quickly lost strength. It had the inadvertent effect of forcing the blade deeper into the wound. His eyes fluttered, but he was still conscious. Time to finish the job.

Trading one blow for another, I slammed my own fist into his face, then his collarbone, effectively knocking the air out of his chest. Perhaps even inflicting more pain onto the stabbing. The agent grunted once before passing out.

Breathing hard, I kicked him off me. Without thinking, I pulled out the knife from his body — that would make the bleeding worse, I knew, but in this particular moment I wasn't feeling a lot of sympathy for the guy. He had seen me only for a second before attacking. Didn't try to arrest me or even say a word. Just went for his gun.

That was all I needed to know about how this STRIKE team operated.

Pausing a second to catch my breath, I decided that I'd rather keep the knife than leave it behind. Wiping it clean on the agent's jacket, I found the sheath he took it from and pulled it off his belt. Sheathing the blade, I tucked it next to my holster. Arsenal ever growing.

I went back to collect my green jacket and the compass still in its pocket. Immediately, a sharp worry filled my stomach. After I shrugged it back on, I pulled out the compass, and sighed with relief to find it was still in one piece.

"HEY!"

A man had just emerged from the gym. Rumlow, followed by two more STRIKE team agents.

I took one look at him and bolted back down the alley.
an oldie but a goodie (: Art made by me

Chapter End Notes

A/N: this last section is based on a deleted scene where the STRIKE team's first attempt at tracking down Rogers' begins with them finding his ditched suit in a gym bag at some random location — this occurs just before Steve arrives at the hospital, to retrieve the drive he hid in the vending machine, and where he is right now, in the fic. I think the scene was meant to explain how Steve went from his stealth suit to his civilian clothes disguise, but I understand why they cut it out. For the purposes of my
fic, however, it's a perfect spot for this scene to happen. I think it's also a logical assumption to believe that SHIELD would have a GPS tracker in Steve's suit, so he'd have to ditch it for more reasons than one.
Chapter Seventeen

"— Man down, man down —!"

Feet striking hard ground. Shouting in my ear. Heart racing.

"— Subject heading southwest on foot —"

Tearing down the alleyway at full speed, I had already reached the end of it by the time Rumlow caught up to my original position. Going down the alleyway was a mistake — if he caught up any sooner and decided to take the shot, there was nowhere for me to hide, not even zig-zag to throw off his aim.

"— Rivers, check on Klein, call a bus —"

By the time Rumlow did pull out his weapon, I had already turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

"— I'm in pursuit —"

I came onto a pedestrian street, nearly crashing into a mother and a stroller. I saw them at the last moment and vaulted over the front wheels. The woman gasped, and I called out "Sorry!" as I kept going.

Apparently having walked into some small park between apartment complexes, I found myself in a green area with only two roadways, surrounding a green lawn filled with trees and a playground. Kids were gallivanting about and my heart dropped at the sight of them.

The quickest way out of here was right through the playground.

Not wanting to trample a dozen five-year-olds, I skirted around the playground, my feet kicking up wood-chips. I sped past a little carousel, and a little girl waved at me as I tore past.

Despite my rising panic, I managed to flash her a quick smile — I could only imagine how terrifying it looked.

Leaping over a seesaw, startling a two boys and a nearby chaperone, I tore out of the playground and back onto the asphalt. There was an exit ahead of me, appearing to lead back out onto a busy street. Seeing the pedestrian traffic on the other side, I made a beeline for it.

Behind me came more startled cries and shouts — Rumlow and whoever else was chasing me, tearing through the playground with much less grace. Adult voices shouting and kids shrieking — guilt twisted in my gut, but I couldn't stop or turn around.

Hitting pavement on the other side, I tore down the sidewalk until I was sure I'd broken Rumlow's line of sight on me — and dropped to a quick walking pace. Panting, I forced myself not to look over my shoulder as I continued forward at a determined but even pace, weaving through the crowd.
as I entered what appeared to be some kind of street market. Vendors lined either side of the cobblestone road, selling clothing, bags, tools, tchotchkes, and art. Music played from a variety of speakers and the air was filled with voices; tourists and locals, vendors talking and shouting their wears, even street musicians busking for some cash.

"Lost visual on Fletcher." Rumlow called through his earpiece, no longer shouting. Sliding behind a kiosk, I glanced around and spotting him stalking through the market some fifty feet back, his eyes scanning every which way. "Last spotted headed south towards outdoor plaza. Look for a tall blonde female in a green jacket. Approach with caution — she's armed and dangerous."

Behind him, I spotted two more STRIKE agents merging into the crowd. They weren't exactly subtle, with their scowls and dark clothing, clearly packing their own weapons. At least they hadn't realized yet I was eavesdropping. Keeping that in mind, I stepped away from the kiosk and kept moving. I had to find a way out of here without getting spotted.

The place was absolutely packed — I couldn't run through here without needing to knock over everyone in my way. As it was, I found it much easier to blend in, and plenty to help hide my appearance.

Once more moving at a brisk pace, I quickly slid off my green military coat, rolling it tightly and tucking it under my arm. Passing an outdoor cafe, I spotted a dark red bomber jacket hanging off the back of an unaccompanied chair. Its owner nowhere in sight, I slipped past, taking the jacket with me.

I had it on and gone long before anyone would notice it was missing. Not even passerby gave me a second glance. Running my fingers along the collar, I was disappointed to find the new jacket had no hood. I looked around frantically, hoping to find something to cover my hair. Unfortunately for me, no one around here seemed to be selling any wigs or balaclavas. The weather was warm, and no one seemed to be wearing any big or winter hats, that would've been suitable for tucking my hair into.

Still fighting the urge to look behind me, I passed a vendor selling scarves. Dozens of them, wafting on the breeze from numerous poles and racks. Passing the stall, I caught one between my fingers at hip level, not missing a step as it slid from its post and into my grip.

Taking a few more steps before putting it on, I quickly wrapped the scarf around my neck and over my head in a loose, makeshift hood. It wouldn't stand against a strong wind, but it would do for now. I passed another stall filled with sunglasses, and snatched a pair of aviators. Then I nearly tripped on someone's unattended backpack — I caught myself before I could fall, and gracefully switched my movement into picking up the bag, as if it were mine and I'd forgotten about it. Stuffing my green coat inside, I hefted it up onto my shoulder and went on my way, as natural as could be.

In less than thirty seconds, I had performed the basic quick-change — altering my basic silhouette to make me virtually unrecognizable to any tails. STRIKE was looking for a blond in a green jacket — now I was in red, with a white shawl, sunglasses, and carrying a bag I didn't have before. I looked just like any other casual shopper here, on a daytrip through the city.

Still walking forward, I spotted the end of the market, opening out onto a side street where there were less pedestrian traffic. It was where I wanted to go, but I didn't want to rush myself — I'd be a lot more noticeable walking alone in an empty alleyway.

I hadn't spotted any other way out, however, and turning around wasn't an option. There was chatter in my ear but nothing alarming; Risking another glance over my shoulder, I could make out
Rumlow still behind, but getting closer, turning around a blonde woman he had just walked into. Seeing it wasn't me, he smiled apologetically and moved on.

Reassured, I continued forward. The urge to break out into a run as soon as my was clear was almost irresistible — I could outrun them all, surely.

But I couldn't outrun a bullet.

Without changing my gait, I continued out the market, following closely behind a group of teenage girls — not so close that the girls would notice me invading their space, but just enough that I might be assumed to be one of them from a distance. I even slowed my walk, so I wouldn't outpace them. It'd make my exit slower, but hopefully make me harder to detect.

A cool breeze picked up, and I hooked a finger around the edge of the scarf, keeping it up around my head as I continued walking with the group of girls. In the earpiece, a woman said, "Not finding her, sir. I think she may have left the area..."

"Agreed. Everyone, widen your radius. Check the shops, make sure she didn't hide inside a bathroom or closet. Cirillo, Bell, with me, we're checking possible exit points..."

Ah, crap. Telling myself to keep it cool, I chose not to break away from the group, even when I glanced out the corner of my eye and spotted Rumlow and two others, a woman and another man, emerge from the same street market I'd just left. Inhaling through my nose, I turned my head back around, and spotted a sign up ahead. A street map of the surrounding DC area. The girls stopped in front of it, leaning in close to find whatever location they were looking for.

Too terrified to stop, I kept walking, picking up my pace a little and keeping my eyes fixed on a small alley coming up on my left. Cars moved in easy rhythm to my right — it was a last resort, but I was willing to run into traffic in order to lose my tails.

"Still no sign..." the woman reported.

"Keep. Looking." Rumlow growled. "She's gotta be here somewhere."

"What about Captain Rogers?" another asked. "I thought our mission was to find him?"

"Fletcher just put a knife in one of our guys, and you want to go look for Big Blue?" Rumlow snapped. "And unlike Rogers, she's still in the area. We have a better chance of catching her than the Captain right now."

"And she might even lead us to him," Another voice suggested, returned with a chorus of agreement.

A chill went up my back. Well, now I knew what SHIELD wanted me for, amongst other things. Not that I'd ever tell them anything even if they did catch me, but I'd rather not end up in that situation to begin with.

"Hold up, I spot someone..."

Their footsteps echoed behind me, loud and fast, but not running. I took it as a sign that they hadn't made me yet. When the alley came up, I had to resist the urge to start running — even then, I skipped slightly, almost jumping for cover. Heart in my chest, hoping it wasn't me that they'd seen, I kept walking, picking up my pace now that I was out of sight.

I was three-quarters of the way through the alley when I heard another set of footsteps follow me.
Shit.

I couldn't look behind me. Now would be too obvious. The chatter in my ear had gone oddly silent, and that didn't do anything to ease my nerves. Did they know I was listening in? Or were they just being silent so as not to alert me of their location behind me?

The alleyway opened up onto a boulevard, and I went left, slipping with a group of tourists that happened to be going the same way. Using the cover to peek a glance behind me, I spotted Rumlow walking out of the alley I had just left. His eyes cast left and right, choosing a direction, before going left. His gaze seemed distant, not appearing to see me.

I snapped my head back around. Instead of blending in with the tourists, I weaved through, pulling out past the guide and skipping ahead.

I had to lose him somehow. Being on the wide sidewalk allowed for better movement and more cover with civilians, but I needed to randomize my direction. Break line of sight again. Find a safe place to hide and figure out how to get to Dmitri.

The way things were looking right now, there was no way I could stop and really think for any length of time. I had to keep moving.

Ahead, a crosswalk was running out of time. A bus was coming up, making a turn, and a group of people had already stopped to wait out the traffic. I slipped past them and, just as the red Do Not Cross light came on, I leapt into the road, skirting in front a few oncoming cars. Just in time, the bus passed behind me, making its slow, lumbering way into the intersection — effectively cutting me off from sight and preventing anyone from making any bold action to follow me.

It was a miracle I didn't get honked at. Glancing up, I spotted a convex mirror hanging from a lamppost, and saw that the way behind me was clear. Rumlow was stuck somewhere behind the bus.

Still, I didn't run. Keeping up my fast walk, I scanned the area ahead of me. A side-street opened up on my left again — some side entrance for trucks for nearby restaurants. It looked clear for now, so I trotted over, making a sharp turn into the driveway.

On the other side, the driveway opened up to some kind of metropolitan plaza or parkway, filled with benches and cement walkways leading between fancy stores and restaurants. Lots of people here, in fancy clothing. Rich perfume and fine cuisine drifted on the wind but I ignored it as I dove in, trying to find a group large enough to blend into. There wasn't any structures here large enough to hide behind, and I wasn't willing to enter any of the stores.

I had stopped at a hot dog vendor, pretending to be interested in the menu. The line provided a bit of cover, and the metal siding of the trailer allowed me to keep an eye on my surroundings. My heart dropped when I saw Rumlow appear in the plaza as well. Damn it, he was still on the scent.

My heart plummeted even further when I spotted two more agents appear from another entrance, entering the crowd. A third appeared from a second side street. All of them were behind me, and drawing closer. Rumlow, the closest, was only fifty feet away. If he looked in the right direction, he'd see me standing right there, out in the open.

If I didn't haul ass, I'd be cornered.

With no other option, I rounded the hot dog vendor and continued forward. The plaza was longer than it was wide, seeming to stretch for two or three blocks uninterrupted. I had to squint a little to
see ahead. Between the people, the evenly spaced trees and trimmed topiary bushes, there seemed to be some kind of gateway up ahead.

A sign. A metro station.

My heart leaped.

A way out of here.

I could feel the STRIKE agents closing in. They were speaking in low tones over the earpiece; Rumlow had called every agent to this location. "Keep low profile. Fletcher likely altered her appearance. Look for any sign of her."

It was only a small relief. Rumlow didn't give a description of my new look, which hopefully meant he wasn't sure it was me he was following. It gave me hope that I could reach the metro without getting made. I could make out the crowd of people entering and exiting now — less than fifty meters away.

The art of invisibility. Being seen but not seen. I wondered, vaguely, how Steve was managing this so far. How he never got spotted.

I probably should've been paying a little closer to my surroundings than thinking about Steve.

Just as my head was turned away, someone crashed into me hard. It nearly toppled me off my feet — as it was, the glasses were knocked off my face, clattering to the ground with the half a dozen or so packages that had been in the arms of the woman who'd walked right into me. She cried out in surprise, making me cringe when heads turned in our direction.

"Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry, I'm such a clutz —" the woman gasped, her hands fluttering in front of her face as she dropped to her knees, gathering her things. The flow of people continued moving around us without much complaint.

"It's fine, it's fine," I mumbled out, along with an apology, keeping my head bowed as my hand skirted the ground, looking for my glasses in the mess of burst bags and spilled clothing. My hand brushed against a plastic box of take-home food, before landing on something glass and plastic.

At the same time a larger, male hand did too. "Here, let me help —"

I looked up, startled, into the face of Brock Rumlow as he handed me my glasses. The easy smile he gave, crouched next to me and the woman as we collected our items.

As his brow furrowed.

Shit.

We moved at the same time. I tried to retreat backwards, but I was in an awkward position on one knee. Rumlow was faster, and grabbed arm, a vice grip wrapping around my entire wrist, his features twisting into a grimace. "Got you, you little —"

I grabbed the first weapon closest to my free hand. Without hesitation, I smashed the box of leftovers into Rumlow's head.

Burrito and hot sauce exploded across his face and he recoiled, grunting in surprise. It was enough to loosen his grip and I wrenched myself free. The woman, innocent bystander in all this, cried out in surprise at the interaction, scrambling backwards as her lunch became ammunition.
Free, I took off running. I felt bad leaving the woman behind with Rumlow, but I doubted he had any interest in her.

Only a few short seconds later, I heard him giving chase. The wind from my speed blew the scarf from my head, but I didn't pause to fix it, just trying to put as much distance between us as possible.

"— *Target spotted! Heading east down the plaza! She's wearing a red jacket and white scarf —*"

I hopped over a bush, forgetting the walkway entirely and making taking a direct route towards the metro. Two men, strike agents appeared on my left, trying to flank me. I quickly dove right, nearly knocking over a man walking his dog.

"— *In pursuit —!*"

Curses flew repeatedly in my head as I charged down the pavilion at full speed. No obstacle was too great in my path — I slipped around people and vaulted over benches and hedges, dove under two men carrying a stack of long construction beams, skirted a statue and dodged a street performer playing the violin and dancing at the same time.

" — *She's heading for the metro, cut her off — *"

Ha, as if they could ever catch up to me. I'd just reached the steps leading down when I took a quick glance behind me. Rumlow, the closest, was still twenty feet back.

Deciding to make haste, I jumped between two escalators, and used the metal surface to slide all the way down.

People jumped away on either side as they saw me coming down, but maybe this happened often around here because all I got were a few curses before they went on with their lives. The STRIKE agents, on the other hand, made a big ruckus as they finally reached the stairs, shoving aside civilians in their way. A chorus of surprised cries and shouts echoed down to me as my feet hit the landing and I took off running.

I almost grinned when I saw that the turnstiles were the waist-high variety — spotting an empty aisle, I leapt right over without paying.

The action alerted the guard at his station only a few feet away, but I paid him no heed. He was about to have a lot more problems when the STRIKE team following me did the exact same thing.

I heard his shouting behind me, which only increased in panic by the rush of heavy bootsteps. By that point I was already skirting around the corner of the walkway, alarming every pedestrian I passed before I flew down the next set of steps. The air became lighter, cooler and a burst of wind hit me as a train had just entered the station.

I hit the landing and kept going. The train closest had the signs flashing — its doors were already starting to close. Heart skipping a beat, I dashed straight for the nearest car.

"Fletcher!"

Rumlow, right behind me. Way too close.

I didn't stop. I charged over a bench. The train's doors were already halfway closed. I threw myself over the last stretch of ten feet.

Angling myself to the side, I slipped into the car just as the doors slid shut.
Rumlow skidded to a stop, his snarl muffled by the closed doors, slamming his fist against the barrier. I just stood there, glaring at him through the window as the train began to take off.

"*She's on the train, heading southbound, get there, cover all exits...*" Rumlow spoke into his earpiece. It was then his eyes narrowed at me, as the train began to move. "*Wait a sec, she's got an earpiece —*"

The rest of his reply disappeared as the train sped out of the station, his voice crackling out as I got too far out of range. Huffing, I pulled the earpiece from my ear. Guess I couldn't use this anymore.

But it gave me all I needed to know. I glanced up at the map over the doorway. The next stop wasn't too far. I was stuck in this car, and I'd still be here if and when the STRIKE team reached the next station.

I had about two minutes to think of an escape plan.

My best bet was to get off at the first stop. Any after that, and the STRIKE team would have enough time to organize themselves there way ahead of time. I'd just have to pray that this next station was far enough away that they hadn't made it to the platform before the train stopped. If they caught me at this car, I was dead.

"You all right there, baby?"

It took me a second to realize the voice was speaking to me. Startled, I looked around, coming to face with an elderly black woman sitting in the seat beside the door. Wearing a baseball cap and carrying a cane, she fixed me with a curious look, and jerked her chin to the door I was just facing. "Who was that man chasing you?"


The woman tilted her head, frowning. "He do that to your face?"

In my rush to escape, I'd forgotten about the recent fight with the STRIKE agent. I lifted a hand self-consciously to my face, and nodded silently.

Her eyes narrowed, and she sniffed. "I see why you ran. Here, sit."

I almost didn't want to, but the woman insisted and I felt rude. I scanned the other passengers in the car — none paid any attention to us. As I sat down, I spoke in an undertone, keeping my head down. "I'm just trying to get away from him. But I think he'll be there at the next stop."

"Ah, quite the predicament." The woman nodded slowly. She didn't seem at all concerned that I said no to the police. She just lifted her chin and studied the middle distance for a moment, humming under her breath as she considered deeply. I thought she'd already forgotten about me, until she suddenly asked, "Are you a Nationals fan?"

"...No?"

"Well, you are now," The woman said as she took off her Washington Nationals cap and placed it in my hands. It was bright red, soft and worn from use. When I opened my mouth, the woman raised her hand, shushing me. "Ah-ah. Not a word."

Bewildered and, at this point, too desperate to look a gift horse in the mouth, I silently put the baseball cap on. On her wrist, I noticed a charm bracelet. One of the charms was a name, written in cursive. I knew I was wasting time trying to read it, but I made myself. I wanted to know.
Martha.

Those two minutes went by fast. Realizing I had a new backpack yet to be fully explored, I quickly took a seat and shrugged it off. Opening it, I set aside my own jacket I had stuffed inside, and started digging.

Inside I found a multitude of things, from a wide variety of usefulness: an empty water bottle; a wallet with fifty-three dollars and two credit cards; a small flashlight; a large make-up bag filled with things I didn't understand; a ring of house keys; a pair of earphones; women's deodorant; headache medicine; a pack of gum; and, finally, a hairbrush.

I was disappointed not to find a cell phone, but I supposed people always kept those in their pockets. Maybe it didn't matter; not even a cell phone was going to get me out of this situation. What I did find, however, was a flannel shirt, folded up near the bottom.

Thanking my lucky stars, if I even had any left at this point, I quickly changed once more. Off with the jacket and scarf and on with the flannel. Martha, the elderly woman, said nothing as I changed and tucked away the spare clothes. If she had noticed the driver's license in the wallet wasn't of me, she gave no indication. She remained silent for the rest of the journey, and when I tried to speak to her again, after I was finished changing, she only shook her head, finger to her lips and not meeting my eyes.

I had no idea what was going on. But I decided to roll with it. Once more, I had changed my silhouette. When the train finally stopped, I was ready.

I didn't stand up right away as the doors opened, but I tried to blend in with the small crowd as they exited the car. Almost immediately upon stepping onto the platform, I spotted Rumlow just getting down the stairs onto this level. How the hell did they get here so fast? Someone must've pulled in clutch with their cars.

I almost wanted to do a U-turn, but instead I veered to the right a little, heading towards the map kiosk. The bag weighed heavy on my shoulder, like a bomb — it was full to bursting now, with the jacket and scarf added to the mix.

I spotted another STRIKE agent ahead of me, approaching the cars and peering inside. I turned away once again, heading towards the stairs. Rumlow was somewhere to my left, behind me. I didn't want to look for fear of him seeing my face. I put the glasses back on, but I wasn't convinced they'd work if he spotted me again.

Just as I was about to hit the first step of the staircase, I heard a shout behind me. "Hey, hey! Stop —"

Rumlow. But before I could think of running, I heard a loud crash as something was knocked down. Then a high-pitched, reedy voice of an old woman, crying out, "Oh, dear, I'm so sorry, sir. I didn't see you there! These old eyes, they don't see very well anymore…"

I looked behind me, surprised to find the same woman, Martha, now standing over a fallen Rumlow — her cane on the ground, under his leg, apparently having been tripped. The attention also turned nearby STRIKE agents towards them rather than me.

As Martha was making a big fuss about him, trying to help Rumlow up but somehow being more hindering than helpful, her gaze lifted to meet mine for only the briefest of moments. She winked.

I mouthed 'thank you' to her before disappearing up the steps.
It wasn't until I was back topside did I realize Martha would've seen that I was armed, especially as I was changing. I wondered if she knew I was lying, and decided to keep helping me anyways. The very thought almost had me tearing up; what stranger would do all that for someone like me? Who could be so kind?

Having never considered myself very religious, in that moment I decided to give way. I made a quick prayer for Martha, hoping she'd be alright.

✮✮✮

Agents Shaw and O'Brien had parked their vehicle down the street from the Hawkins' residence. Since the day before, the street had been cleared of any crime scene tape and debris of the accident. Aside from the scorch marks on the asphalt, it was almost like the attack hadn't happened at all. SHIELD did quick work.

They had both decided to take a lunch break before fetching their charge. "Ain't like he's going anywhere," said O'Brien around a mouthful of bread and meat.

Shaw wiped some mayonnaise from his mouth before setting his sandwich down and opening the passenger door. "Keep the engine running, I'll be back in a hot second."

O'Brien just gave a thumbs up and kept munching on his club turkey sandwich, savoring the bite and closing his eyes in quiet ecstasy. It was rare that they had time for a break like this. With SHIELD in its current state, it was lucky they even had enough time to eat a granola bar.

Shaw, meanwhile, wasn't having such a great time. Finding the kid? Easy, he was still in the living room. Getting him to leave the house? Another thing entirely. For whatever reason, Shaw was met with resistance with each explanation he gave the kid for each question he asked.

" — I don't understand, why do they want me at this Triskelion..." The boy dragged his feet as Shaw pulled him by the arm.

"I already told you, its for an interview —" Shaw growled, hating having to repeat himself. Why didn't people just accept the usual answers anymore? For a kid who was supposed to be grief-stricken over his dead mother, he was sure putting up quite a hassle.

"But I already gave my statement at home, why does SHIELD need another one? It's not going to change —"

"It's not about your statement —"

"So then I'm under arrest? Because you haven't told me the charges —"

"There are no charges!"

"Then what's going on? I want my lawyer —"

"No lawyer!" Getting fed up, Shaw turned on his heel and let his other hand fly. The boy cried out when the hand met his cheek, head snapping to the side. Unconcerned, Shaw kept dragging him along, snapping, "Just shut up and do as you're told."

The kid was persistent but not very strong, and couldn't do much more than struggle lightly against
behind pulled towards his inevitable fate in the truck. Shaw thanked God that the kid had chosen ballet and not football. He relented, if reluctantly, only giving mild resistant as they closed the rest of the distance.

The engine was still running. But O'Brien wasn't inside anymore.

Shaw didn't realize this until he opened the sliding door, and found the driver's seat empty. The driver's door was slightly ajar. Frowning, he said loudly, "O'Brien?"

No response. Shaw couldn't fathom why O'Brien would've left the vehicle, but he wasn't responding to the earpiece either. Muttering under his breath and praying O'Brien hadn't taken another one of his "smoke breaks", he released the boy, shoving him against the vehicle. Sticking a finger in the boy's face, Shaw growled, "Don't. Move."

The boy just wrinkled his nose in unveiled contempt, crossing his arms defiantly. But he didn't shift from his spot, clearly straightened out by the cuffing. Shaw sniffed. Good enough.

Shaw set out to find O'Brien. It didn't take him long.

He began his search by checking around the front of the vehicle. He spotted a pair of boots sticking out from the other side, half on the sidewalk. Thick, black, standard issue. O'Brien frowned, "...O'Brien?"

He came around the front end to the driver's side.

There, he found O'Brien lying unconscious on his side, half a sandwich still in his hand, the rest scattered on the asphalt. "Oh shit!"

Shaw rushed over to check O'Brien's pulse, already sending out an alert on the commlink, reaching for his piece at the same time. "STRIKE to base, we have an agent down, repeat, O'Brien is — ack!"

His report was cut off by a choking cry. Shaw stumbled forward on his hands and knees as something suddenly wrapped around his throat. Some light, fluffy fabric, suddenly tightening around his neck with terrifying speed. Shaw choked, reaching up with one hand to pull at the fabric while the other still struggled to pull out his weapon. If he could just twist it behind him, he could shoot —

But he never got that far. A foot came up and kicked the Sig Sauer from his grip before he could maneuver it upside down. Then the noose around his neck tightened with a sharp snap, and Shaw's vision started to narrow. He tried to cry out, but it was useless. There was no one nearby to hear him — curse O'Brien for parking so far away.

It was startlingly easy how quick it took to strangle an adult man. Shaw knew, of course. He'd done it more times than he could count. This was the first time, however, where he'd been on the receiving end. He would die here, completely unheard and unnoticed. Unbelievable.

A sharp blow to the head knocked out Shaw before he could fully suffocate to death. He dropped to the ground, unconscious next to his partner.

I stood over them, a little out of breath as I unwound the scarf in my hands.

Well, that wasn't so hard.

Killing them wouldn't have taken much more effort, but I didn't want to incur that kind of wrath so
soon if I could avoid it. Rumlow was pissed as it was that I stabbed one of his guys, and I was pretty sure Klein was going to live. These two would need good hospitalization, but they'd be fine. They just wouldn't be coming back in the fight.

"О Боже…" Came a voice behind me. I spun around, coming face to face with Dmitri, who stood at the front end of the car, staring down at the bodies. With his pale face, it made the smarting mark across his cheek all the more stark red.

"Mia?" His eyes traveled up to meet mine in slow realization. The scarf in my hands, the weapons at my hip. The lesions on my face, the blood on my shirt. "...W-what have you done?"

I swallowed hard. Now came the hard part. "Dmitri, I know what it looks like —"

"Were they going to hurt me?" Dmitri asked, pointing towards the bodies at my feet. His words were sharp, focused, and his gaze didn't waver from mine.

I didn't blink. "Probably, yes."

"And you stopped them."

"Yes."

"You, normal girl from New York, took out two full-grown men, experienced government agents, by yourself?"

"Yes," I said again, then ceded with an embarrassed shrug, "Well, not exactly normal...but I had to stop them. We can't trust SHIELD. They think you know more than you're saying, more than you should, and that makes you a threat to them."

Eyes widening, Dmitri didn't say anything. Maybe too stunned. I didn't blame him if that was the case. I glanced away, then back again. Dmitri's face was an open book. The confusion, the fear. How could I ever explain any of this to him? "I guess this is the part where I ask if you trust me."

I held out my hand.

Dmitri stared at me for a long moment. Then to my hand, the knuckles bruised and bloodied. His green eyes, wide and vulnerable and just a little too fragile.

He could say no. I wouldn't blame him if that was the case. I glanced away, then back again. Dmitri's face was an open book. The confusion, the fear. How could I ever explain any of this to him? "I guess this is the part where I ask if you trust me."

I was still surprised when he took my hand. His skin was soft against mine, but his fingers tightened, strong, around the bruises. I looked up, and found Dmitri's gaze still set on mine, even and sure.

" Completely." he said.
"How many of them are there?"

"I don't know."

"What is it do they think I know?"

"I don't know."

"And who is 'they'? I thought SHIELD were the good guys."

"I don't know."

"How long will it take for them to notice what happened? Is there any place safe we can go? How do we know they're not following us?"

"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know!" I finally snapped, throwing up my hands. Trying to give Dmitri the lowdown on our situation only led to a stream of more and more questions I didn't have the answer to. Fear prowled at the edges of my mind, waiting for a chance to strive.

We were walking fast, trying to get out of the neighborhood — back to the subway, so we could get lost in the crowd. Just getting there, though, seemed to be the greater task.

We had left the unconscious agents behind, unnoticed, but Dmitri was only growing more agitated by the second. It had begun soon after I told him SHIELD, or any government agency, couldn't be trusted — I had to play it safe. If SHIELD had been compromised, then nowhere was safe.

"Then what are we going to do?" Dmitri demanded, panic rising in his voice.

Too loud. I quickly drew him aside so we were in an alleyway, out of sight. "Keep your voice down! I've got a plan, okay? Our first priority is to get you out of here safely. Is there anyone you can contact, anyone you trust that can get you out of the country?"

"Y-yes," Dmitri stammered, swallowing as he regained a little composure. "My father. He was here just last week on business — that's when I arrived, but he'd be back in Russia now…"

"Does he know what happened?"

"I-I don't know, SHIELD wouldn't let me call anyone."
Well, that wasn't comforting. If I wasn't convinced SHIELD was trying to cover up Helen's death, I was now. "And your father's a banker, right?" At Dmitri's silent nod, I continued, "Is there a secure number you can call him?"

Dmitri pulled a phone out of his pocket. "Yes, on here — hey!"

He jumped, startled, when I snatched the phone from his hands and chucked it out of the alley — it landed in the flatbed of a passing truck, disappearing down the street and out of sight.

Dmitri threw me a bewildered look. "What was that for?!"

"No cell phones!" I spoke in an undertone, urgent. He had to understand that no mistakes could be made here. "SHIELD, or anyone else, can use them to track us. Do you have any other digital devices?"

"Besides the one with all my photos, music, and contacts on it? No, I have none."

The sarcasm in his tone was obvious, resentful and hurt. Realizing I was getting too brusque in my manner, I sighed and took a step back. Running a hand through tangled hair, I capitulated, 'I'm sorry, Dmitri, its not your fault. But we can't take any risks. Its our lives or theirs now. Are your photos more important than that?"

Dmitri glared at me for a moment, before wilting, hanging his head. "No."

"Okay," I paused, letting the moment hang while I collected my thoughts. "I need to know I can rely on you, Dmitri. Every move we make, every decision will be under the presumption that SHIELD is trying to catch us. We're on our own here, the only reason we're getting out of here alive is only with each other. Do you understand?"

Dmitri looked like a kicked puppy and my chest ached to see him like that. To think it was me who did it. He didn't answer me right away.

Finally, at length, he whispered, "Did SHIELD kill my mother?"

I bit my lip, but I didn't blink when Dmitri lifted his head to meet my gaze. "I don't know. But my gut tells me they know more than what they're saying."

Dmitri's expression changed — green eyes darkening under his brow, the once-soft edges of his face hardened, almost imperceptible, but for a second, I found myself looking at a completely different person. His next words were resolute.

"Then yes, you can rely on me."

✮✮✮

We made it to the metro unmolested. Just outside the ticket gate were a line of phone booths along the wall — a godsend, as I couldn't find any on the streets above.

Giving Dmitri a handful of quarters from my stolen plunder, I stood next to him in the booth while he made the call. Leaning against one side, I kept an eye out while Dmitri faced inward, keeping his voice low even in the loud acoustics of the station.
Sunlight filtered down the steps leading topside, and there was a constant stream of people going up and down, passing through the gate in a rhythm of clicks and clanks — it was rush hour, the work day over and everyone desperate to beat the traffic they were contributing to. It made the metal and cement walls ring with voices and footsteps but it was perfect cover for two fugitive teenagers.

I spotted a few security cameras but there was no chance of avoiding them — as long as we didn't do anything strange, we wouldn't draw security's attention.

There was too much noise for me to catch the voice on the other end of Dmitri's call. It went on for an extended amount of time. Someone had picked up right away, but Dmitri exchanged short words in Russian — from my guess, a secretary of some sort, who then put him on hold. One minute, then two.

At the five-minute mark, I checked the clock on the opposite wall, even though I already knew how much time had passed. Not that I suspected we were being watched, but staying in one unsecured location for too long was making me antsy. What if STRIKE was still searching the metro system?

In my impatience, I gave Dmitri a little nudge, following it with a questioning look. He just gave me a helpless shrug. "They say he is in a meeting."

So we waited.

Finally, at fourteen minutes and thirty-two seconds, Dmitri visibly relaxed, slumping against the counter. He spoke in a rush of quiet Russian, his head bowed.

"Something happened, otec," his voice was too low to maintain strength, and cracked at the end of his sentence. "Something happened to Mum…"

Dmitri shook slightly as he continued to explain, and then fell silent, listening to the voice on the other end — his father. I wanted to know what he was saying, but instead reached over and took Dmitri's free hand, squeezing gently.

The message was brief; we waited almost fifteen minutes for a conversation that was mostly one-sided, and lasted no more than ninety seconds.

At the end of the call, Dmitri hung up the phone, pausing a moment to collect himself before speaking. He didn't look at me, concentrating on the phone dial. "He says he's coming. There's an abandoned hospital on the waterfront. We meet him tonight at 4 AM, on the dot."

4 AM? I blinked. "That's fast. Did he say how he's getting here?"

Dmitri shook his head. "No, but my father has his ways. He hires his own private security force, I guess a private flight wouldn't be too difficult to arrange."

I nodded quietly, pleased with this information. If Dmitri's father had his own security, and could get from Russia to DC in a little over 12 hours, then Dmitri would be in safe hands. "Alright, then. Let's go, we've got a long night ahead of us."

We made our way through the ticket gate, paying with cash so we didn't leave a paper trail. Dmitri didn't speak again, just followed my lead as we threaded our way through the crowd, checking the train routes before I found the one I was looking for. DC metro was unfamiliar, but it functioned the same way New York's subway system did, so I was on familiar territory. Although his silence was of some concern, it also gave me time to think. 4 AM would be manageable, and hopefully it'd
be over quickly, so I'd still have time to meet Steve at the rendezvous point later that morning.

"So what's your second priority?" Dmitri suddenly asked me when we were aboard, speaking in Russian. Our car was full, but relatively quiet. We were both standing, hanging onto the same pole as bodies jostled around us, the train pulling out of the station.

"Second priority?" I asked, switching to Russian as well, smooth despite my confusion.

"Yes. You said in the alley that ensuring my safety was your first priority. What's the second?"

"Oh, right," I said, feeling silly I'd lost my train of thought earlier. "My second priority is getting your mother's notebook. I stole it from your house — don't give me that look, I would've told the FBI if SHIELD hadn't just walked in. Anyways, I hid it at my, er, at my dad's apartment. I know SHIELD is looking for it, and I think it's why they're so interested in you."

Dmitri furrowed his brow. "What, they think I know what's in it?"

"Possibly," I shrugged. "I think it has something to do with why she died. Either way, I want to see what's inside. And that's why we're headed there now."

"And after we get it, what then?"

"Then? Then we find a place to lay low until your father arrives. Stay out of danger as best we can."

Our first problem arose almost immediately after we left the metro station, seven blocks from Steve's apartment. The station opened up to an avenue next to a park - on the far side, I spotted a sign for a high school. It explained the number of kids and teenagers that filled the park. It also made it easier for me to spot the adults that didn't blend in.

The first agent I saw was walking away from us down the street, but his face was turned in such a way that I spotted his ear piece. I couldn't tell if he was STRIKE or not, but at this point I wasn't going to take any chances.

Grabbing Dmitri by the wrist, I cursed under my breath and rushed forward as fast as a walk could take us without drawing attention. We'd blend in easier in the park, surrounding by kids our age. "Keep moving!"

"What is it? What's wrong?" Dmitri stumbled to keep up with me.

"Agent to our right walking towards us. Another two ahead, standing by the bench," I said, noticing more as I spoke. Glancing over my shoulder, past Dmitri, I spotted even more. "And one behind us, walking a German Shepherd."

The dog was a clever touch. But I could still make out the ear piece, the curling wire tucking into the woman's collar. All I could think of now was having to outrun a dog, feeling its sharp teeth sinking into my leg and dragging me back. I shuddered at the thought and pulled my attention ahead. "It looks like a whole team."

"Why are they here?" Dmitri hissed, coming up so we were walking side by side, shoulders bunched together. I had to pick up my pace just to match him, and it took me a lot of effort to pull him back and slow us down.

"Careful," I whispered, my throat dry. We were surrounded on all sides. "They must be watching Steve's apartment."
"Because you hid the notebook there?"

"No, I don't think they know about that." At least, I hoped not. "It's probably because Steve's place was where the Director of SHIELD got shot."

Dmitri made a face. "Why was SHIELD's director at your father's apartment?"

Oh shit. That's right, I never told him. Glancing at Dmitri, I flinched in anticipation. "...Because he's Captain America."

"What?!"

"Shh!" I flinched again, my eyes on the two agents we were slowly walking towards. They hadn't noticed us yet, so I diverted us off the walking path, going on the grass and around them. We had to maneuver around some kids lounging in the grass. Once we were safely out of earshot, I added, "Sorry, I assumed you knew."

"How the hell would I know that?" Dmitri seemed completely besides himself. "Wait, wait, so, your father is Captain America?"

"Uh." I grimaced. "No."

"But I thought you said…"

"I lied," I threw him an apologetic look. "It was easier than to explain the truth."

Dmitri was starting to look doubtful. "What else have you lied about?"

"A few things," I said, although nothing popped out at me (aside from the whole super soldier thing). I was sure I had, though, but in the heat of the moment I was too wired to recall anything. "It's a long story. I promise I'll tell you everything later, once we're safe."

He certainly deserved that much.

To our far right was a soccer field being used for practice. Middle school kids shrieking and shouting as the ball shot back and forth between nets, their bright yellow and blue pennies shining under the afternoon sunlight. The noise distracted me, pulling my attention away from my direct surroundings, and when I looked again, my heart skipped a beat. "Shit."

"What is it this time?" Dmitri asked, sounding tensed. His head was on a swivel, but I wasn't sure if he could see what I could.

"Ahead. Three agents in a group coming directly towards us." My eyes were pinned on them, swept back behind us. "Dog walker also coming in on the path. They haven't spotted us yet, but we're too close." The active soccer game prevented us from going around on the right, and the left would put us back on the walking path, and in the direct line of sight of the dog walker.

I thought fast. "When they get in close, I'll distract them, and you make a run for —"

"Mia, wait, I have a better idea," Dmitri interrupted. The grip on his arm reversed and then it was him pulling me back, against a large oak tree just starting to sprout leaves. It was enough to block us from immediate view, but it wouldn't last when they got too close. I had no idea what he was doing.

"Please don't hit me," Dmitri said, looking me in the eyes as he cupped my cheeks with his hands. I
blinked in confusion, and had opened my mouth to ask what he was doing, when he pressed his lips to mine.

Suddenly, his strange request didn't sound so strange anymore.

Taken completely off guard, I went stock-still, unable to move or even think. My train of thought nose-dived right off a cliff.

On instinct, I squeezed my eyes shut — not for the romance of the sudden situation I found myself in, but rather I was so terrified I didn't want to see it when the STRIKE agents finally caught us.

...But it never happened.

When Dmitri pulled away seconds — hours? It felt like hours — later, I blinked, stunned to see that the dog walker and the group of three agents had passed us entirely, apparently without a glance. I was still studying them when Dmitri was already moving along, taking my hand and pulling me along with him. He whispered, "Let's go."

I followed mindlessly, my head turning to keep watching the agents in quiet bewilderment; as a result, I didn't see the branch that Dmitri had ducked under, and promptly bashed my head into it.

Stumbling, I rubbed my forehead, finally returning my attention to Dmitri. "H-how did you know that would work?"

"I saw it in a movie once," Dmitri shrugged, smiling in a self-deprecating way. His face had a noticeable flush, however. "Figured it was worth a shot."

"S-smart," I said, and despite my stutter I was completely genuine. The kiss had hidden our faces, along with the help of the tree, and the whole scene played out like two love struck teenagers who didn't understand the meaning of too much PDA. "Never would've thought of that..."

If I had any amount of self-awareness, I would've felt the heat in my face, too, clearly on display. At the moment, however, I was still caught up in my thoughts. Dmitri's improved move had left me reeling; of all the things I thought could happen in my (our) harrowing fugitive adventures, a kiss wasn't one of them.

Well. C'est la vie.

Romantic teenage milestones aside, we managed to sneak through the park completely unnoticed, and the remaining five blocks or so unhindered. In the face of more possible enemies awaiting us, I smothered any and all potential emotional aftermath of the kiss in the proverbial crib. There was no time to reflect or consider how I felt about it when our lives were still in immediate danger.

"There it is," I said, when Steve's apartment building came into view. Surprisingly, aside from the new holes in the uppermost floor wall, the building looked exactly the same. Even Steve's truck was still in the last place he parked it.

Aside from the unmarked van parked across the street, of course.

It was possible that it was just a regular utility vehicle for a plumber or an electrician, but with no company signage and out-of-state plates, I doubted it. The windows were all darkly tinted so I couldn't make out what was inside, and as soon as I saw it, I pulled Dmitri under the canopy of a nearby cafe and its outdoor seating.

Planting our butts at one of the small tables, Dmitri leaned over and asked, "What do we do now?"
"We're not going to do anything," I said, still scanning the area, my eyes drawing up to the rooftops to see if SHIELD had planted any lookouts. I couldn't see any, but that didn't mean there wasn't any there. "I'm going to get the notebook while you stay here and play lookout. You see that van behind me, about a hundred meters back? It could be SHIELD. They probably have more agents stationed around here somewhere. If you see any agents, especially if they're moving in, I want you to give me a signal."

"How do I do that without them noticing, too?"

"You know how to make a bird whistle?" When he nodded, I continued, "Make three notes. Three distinct notes, so I know it's you. I left the notebook in the grill on the second-floor fire escape. It's on the opposite side that the van is facing, so they won't see me, but I won't be able to see them, either. Now I'm going to work my way around the block to get to that fire escape without being spotted, hopefully. Should take me a few minutes, another to get the book, and I should be back before you know it."

Dmitri just smirked and shook his head, sitting back in his seat. "You make it sound so easy."

"That's only if nothing goes wrong," I replied. And something will. It always does.

Once I was sure Dmitri understood the finer points of the plan, I set off, retracing our steps a little as I took the long way around back to Steve's apartment. Leaving the backpack with Dmitri, I wanted to move as light and fast as possible without the awkward weight to distract me. I walked at a brisk pace while on the sidewalk, before bursting into a quick run as soon as I was sure I was out of the van's line of sight. I spotted no other suspicious looking vehicles as I went, nor any pedestrians.

Nothing here but quiet suburban life. I glanced to the rooftops once more and saw nothing. My heart raced at the thought of being in the sights of an unseen sniper.

Of the Winter Soldier.

At this exact location just last night.

But no bullet erupted from the nether to strike me in the back, or in the head. Just as I predicted, I was standing under the fire escape in under five minutes. The smell of a nearby dumpster entered my nose, but aside from a grimace, it barely registered to me.

I had to jump up to reach the first rung on the ladder — my fingers caught, and it dropped down with a loud clang, making me flinch. If anyone was inside the building, they would've heard that. Praying no one was in Steve's apartment and happened to get curious, I scrambled up the fire escape ladder, then onto the next flight until I was at the grill.

I glanced over my shoulder, looking across the street to where Dmitri sat at the cafe tables. His head was turned towards me; a slight nod, to show that he was watching.

Now for the moment of truth.

The grill had shifted a foot to the left since I last saw it; a stroke of panic went through me, wondering who moved it and why. Had they looked inside? Was the notebook still there? Was this all for nothing?

Crouching low so any neighbors wouldn't spot me from the nearby window, I carefully slid my fingers under the lid of the grill and slowly lifted it upwards.
At the bottom, in black crumbs of charcoal, sat the bright blue leather cover of Helen Hawkin's notebook.

My heart sang with relief as I lifted it out, and tucked it into the inner pocket of my jacket.

Then, bird song rang through the air. Three notes in quick succession.

Oh shit.

A loud metallic clang followed, the fire escape shaking around me, as someone heavy dropped onto the same level as me. I spun around, coming face to face with Rumlow. And the Sig he had pointed at my chest.

"Ah-ah," He said, raising his chin and jerking the gun when I attempted for the steps. "One wrong move and it's a bullet for you. Which would be a shame, considering SHIELD still wants you in one piece. I'm willing to overlook that, though, thanks to what you did to Klein."

Frustrated, with hands reluctantly raised, I just glared at Rumlow. "He had it coming."

He smirked at me, but it was more like a sneer. I was still trying to figure where he'd come from, how he knew I was here; maybe he'd been lying in wait in Steve's apartment, waiting for a return, and had heard me on the fire escape. Maybe he had been following me this entire time and managed to flank me. At this point, I could only guess.

Gesturing with a tilt of his head, Rumlow said, "Just hand over the notebook, and maybe I'll reconsider. That's it, nice and easy…"

Relenting, I slowly pulled the notebook from my jacket. I didn't really have a lot of options. Helen's notebook was important, but I wasn't sure if it was worth a bullet just yet. Or risking Dmitri. I could still make him out, just past Rumlow's shoulder, in the far distance. Luckily, Dmitri hadn't moved — but if the tenseness of his silhouette was any indication, he sure wanted to.

Don't move. Don't do anything stupid. I thought, as if I could speak to Dmitri telepathically. Just stick to the plan.

I hadn't given up quite yet.

Rumlow had dropped his weapon, moving in slowly with one arm reached out to take it. I held the notebook close to me, arm bent, slowly extending it away from my body.

When Rumlow was within touching distance, I threw it over the fire escape.

"No!" Rumlow's eyes followed it as the notebook spiraled down, landing with a dull thud into the flatbed of Steve's truck below, almost fifty feet away. I made sure to get a good throw.

His shifted attention also allowed me to get one good punch in.

But Rumlow was no half-rate SHIELD agent escort — as soon as I tried to disarm him, striking his wrist, Rumlow retaliated immediately. He didn't even look before swinging out with his free hand, striking me hard and fast across the face. It caught me off guard, but I hadn't let go of his firearm, managing to release the magazine. It dropped, slipping through the gap between the bars of the metal floor and dropping out of reach below.

By that point, Rumlow had reset his attention on me. With a grunt, he slammed his shoulder into mine.
It unbalanced me. If there had been more ground behind me, I could've taken it easily.

But my back hit the railing too soon. And I went toppling over.

*Wham!*

The plastic lid of the dumpster cushioned my fall, bringing up the pungent smell of week-old trash with it. I almost gagged, but quickly forgot about my nausea when bullets hit the brick wall behind me. Rumlow, shouting; unable to grab the fallen magazine, he fired off the one bullet left in his chamber before scrambling for another weapon.

Luckily, that seemed to be the only firearm he had on his person.

Unluckily, Rumlow wasn't alone.

Rolling off the dumpster, back aching, I hit the pavement running. Almost immediately, more gunshots rang out, bullets sparking against the side of the dumpster. Someone, across the street, was firing at me with a weapon much higher-powered than a regular old handgun.

More shots nipped at my heels as I tore like hell for Steve's truck, the only cover within my radius. Ahead of me, civilians were scattering, the cafe abandoned as people ran every which way, terrified by the gunshots.

Dmitri's seat was empty. The backpack I'd left with him, also missing.

I dove for cover like a runner sliding into home plate. Bullets rebounded off the metal and chrome siding, and the truck sagged to one side when a wheel popped.

A grunt behind me. I looked around; Rumlow had just dropped to street level, pulling two batons out from his back — my eyes widened when they lit up with some kind of electricity.

"I'm sorry, Amelia," Rumlow called as he approached, strolling along like this was just a walk in the park. "But you had it coming."

Not appreciating having my words thrown back in my face, I scrambled backwards on my hands and knees, looking around for a place to hide. The firing had stopped so Rumlow could move in without taking friendly fire, but that didn't mean I was safe. If I moved out from behind this truck, even to reach the notebook, I was a walking target.

There was nowhere for me to go.

Rumlow was closing in, speaking at a normal register now that he was within earshot. "Just want you to know, I'm not going to enjoy this."

The smirk on his face said the opposite.

With no other options, I was getting desperate. That's when I vaguely remembered Peter telling me something on the phone. Something about the truck — but what? He'd been cut off before he could tell me.

There wasn't really any place to hide under it. The truck, with its popped tire, barely had enough room for me to hide under — but it was better than nothing.

It wasn't until I had dropped down onto the tarmac, bending my head down, when I noticed something sticking to the underside of the chassis. Circular, round, glimmering silver in the
evening light.

For a single moment, I could only stare. *My shield.*

*Peter, you mad genius.*

Rumlow was right on top of me now. The batons in his hands crackled with energy — deadly? I didn't want to find out.

Reaching under with one arm, my fingers landed around the outer edge of the shield. Tugging sharply, the shield came away with a quick *snap* — webbing broke, and the familiar weight of an old friend fell into my arms.

Gritting his teeth, Rumlow brought both batons down on me.

At the same time, I yanked out the shield from beneath the truck.

Electricity cracked against metal, rebounding off harmlessly. Rumlow had hit so hard in fact that the shield's property had him recoiling, nearly knocking him backwards off his feet. It was enough to change the game.

I rose quickly, from my side, to a crouch, to a hunched stance. Bracing upwards with my shield, I slammed into Rumlow as hard as I could. Rumlow didn't have enough time to recover before he took the full brunt of my attack.

He went flying back with a terrified shout — slamming into the brick wall behind him, before dropping to the ground.

Rumlow groaned. Not out for the count, but temporarily stunned. Bullets were already starting to fly again — no time to finish off Rumlow, I raised my shield up over my face as I turned around, reaching into the flatbed to grab the notebook before making a run for it.

With all the civilians gone, it made it pretty easy to spot the SHIELD agents that were left. As I came around the corner, I spotted the white van from before, now with its doors open, agents jumping out. That wasn't where the shots were coming from, however.

Ducking behind the low stone wall that made up the front steps of Steve's apartment building, I paused for a quick moment to catch my breath. Aside from Rumlow, there had to be at least six other agents. At least one across the street firing at me, and another five that had just left the van.

Fun.

Simply put, I was cornered. With SHIELD closing in, and me trapped in this little stairwell, my only route now was to head *inside* — not exactly my favorite idea, but the only one I had.

It was better than waiting to be overrun by a STRIKE team. Deciding it was better to move than to wait around, I scrambled up the last of the steps and used my shield to slam through the locked entrance.

Wood shattered upon impact, splinters flying. Another chorus of bullets, but now I was safely out of sight in the dark hallway. I heard screaming above me, and a wave of guilt followed. Was I putting these people in danger? Had someone gotten hurt? My reckless survival methods were selfish, meant for myself and myself only. I didn't know how to protect any random person that happened to get caught in the crossfire. If someone got injured, or even killed, because of my actions, then it would be on my head. Forever.
I had no time to reconsider my actions, a fact that only made me feel worse. I had to keep moving. There was a window on the other end of the hallway. Knowing I was making a very easy target for myself running in a straight line, I dove for it.

Glass shattered as I smashed my way through once again. Hitting the floor of the alleyway in a roll, my body slammed into the wall of the building opposite before I jumped back to my feet and took off in a dead sprint — heading not to the street where the van was parked, but to the other end of the block.

I had broken line of sight with the STRIKE team. I only hoped I'd given myself enough distance for this to work.

Emerging in a single file line, five STRIKE team members stepped out onto the block perpendicular to Steve's apartment. From the corner, on the other end of the street came Rumlow, limping slightly but looking more pissed off than anything else. They scanned the area — aside from a few cars and a large construction vehicle carrying gravel, waiting in front of a red light, oblivious to the danger around them, there was no one in sight.

They'd lost their target.

As the light turned green, Rumlow's shouting could be heard over the revving of engines. I lied on my back, listening as his voice slowly faded into the distance, droned out by the truck's heavy engine, rumbling beneath me as it rolled over several potholes.

Gravel rubbed against my back, digging into my arms and shoulders. The smell was thick and oily, unpleasant even without the diesel fumes from the truck's exhaust. All I could see was the great rectangle of orange-pink sky above, outline by the thick, tall metal walls of the gravel container. Vibranium shield in one hand, notebook in the other.

The choking smells, the wild discomfort, the darkening twilit sky, all made me smile with a single thought.

*Amelia Fletcher, escape artist.*
Chapter Nineteen

Dmitri was waiting for me at the park — sitting on the bleachers, watching the game with the rest of the audience. "Did you get it?"

It had been our agreed-upon plan; if anything went south, Dmitri was to run and meet up with me again somewhere else. Public, crowded and familiar. A little too close to Steve's apartment, but I wanted to make sure I could find him again as quickly as possible.

Pulling back my jacket to show the notebook hiding inside, I grinned. "Got it. Let's go."

I also probably wouldn't have picked someplace so public if I knew I was going to find my shield. Peter had the foresight to include the shoulder harness, so I could carry it on my back — convenient, but not exactly subtle on the streets of DC. At least I had both hands free for whatever bullshit came our way next.

Still, I had to pretend I didn't notice the few stares it gathered.

Nothing felt safe — in the ballpark of safe — until we finally found a motel, about a mile and a half from the abandoned hospital we were supposed to reach later that night. Close enough we could get there fast on foot, but no so close that we might draw SHIELD's interest to the location. Keeping with the same rule of a paperless trail, we paid for the room with cash. The clerk at the desk gave a suspicious glance between the two of us, but he said nothing before accepting the bills I'd taken from the stolen wallet. One man's lost property is another man's… property.

Obviously, no room service, so our dinner that evening involved raiding the vending machine outside the lobby. It had all four basic food groups: soda, chips, crackers, and candy. The sun had set by that point, the sky still a pale shade of purple fading into black. I couldn't decide if the shadows were comforting or foreboding.

Upon first entering our room, I made sure it was safe before we got too comfortable — locking the windows; closing all the curtains and blinds; putting up the 'Do Not Disturb' sign; using both door locks and wedging a chair under the handle to serve as a barricade. Last of all, adding noise to cover our voices so we could speak without being effectively eavesdropped.

There was an old, blocky CRT television in the room, which I turned on as we ate. I would come to regret this, as it was all news channels at this hour, and every single one of them was talking about the manhunt for Captain America.

"...earlier today, Captain Rogers was seen taken down a quinjet single-handed, while fleeing the Triskelion, international headquarters for SHIELD..."

"...Captain America has been ranked America's Most Wanted, topping the names of terrorists and
enemies of the nation that have been on the FBI's list for generations…"

"…Flights in and around Washington, D.C. have all been closed down indefinitely until this man is caught…

"…Once the greatest American soldier who ever lived, Captain Steven Rogers is now a criminal, a terrorist, bent on a plot that no one, not even SHIELD, is fully aware of…"

"…So far, the White House has remained silent on this entire matter, although Press Secretary Wright has promised a press meeting tomorrow morning…

"…rumors have it that the President, his family and staff have been under lockdown, for fear that Captain America may attack the First Family…"

After that, I couldn't take it anymore, and shut it off. Not even the radio offered relief; between the Top 100 playlist, the radio hosts only spewed out the same garbage as everyone else. If I needed an indicator that SHIELD had the media wrapped around its little finger, now I had one. But they had to stay on, otherwise our voices would be too easy to be picked up by any listening devices.

Least to say, it was depressing.

"It's strange," Dmitri said when I gave up on the radio. He chewed on a granola bar, brow furrowed in thought. "All this talk about Captain America, and nothing about you."

"I'm also not a super hero." I cut him a wry smirk before turning back to my meal. The room had two queen beds, of which we each commandeered one and lay about our edible spoils. I picked glumly at the bag of chips I'd opened early, popping one into my mouth. "Or an Avenger. No one would even know who I was."

"True," Dmitri nodded, then made a face. "Or maybe SHIELD doesn't want the public to know about you."

This time I paused, frowning at him. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe they don't want anyone to know about you," Dmitri explained with a shrug. "So no one will notice if you go missing. Only your family knows you're here, yes?"

"I — yeah," A cold chill went down my back when I realized Dmitri had a point. And that the tactic wasn't entirely unfamiliar to me. I clenched my fists together, then released them. "My cousin Peter knows. My aunt would, too, if she's watching the news, and I know she is. Some of my friends, maybe. But no one important."

"I understand now why you don't trust them." Dmitri said.

"Yeah…" I muttered, but didn't say anything more. There was a cold dark pit in my stomach, wondering if Dmitri was right. Hiding my presence so no one would raise concerns about me sounded very much like a SHIELD tactic. It was also not the first time it had happened to me.

The first time? When the Crucible faked my death.

No one goes looking for the girl when they think she's dead, after all.

In an attempt to distract myself from that disturbing thought, I increased the TV's volume. Unfortunately, the news segment hadn't ended yet.
"…The Avengers have also not given any formal statement about the status of their leader. None of the other members could be reached. Tony Stark, often seen as the public face of the Avengers, has not been seen in several weeks. Stark Industries liaison, and close friend of Tony Stark, Colonel James Rhodes reports that Mr. Stark is currently dealing with a personal family matter and cannot offer any aid at this time..."

Personal family matter? I blinked, surprised. "I didn't know Tony Stark had family."

"I suppose that's why the Avengers aren't getting involved," Dmitri said, looking down in disappointment. "No one is coming to save us."

"No," I said, but I had already known this even before I thought of the Avengers.

They were too tied up with SHIELD to begin with, ever since the Incident. The Avengers had been a SHIELD initiative, and now everything, everyone was going haywire. To be honest, I wasn't even sure if the Avengers could be trusted at this point. Black Widow and Hawkeye had been SHIELD agents; who knew where their loyalties truly lied.

Thor could probably wipe the floor with SHIELD, but that meant nothing if he was currently off-planet. And Hulk? Bruce Banner had already been chased across the world by different government agencies. If he wasn't already captured, I wasn't sure how the Hulk could serve anything as a distraction with his unfocused destructive tendencies. If I were him, I'd want to keep my head down. Maybe I was putting a lot of doubt onto a man who'd once pulled me out of a panic attack, but still. I wasn't counting on Bruce Banner or the Hulk, either.

The look I gave Dmitri was scared, but certain. "This changes nothing. We already knew we were on our own when this started. We have a plan, a way out. If we stick to it, we'll be fine."

Dmitri stared at me for a moment, eyes verging on the fragile, before he closed them and nodded his head. He didn't speak again.

While I ate, I finally turned to the blue notebook; it had been lying on the bed next to me for a good thirty minutes before I finally picked it up. Partly because I was just so hungry I knew I couldn't devote brainpower to anything else. And, perhaps, because I might've been a little afraid of what I'd find inside.

Pulling off the elastic band, I gave a cursory flip through all the pages; each entry was labeled with a date. Based on the first page, Diane had started this notebook back in the summer of 2012, a few months after the Incident.

I started to read as the TV continued to play in the background.

"On to other news… famed Italian art historian and restoration expert Fausta Bonalumi has been recently hospitalized after she collapsed unexpectedly in her house in Rome…as of yet, no word from Bonalumi's estate on her condition, or what will happen to her young son. Fausta Bonalumi is renowned for scientific advances in art restoration, and is considered the world's foremost expert on Leonardo Da Vinci…"

At last, the news channel moved on to other segments. A headache was forming behind my eyes; not from the TV's sound, but from the words swimming on the page I was reading. Script was always the worst, and of course not only did Diane write in a short-hand I had to decipher, but her inked handwriting was nearly incomprehensible. Aside from a few clippings and small pictures, I had no idea what was written in this book.
The truth to everything in the palm of my hands, yet locked behind the invisible wall of dyslexia.

"Mia, can I ask you something?"

Dmitri's voice broke me out of my thoughts. A welcome reprieve, to be honest, and I met his gaze with my hand on my chin. "Yeah?"

His face was turned towards me, although his eyes were still watching the television. Almost wary, in a way. "I know you said Captain Rogers wasn't your dad, but you're not… normal, are you?"

Dmitri winced at his own word choice, and backpedaled, "I mean, you're different, in the same way he is. I saw the way you fight and its… it's not human."

Ah, the Talk. I was wondering when he was going to ask. Licking my lips, I set the book down, taking my time as I chose my next words carefully. "Yes. I'm like him."

His eyes finally flicked to mine, sharp, guarded. "A super soldier?"

I nodded.

"And that shield," he said, glancing at the hunk of metal I placed against the headboard next to me. "It's like his, too?"

Again, I nodded.

"And its yours?" When I confirmed, Dmitri continued to stare at it. "I've seen it before. On the news. Rebel Columbia had it."

And there we go. At this point, I wasn't afraid of the truth. Merely waiting for Dmitri to come to his own conclusion, and glad it was the correct one, I just gave a rueful smile and raised my eyebrows. "She sure did."

Dmitri's apprehension gave way to annoyance, and he cut me a side-glance. "Okay, now you're making fun of me. It was you the whole time, wasn't it?"

"Yep."

"You're very casual about this," Dmitri frowned at me. "But its your secret identity, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't know," I could only shake my head at this point. "I knew by the time I needed to find you again that I wasn't going to be able to hide it for much longer. And to be honest, we have bigger things to worry about than me being a super soldier. I was worried that you'd be scared of me, but I hoped you wouldn't be. I'm sorry I lied to you."

"You don't have to apologize, I understand," Dmitri paused to think about it. "And I'm not afraid. I don't think so, at least. I always knew you were a little… strange, but this wasn't what I was expecting. Were you born this way? I remember you telling me you grew up sick."

"In a way, I was." I said, wondering how much I wanted to tell Dmitri without telling him everything. There was a line I wasn't willing to cross just yet, and getting into Crucible business was still off the table. Even with the threat of SHIELD on the horizon I wasn't about to drop the entire A-bomb on Dmitri. "But a key part of the super soldier serum is radiation exposure. I didn't have that. And suddenly, I did and boom — instant super soldier."

Dmitri's eyes narrowed, skeptical. "It couldn't have been that easy. It doesn't explain how you can fight the way you do."
"No, it doesn't." I said in an airy tone, and did not continue.

"...Ah." Dmitri said, lifting his chin slightly before dropping it into a nod of understanding, although his brow was drawn into confusion. He wouldn't know the circumstances, but I hoped he understood I didn't want to talk about it.

It brought an awkward lull to the conversation, of one I was highly aware of, and knew that I had caused. The way I said it, I knew it wasn't suave or deflecting. It was the truth, at least a part of it. But it also left no easy segue into another topic, and to be honest I didn't know what else there was to say. I wasn't particularly motivated to explain myself.

Yet it was Dmitri who broke the silence first. "I guess I should apologize, too."

"For what?" I couldn't think of anything he'd done wrong.

Dmitri's face had turned a curious shade of pink, and he ducked his head, laughing in embarrassment. "For, uh, for that kiss. I-I should've asked first."

"Oh," I said, and now my face felt hot, too. I tried to play it off, though, shrugging one shoulder. "It's alright, I'm not mad. It worked, right? That's all all that matters. And... and I kind of liked it. So... no harm done."

"You did?" Dmitri seemed surprised by this, then smiled. "I'm glad! I-I liked it, too. Well, if I'm being honest, it wasn't the first time I thought about it. Kissing you, I mean."

"O-oh?" My brain might've stopped functioning at this point. Hours ago I was fighting for my life. Now I was giggling like a schoolgirl.

Then I remembered I still was a schoolgirl. Kissing was supposed to be the fun part of my life, not the fighting part. In fact, that fighting part wasn't supposed to be happening at all.

Yet here I was.

My heart was doing funny things, making it hard to think — so I said, "...Well, maybe you'll get another chance, who knows?"

_Dumbass._

Suddenly I wanted to take that back. It felt like a point of no return, saying things I felt but had never voiced before. A mistake, even.

"Maybe I will." Dmitri smiled, and I felt a little less regretful about it. I liked the way he smiled at me.

But feelings made me uncomfortable and that wasn't going to change now. I was too shy to say anything. Instead, I returned to the notebook, and the headache returned in full force within a few seconds. I was still stuck on the first page, and had made very little headway even before the conversation started.

"Are you okay?" Dmitri's voice broke me out of my thoughts. He was giving me a concerned look from his spot. Perhaps he could see the frustration on my face. I was afraid my last sentence had been too leading and thought he might lean more on it, but it didn't seem so.

Already feeling embarrassed, I was thankful the topic had changed. More than I liked to admit, really. I dropped the book onto the mattress and sighed, "Yeah. Cursive's a bitch."
I never asked to be read to because it made me feel like an infant for needing it. The last person who actually read to me was my mother. Dmitri, who was already well-aware of why I couldn't manage this, just gave a small smile before coming over and sitting next to me on the bed.

"You're lucky my mother leaves notes and texts to me in the same shorthand." As he picked up the notebook and opened it to the first page, Dmitri flashed me a mischievous look. "My chance to tutor you this time?"

"Very funny," I rolled my eyes, holding up a hand and shaking my head. "Don't bother, this one's already a lost cause."

"So you're a super soldier, but you can't read? It doesn't help?"

"Not everything can be fixed."

"Alright, fair enough." And with that, Dmitri started to read aloud.

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June 20th, 2012.

All anyone is interested in is the Incident in Manhattan. SHIELD, superheroes, aliens. All a wonderful distraction to what's happening behind the scenes.

Recently got a message from someone claiming to know the current activities of the KGB. Originally, I thought it was just wild claims, the stuff of conspiracy. The KGB has not been active since 1991, when the Soviet Union fell to pieces.

Maybe they knew I would be doubtful, so they included this information:


The name is vaguely familiar, but it isn't until I do some research when I understand. Plamondon was a French diplomat residing in Manhattan during the mid-1990's (picture included). He leaving the UN late one day in July 1996. His convoy explodes, some type of car bomb. Plamondon is killed, as well a number of security and civilians. But Plamondon isn't killed by the explosion. It takes two weeks for CSU to find a bullet in the wreckage; the fire had destroyed a lot of evidence, including most of the diplomat's body, but not the bullet that had entered his head.

Everyone knew it was an attack, but the US and French governments could never figure out who. Although they eventually captured the bombmakers, apparently disgruntled French immigrants, authorities never caught the sniper. Plamondon was an advocate for government transparency and against interventionism. He was not fond of US actions in the Gulf War and Somali Civil War, and feared they would have further repercussions. He was, perhaps, more correct than any of us could know at the time.

Now this source claims that Plamondon was a target of the KGB. Even then, they would not have been in function. Could this person be confused? Are they conflating the current Russian government for a relic of the past? Does it make a difference?

Either way, it is a serious accusation, and I must admit, I am intrigued. Even if the
KGB wasn't truly behind this, the possibility that Russia carried out a hit against a foreign diplomat, on US soil, could have huge political and social ramifications.

This requires further investigation.

_July 2nd, 2012._

Getting this source to talk is like pulling teeth. Despite the fact that _he_ approached _me_, he suddenly seems skittish, unwilling to give me more than pieces of information. More deaths, more attacks. So far, I have accrued a list of twelve different events, including Plamondon's assassination, all of which this source claimed as been the act of one singular organization.

He also says it is not the Russians, when I questioned him. How can this be so, when it's the KGB?

It is and it isn't, he says. It's something else. It's something more.

He warns me not to keep this information anywhere digital, anywhere that can be accessed remotely. No computers, no phones, not even a tape recorder. He's utterly paranoid; he says they have eyes and ears everywhere. I wonder if this organization is not Russian, but perhaps American. He rejects that notion as well, but refuses to give me an actual name.

I wonder if he really knows. Perhaps he doesn't. Perhaps he's too afraid.

I strongly suspect the latter.

Just to humor him, I follow his advice. All information regarding this investigation remains in this notebook. He asks if I will write an exposition. I said I might. He says I must. But to keep his name out of it.

Not that I have a name to begin with.

I know he is a man, however. That is clearly indicated in the way I have been addressing him. We have been exchanging messages via dead drop location in Central Park, a fake rock in a stone wall by the duck pond. This last exchange, I remained behind, hid and watched for nearly a day until a man in a bulky jacket and a wide, low hat approached. His clothing was too warm for the weather, but I could not make an accurate guess to his age or build. The most I could gather was that he was of average height, Caucasian, and had a slight limp.

And that he was so good I didn't realize it was him until after he'd already left. He switched out the letters so smoothly from that rock that I hadn't even spotted it, and I had my eyes on that spot the entire goddamn time.

This man is a professional. I now have a better understanding of the person I am dealing with.

For now, I will call him Deep Throat. Fitting name, considering the work I am dealing
July 16th, 2012.

Deep Throat is slowly beginning to trust me, I think. His messages include more information about himself now. He is ex-KGB. He will not be in Manhattan for much longer. He hasn't told me where he will be going next, but I think he doesn't know either.

More clues. Now he is going further back into the past, into events the KGB (or whoever they are) could certainly have an involvement in. The assassination of various political figures during the Vietnam War, including South Viet leaders. JFK, Bobby Kennedy, Howard and Maria Stark. Even Natalie Wood was a target. Why a Hollywood actress? Why the Stark empire? What were they working on? Who is killing all these people?

As I look into these deaths, I am starting to suspect if it is not a series of different killers, but of one. One killer. One assassin. Seven decades' worth of death and murder.

This is entirely of my own discovery; Deep Throat did not clue me into this. I do not know if he already knows this, or expects me to figure it out from his information. Either way, I will inform him of my research at the next drop.

I have begun inspecting travel logs, airport images, old photographs that I've received from a contact in the CIA. I have not told them what this is about, but they understand discretion and they have been of invaluable aid in the past (images I keep in the pocket of this notebook). A series of images of a single man, across the world, around the time of each event Deep Throat has given me.

The camera angles never reveal this stranger's face; perhaps he knows they are there, and knows to hide himself. If he is who I suspect him to be, the assassin behind all of this, then perhaps he is skilled enough to pull this off.

Although I can never capture a face, I can gather from this collection of images that this man is at least six feet tall, over two hundred pounds, Caucasian with dark hair. The length of his hair changes. The earliest dates, it seems the shortest, and aside from disguises in hats or hoods, it seems to get longer over time. Difficult to say, but the color remains the same, and helps develop the theory that it is the same man.

I know it won't convince everyone. Maybe not anyone. For all I know, these are a series of completely random images that happen to contain shots of different men who share a few similarities. Maybe I'm too invested. Maybe I'm just going crazy.

Even if this turns out to be a dead end, I am still convinced that Deep Throat is correct, that there is a connection between all these deaths. Many of them have been political gamechangers, they have altered history in a way that cannot have been predicted, and from what I can see, have been against the interests of America and her allies. Whoever is behind this has a reach that is on par with first world countries. Deep
Throat, again, says it is not one place to blame on this.

That would imply that this is not a country acting, but a company or an organization. Something built on money, or power, or even an ideology. I can't figure out what is the motivation behind all of these. The political ramifications are obvious, but that cannot be the only desired goal, can it?

As the old saying goes: Follow the money.

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**August 1st, 2012.**

I have asked for a face-to-face meeting again. We have changed our method of communication at his request; for now, I will not disclose what it is, because he is so paranoid. Once more, he denies me, but Deep Throat has given me a sliver of very important information. He is in London, and he will be meeting with his handlers very soon.

I didn't even know he had handlers. It implies he is still active, although DT told me he was retired. I'm not sure what he is up to. What is the point of this meeting? Is it to protect his identity? His cover in London? I tell him it is a risk. He says it is a necessity. Whoever it is he works for, then or now, has demanded an interaction and he cannot refuse them.

I wish I had that kind of power.

I am heading to London now. I know it will alarm him but I cannot let this distance come between me and this story. I am on the verge of a great discovery; I can feel it. I cannot let it slip away now.

I have recently spoken with Senator Pierce regarding the World Security Council, of which he is a party of. Aside from SHIELD's debut and the resounding acceptance of the Avengers, there had been recent leaks regarding WSC's reaction to the Incident, specifically the plan that involved nuking Manhattan. We agreed to set up an interview for the Senator to speak on the WSC's behalf, and allow him to clear the air.

I am including this because the conversation reminded me of Plamondon — he and Pierce had been good friends. I did not bring it up today, but perhaps I will ask Pierce about him during out interview.

We will see how that goes.

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**August 18th, 2012.**

Niko Constantin, 56, is dead as of 10:08 PM. My only source for the Cold War story I was working on this year, is now in a London morgue, a day after he finally agreed to
meet me face-to-face.

This cannot be a coincidence.

Constantin was ex-KGB, and the only one I could find willing to talk to me.

He himself believed to have been murdered. He said so, as he lay dying on the gurney. Sixteen excruciating hours as the poison ate at him.

I know it was Niko Constantin because, as he was lying on his deathbed, he asked the doctors to contact me. I almost refused, as I didn't think I knew him, until the doctor relayed a coded message only I understood. My gut instincts about going to London had served me well, and allowed me to be there for Constantin's last remaining hours.

And what a loud few hours they were. Constantin was very vocal about who he was, and what had happened. Not only did he claim to have been poisoned, but he believed he knew why. Namely, because he was leaking me information, but he didn't say that. Just that he was ex-KGB, and they wanted him silenced.

No one believed him. The doctors told me the poison, whatever it was, had impaired his mental faculties, making him irrationally paranoid. But if Niko Constantin really is Deep Throat, then he was paranoid long before his enemies got to him.

I am glad I listened to his advice.

In his dying moments, Niko revealed to me the last he could recall. If I thought his information before was difficult to conceive, this by far has been the most unbelievable.

Apparently, according to Constantin, Russia recruited children, little girls to be trained as spies, under the guise of the Bolshoi Ballet. Spies, killers, assassins. I have no idea if this is in any way relevant to what I was already investigating, but it's worth looking into.

It is not an unfamiliar idea. I know of the Russian 'Swallows', female spies sent out to lure and compromise American agents, especially in Moscow. This seems to be in a similar vein, but he does not call them Swallows. Much of his language at this point is hard to decipher; his ramblings are in both English and Russian.

I am more concerned, however, with who killed him. Is this supposed to be a clue?

When I ask him this, however, Constantin shakes his head. He said to find his handlers, speak to them, they were there and they would know what happened, how his dinner was spoiled. That was how he was killed. A meeting with his handlers at a café; food spiked. A long, slow death followed.

And Niko Constantin, dying, had nothing left to lose.

If only I were not the only one who believed him.

He also tells me of another source, one that can continue to help me even after he passes. "I do not want my death to be pointless," He told me. "I want those bastards to regret ever looking in my direction."

The only name he gave me for this new source is a bank number. To contact this
source, I must deposit $1972.32. I don't know the meaning of the number, what it represents. It could be completely random.

Perhaps that is the point.

I am convinced this may have something to do with what I discovered. I had not received any feedback from my single assassin theory until this point, but when I brought it up again at his bedside, Constantin's face goes pale - paler than it already was. He can only whisper to me a single phrase.

*Winter Soldier.*

I try to wrestle more information from him. Some explanation, anything, but Constantin seems so terrified by the very notion that he refuses to speak again. It remains this way until he falls unconscious, and then never wakes again.

Now I am home again, scribbling everything down as I can remember it. I can barely read my own writing. I am frantic, terrified. Niko Constantin was a warning. If they killed him for what he knows, then they could kill me, too.

If Niko Constantin was irrationally paranoid, then I must be more so. Not just to protect myself, but my work. This is not the first time my life has been in danger, but this is the rare occasion where I feel my work has become more important than myself. This is something that will affect the world on a massive scale — I know it in my heart and I know it in my bones. This is different. This will change everything.

It is bad enough that I have reached out to Lev, to tell him what happened. Constantin would kill me for revealing even a shred of this information to anyone, but if it concerns my life then it concerns everyone in it. I want him to be safe. If anything were to happen to me, I want him to know why. Lev knows my work is dangerous. Our occupations is our one area of respect that remains with each other.

And I must be more careful. Dmitri stumbled across this book in my desk while looking for a pen earlier this week. I know my secretive work is a strain on him; I wish I could be more open. He is already suspecting I am working on a new project. I can't even tell him what it is about. Lying would not be productive; eventually he would know I wasn't telling the truth.

I hope he understands that I'm trying to protect him. This is my work, and its important, but I don't know what I would do if any of this somehow bled out, if anything were to happen to him.

I cannot allow that to happen. For now, I think it's best Dmitri remains with his father while I continue my research. Maybe someday, he will understand why I did what I —

Dmitri came to an abrupt stop, snapping the book closed. "I can't do it. No more."

"— wait, what?" I straightened up, alarmed as Dmitri suddenly tossed the book aside. He surged off the bed as I grabbed the book from the floor, still baffled. Not even a quarter of Diane's work had been read. "But there's so much more!"

"And I don't want to know any more of it!" Dmitri snapped, cutting his hand through the air. He paced back and forth in the small room, like a lion in a cage. The way his eyes kept glancing towards the door told me everything I needed to know. "Whatever all this leads to, I-I don't care!"
I've had enough!"

I'd been so caught up in the story that I had not noticed his increased agitation as he read. I stood up slowly, notebook to my chest. "Dmitri, your mother died for this —"

"Exactly! They killed her!" Dmitri whirled back on me, shaking hands clenched into fists. Tears glistened on his eyelashes. "My mother is dead and she knew! She knew all along what would happen! They killed this Constantin, they killed her, and we're next! You are next!"

Upon approaching him, I did a double-take. "What?"

Closing the distance between us, Dmitri took me by the arms, pleading. "Come with me, Mia. When my father arrives, we can both go. Leave here and let it play out. You said they were after me, but they're after you, too. We can both be safe."

"What? N-no, Dmitri, no," his earnestness was overwhelming, the offer seemingly out of nowhere. The amount of concern, the emotion doubly so. I didn't expect him to care so much. Still, I shook my head, turning my face away so I wouldn't feel guilted by the desperation on his face. "I can't do that."

Dmitri searched my face, uncomprehending. "Why not? Is it my father? Because you don't have to worry, he's a good man, he'll help you —"

"No, it's not that." I lifted my shoulders, holding up my arms to pull away from Dmitri and his too-tight grip. "I can't leave here. I have to keep going, I have to see where this all leads. It could have something to do with Steve, with everything that's going on."

What I didn't tell him was that Diane had known too much for me to ever abandon her story now. She knew about the Winter Soldier. Not only knew him, but had evidence it was him. Pictures in this very notebook I had in my hands, that no one else in the world had. Not even SHIELD. Maybe it could finally make him real, finally put him on official records. If I had any idea that Diane Hawkins had been this close to uncovering the Winter Soldier's identity back when I met her in December, maybe I would've acted different. Maybe I could've even helped. Maybe things could've been different.

All this time, and I had no idea. Diane had gotten closer than anyone at finding the truth.

I thought about Pierce. Gaspard Plamondon had been his friend, just like Nick Fury had. And the Winter Soldier had killed both of them.

The pain I saw in Pierce's face at the Triskelion felt real, more real than anything else I witnessed in there.

He needed to know what happened.

"There's too much at stake," I said finally, my voice dropping to a whisper. "Too many lives. I'm sorry, Dmitri. I want to go. But I can't."

Dmitri just stared at me, bereft. Then he hung his head, running a hand over his eyes. He didn't say anything for a long moment.

I could only imagine what this was like from his perspective. I had the benefit of context. All Dmitri knew was that his mother was killed for something he probably didn't understand. Names like Plamondon, Pierce, Constantin, Winter Soldier — they were just pieces in a game that got Diane killed. Along with dozens of others.
When Dmitri looked up again, his gaze wasn't on me. Instead, he looked about the room, biting his lip, bouncing one leg as if he were looking for a last-ditch resort to convince me. In the end, though, he didn't find one, and sighed. "Fine, then. I know I cannot protect you, but at least let me help you. I'll look for a first aid kit."

Despite everything, that made me smile a little, and I slowly sat back on the bed as Dmitri turned for the bathroom. "I don't need you to protect me."

"Oh, you've made that very clear today."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I'd like to thank charmanderisacutie on tumblr (TheHand on AO3) for the Niko Constantin and Natalie Wood idea!

Also a few references to All the President's Men, a film in which Robert Redford starred in xD
"How many spies do you think are watching for us right now?" Dmitri asked, rubbing iodine over the cuts across my knuckles, and the palms of my hands. There was a first aid kit next to him, next to a pair of scissors, gauze, and ace bandages.

My face had already been tended to. My face still tingled with traces of iodine and small band aids. Dmitri was a little clumsy with his application, and didn't warn me when something would hurt; not that I flinched, but Dmitri must've noticed my face and realized, and kept apologizing. I didn't hold it against him; clumsy or not, it was the effort, and the results, that I cared about.

And most of the pain I felt wasn't physical. The scrapes and bruises I'd earned over the course of the day were minor annoyances compared to the headache pounding behind my eyes. It had begun sometime during Dmitri's reading, and had proceeded to only get worse. Thinking I might've been dehydrated, I drank about five cups of water, to no effect. I imagined that the pain Dmitri saw on my face came more from my headache than anything he was doing, but I didn't want to bring it up.

"Around a dozen, at the very least," I said, and that was probably the lowest boundary. At the most? Well over a hundred, but I didn't want to scare Dmitri with that kind of statistic.

"Really? That seems kind of low," Dmitri replied, earning a surprised look from me. He just raised his eyebrows and said, "I visited the International Spy Museum earlier this week, and they said that Washington D.C. has more spies per capita than any other city on the planet."

"Well, that's fun," Now I was the one who was a little depressed now. How the tables turned. "Makes slim odds for us."

"Maybe," Dmitri shrugged, smiling slightly. "Maybe not. I'd say we're doing pretty good so far, for a pair of dumb teenagers with no experience. Well, one of us with no experience."

"Ha-ha," I shook my head, but on the whole I found that information fascinating. "Two teenagers lost in a city of spies."

"Not the only one," Dmitri added brightly. I wondered if he was trying to distract me from the pain with facts; it wasn't working, but I appreciated the effort. "There's lots, all over the world. Most capital cities tend to be a city of spies, by their nature, but DC and Moscow have been the most populated, most active because of the Cold War. Even now still, I believe. London. Berlin, both East and West. Lisbon. Istanbul. Helsinki. And New York, obviously."

"So everywhere, then." New York was obvious, but I hadn't considered it until Dmitri said it. My heart fell, thinking about when — if — this was over, and I went home, I'd still be surrounded by agents who might be watching me.
"Unless you live in the country," Dmitri suggested. "I hear Alaska is nice this time of year."

"Hmm," I made a show of really thinking about it. The largest state in the world, a small human population outnumbered by wild grizzlies and giant moose? It did sound pretty tempting…

The conversation fell away as we fell into our own thoughts. Dmitri was concentrating on my hand, trying to do a cleaner job, while my gaze drifted to the notebook. Although I couldn't read more, I could remember clearly every line Dmitri had read, and went over them in my mind in careful scrutiny. I had so many questions, but airing any of them with Dmitri would only be met with roadblocks.

Still, there were a few I thought he might have the answer to.

"So, who's Lev?" I asked, breaking the silence between us.

Dmitri blinked up at me in surprise, then went back to wrapping up my hand. He didn't ask clarification; only said, "My father. Lev Kasyanenko. I suppose he was aware of my mother's work, to some extent."

His voice was low, laced with the hard edges of resentment. "I'm sure he was just trying to protect you, too, Dmitri."

"I know! I just —" Dmitri huffed, throwing up his hands in frustration, before drooping. The helplessness he must've felt was clear as day in his sunken posture and withdrawn expression. "I wish people would stop hiding the truth from me. Stop keeping secrets from me. I am not as delicate as I appear."

"You're also their son," I reminded him. Did I like Diane? No. But I understood why she wouldn't tell Dmitri any of this. Why neither of his parents would. Sure, if I was in Dmitri's position — and I kind of was, in the past — I'd be angry at them. But their decision wasn't irrational, either. "She said so in the notebook: Protecting you is her priority."

"Like it is yours?" Dmitri asked, cutting me a wry look. I just shrugged, a little embarrassed, and he sighed. "I know. I guess… I guess I'm just more surprised than anything. Before now, I thought we were always honest with each other. I thought I knew everything important there was to know about my mother. I had no idea how much she was hiding from me until now."

I made a sound of noncommittal agreement, unsure of what else to say. I had been in the same situation with my own mother when she died — so many questions, forever unanswered. Sure, her not talking about my dad had just been a reality I'd never questioned, because I'd known it for so long it became normal. Not until after Sokovia did it occur to me that there may have been more to it than just heartbreak and bitterness.

A part of me was sure that my mother had known who — what — my father was. I didn't know how, or why, I had no proof. But given what I know now, I had every reason to believe it they were the same reasons Mom never told me who he was. Hell knows, if I started looking, I wouldn't stop.

My gaze dropped to the notebook left abandoned at my side. Its shiny blue leather cover reflected in the low light of the room, now covered in dirt and sooty handprints.

"So you won't read any more of that notebook?" I began slowly, testing the waters. We had already resolved that fight, if only just, but I was determined to do it on my own, if I had to.

"No," Dmitri's tone was short, resolute and he didn't look up from my hand. "I told you, I'm done
with it.”

"So you'll help me, but not with that."

"I'm not going to help you get killed."

Pressing my lips together, I bit back a sharp retort I knew I would regret. The headache pressed my impatience. But even as a spike of pain made me wince, I closed my eyes and took a breath. Instead, I tried to compromise. "Well, can you at least help me understand her shorthand?"

"No."

"Please? I just want to read it myself," My tone took on an undeniable begging tone as Dmitri suddenly stood up, walking away. To the TV, where he began flipping through the channels, as if looking for a distraction, or perhaps trying to pointedly tell me he was ignoring me. I didn't move from my spot, just picked up the notebook with my now bandaged hand. "I promise, I won't talk about it again."

Dmitri pulled his hand away from the TV, folding his arms as he scowled at the screen. It had stopped on a sit-com; the tinny audience laughter echoed in the room, disjointed in the stiff silence. "Nothing is going to stop you, is there?"

What else could I say? "Not if I can help it."

Dmitri remained silent. The sit-com played out banter between a husband and wife with repeated peals of laughter; it received no reaction from either of us. At last, Dmitri turned back to me, and held out his hand. "Fine. Let me have it."

I suppressed a smile as I got up and passed the book to him, and tried not to seem too enthusiastic or pushy as he spent the next ten minute writing into the cover of the notebook — a key, as it turned out, in his fine, easy-to-read script. I thought it was a nice touch; one of our things in his tutoring was his writing. Dmitri had made an effort to write cleanly so I could help him better; the fact he did so now, when he could've easily done otherwise just to spite me, meant more to me than I could vocalize.

"Thank you," was the least I could do, putting as much weight into those words as I could manage.

"Hmpf," Dmitri's response was a small snort; he seemed more amused than annoyed, but his expression still appeared reserved. His brow furrowed. "What do you plan to do with it, when you finish reading it?"

"Share it," I said immediately, as I looked over the shorthand key he'd written. There were easily over two dozen phrases; hopefully this would speed up my reading time. "Spread it. I'm not sure how yet, but for whatever reason SHIELD wants this suppressed. So I'm going to do the opposite. Send it to the media, spread to more people than they can possibly kill."

That was how I would protect myself. Maybe even afterwards, SHIELD might still want me dead or captured, but at least the truth was out there. Would it be damaging beyond belief, create chaos? Maybe, but I wouldn't know until I read more, and in the end it didn't matter. Liberty in chaos.

Dmitri seemed doubtful, but not necessarily dissenting. "I suppose that makes sense. Its what my mother would want, I think." His gaze grew sorrowful, and looked down to his hands, voice dropping to a murmur. "I know she wasn't always the nicest person, but she always believed in
America, in its values. Freedom of the press, and all that. If she were in your shoes, she'd be doing the exact same thing."

That was surprisingly reassuring, and I wasn't sure what to say at first. I closed the notebook, running my hand over its dirtied cover. "Maybe we would've gotten along, in another world."

Opening it, I came to Diane's entry regarding Niko's death. There was a small news clipping attached, including a photo. In it, depicted the headshot of a middle-aged man with dark eyes, salt and pepper hair, with a distinct crescent shaped scar hooking under his nose, like he took a nasty sucker punch to the face. The man who started it all.

"Yeah, maybe," Dmitri snorted at that, and a brief but genuine smile lit up his face. "Not sure if that's even possible. I think just by existing, you were challenging her."

"Really? I didn't mean to," I laughed at that, a little helpless. But maybe Dmitri had a point; maybe I never had a chance of getting Diane's good graces. But that didn't mean we weren't on the same side. A part of me still felt sad, though. In my hands I held nearly two years' worth of a woman's investigation into a world-changing conspiracy. Diane Hawkins was possibly braver than I could ever know; and I never had a chance to see that side of her.

It felt like I'd wasted something. A deep regret hollowed out my stomach.

"Maybe we should call it a night," I said at last, glancing at the clock. 10:03 PM. Another six hours until the extract. Should be fine. "Get some rest before the big move."

Dmitri agreed without argument; we turned off the lights but kept the TV going. Its flickering light filled the dark room; that and it's loud noise made for a strange sort of comfort. I changed the channel to the sports channel; a football game was going tonight.

It could've been the exhaustion, but a part of me was astounded by the entire debacle. That, in spite of the nation in turmoil, a government at war with several of its own citizens, people still got out of their homes and traveled hundreds of miles to cheer for their favorite teams in a massive, packed stadium, just for the sheer joy of it. Just to forget, even for a few hours, all the troubles and pains in their lives, to feel together. A part of something larger than themselves, just to know they're not alone. Even the annoying, repetitive ads proved to have a sort of normalizing effect.

Luckily, the sport bored the hell out of Dmitri, and he fell asleep quickly. I, on the other hand, remained awake, staring at the ceiling. Even though it had been my idea, my brain was dancing around frantically with thoughts. I wanted to sleep; hell, I initially suggested it because my headache was getting so bad that the lights were starting to hurt.

But now, lying in bed in a dark room, presumably safe but probably not, I was filled with this intense dread that something terrible was about to happen.

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Cobblestone streets. Horns honking in nearby traffic. Blossoming trees in the height of summer.

Crimson double-decker buses and quaint phone booths decorated in graffiti and stickers. Tourists and locals alike, milling the streets and filling the shops, making calls, eating food, dropping coins on the street.
The weather was uncharacteristically sunny for London, and it seemed the entire city was outside to enjoy it. I drifted amongst the pedestrian crowd, as if floating through a dream.

Except it wasn't a dream.

I could feel his presence at my back, a dark, silent aura so powerful that it practically pushed me forward without any physical touch whatsoever. My throat was dry, and my gaze focused on one point in the distance.

The target.

As I walked, a distant part of my mind noted that I'd never worn skinny jeans until today. They were all the rage back at home, but I'd never owned a pair. The Crucible had dressed me up in plainclothes; the first normal things I've worn since I was first taken by them. But between starched cotton and black Kevlar, denim jeans and linen shirts now felt alien. Too soft, too fragile, flimsy and loose and so easy to tangle up, to pull and grab and strangle. I could move easily, but the pants did not allow as wide a range of movement as the clothes I was used to. Climbing and fighting would be more difficult in this.

But they were not expecting any of that from me. Not today.

No. Today was a test.

And part of the test was not to be seen at all.

Ahead of me, an open cafe. Right on the street, people passed by and through the tables, enjoying the view of the Thames from here. The park on the left offered a beautiful riverside view. Less traffic here. More people.

Someone bumped into my from behind. A gloved hand brushed against mine, and something soft passed from theirs to mine. Smooth, almost oily, the little water-soluble pod might be mistaken for dish detergent or laundry soap. But the liquid inside was entirely clear, with only the faintest yellow hue.

Its size also did not resemble anything on the market. The size of a dime, it would not contain enough solution to clean anything.

But it did have just enough to kill a five-foot-ten-inches tall, one-eighty pound adult male.

At one circular table sat three men, all roughly the same age. Two were dressed in fine suits with full heads of hair, sharing cigars. One was dressed in a plumber's overalls, had dark eyes, salt and pepper hair, and crescent scar under his nose. They seemed to be having amiable conversation, laughing and speaking Russian over some tea and biscuits.

None of them looked up as I approached.

The dark presence faded away, but I knew the Soldat was still watching, just in case. I didn't alter my pace, continued at a leisurely walk as I came upon the table of old men.

I didn't know the scarred man's name. I only knew that he was a target. A threat to the Crucible, the Chairman, and must be eliminated. He was not a dangerous threat in the physical sense; old enough that a younger, healthier agent could dispatch him easily. Making him the perfect training dummy for a subtle public assassination.

Then, just as I was passing, I tripped.
The man with the crescent scar reacted first, helping me back up to my feet, a kindly gesture. I placed my hand on the table as I rose, my hand sweeping over his cup. The pod dropped, and dissolved instantly.

I offered a quiet, strangled thanks, and left without further incident.

So fast, I might have convinced myself that nothing happened at all. It couldn't be that simple, that easy, could it? Did he notice how cold my skin was, how thin my wrists were, the hungry look in my eyes?

"Package delivered." I said under my breath as soon as I was out of earshot.

"Признанный." The Soldat replied. As I positioned myself in the park, under a tree on a small hill, I had a good vantage point of the three men taking their meal. As the scarred man picked up his cup and took a sip, the Soldat's voice echoed in my ear. "Package received."

I stood there, watching, as at first the scarred man continued talking, and my chest tightened, wondering if it worked.

I was sure I had dropped the pod in his drink. I did not get the wrong cup. He didn't order a new one, either. Was the dosage correct? Had I missed something? What would happen to me if he didn't die? I couldn't fail this test. The Crucible did not accept failure —

The effect began in small details. At first, his face went oddly pale, and he started to sweat. Then cough. His face went red, and his compatriots started to look concerned. Then, in a sudden burst, the scarred man tried to stand, only to collapse. The people around him took notice as well, some calling out in shock. He writhed on the ground, but couldn't get back up.

It was such a scene that civilians gathered and an ambulance was called. In the following commotion, the scarred man's friends vanished into the crowd, leaving their unfinished meal and cigars behind.

Deep down, I knew what just happened was terrible. That I hated it, hated having any part of it, hated the Crucible for making me do this. But in truth, I was relieved.

Relieved that it went off without a hitch. That I could return a success, and earn my first full meal in weeks.

"Objective has been eliminated," The Soldat said in the earpiece. "All assets head to extraction point..."

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"Mia? Mia, wake up. It's time to go."

I woke to Dmitri shaking me, my skin drenched in a cold sweat.

Dmitri's face hovered over me, his brows drawn in concern. "Are you okay? You looked like you were having a nightmare."

I squinted at him in the darkness, that same headache now a dull pounding behind my eyes, slowly fading. I wiped a hand over my forehead and found my hand was shaking.
"I'm fine," I said, my voice thick and slurred, before rising to my elbows. I couldn't meet Dmitri's gaze in that blatant lie, so I glanced at the clock. 3:17 AM. God, already? A part of me wanted to go back to sleep, but knew it would be a bad idea with the state I was in. I just sighed. "Let's go."

The night was chilly, so I had both the flannel and the red bomber jacket on as we headed out. The shield felt like a guardian angel on my back, but I left the TV on when we left the room. In case anyone was watching this location, I wanted them to think we were still inside.

Taking a few minutes to make sure the parking lot and surrounding area was clear, I led the way on foot. Dmitri had the foresight to mark the hospital's location on a tourist brochure map he had gotten sometime earlier, and I marked the quickest way from here to there. It would take us through side streets, alleys and empty lots — away from main roadways and hopefully keep any tails off us.

The trek was long and dark. We couldn't afford using any flashlights in case we were spotted, and we avoided standing under direct light — I was fine, with the highly light-sensitive eyes of a super soldier, I could see reasonably well in darkness. Dmitri, however, was not so lucky, and could not find his way easily on the uneven and unpredictable land we crossed. I had to guide him by the hand, speaking quietly to indicate obstacles and landmarks to avoid. It slowed us down, but I had already intended to go at a walking pace. We still had plenty of time to reach the extraction point on time.

We didn't talk much besides that. I was deep in my own thoughts, deeply unsettled by the dream I just had.

I had killed Niko Constantin. I was the reason Diane got involved in all of this. Why she eventually died.

For obvious reasons, I said nothing about it to Dmitri. It was enough that he knew that I was a super soldier, that he knew that I knew what I was capable of. I could kill. I didn't want him to know I already had. Repeatedly.

The mustached man in the mountains. Niko Constantin. Others, who I killed in self-defense: Brandt, Savin, other Extremis soldiers. But the Crucible targets weren't a choice.

I couldn't decide if that made it better or worse.

Either way, it made me sick to my stomach, finally starting to see a wider context, the domino effect of my actions. When I first left Sokovia, I thought I had never killed before. Now, clearly, that wasn't true. I wondered how many other targets I'd eliminated, that I couldn't remember.

The thought haunted me.

The hospital couldn't appear fast enough.

I almost didn't recognize it at first, as the building was completely dark, only a silhouette against the riverside. But as we drew nearer, I heard the voices first.

Too indistinct to understand them, but clear enough to know it was human. The sound of it alarmed me and I held out my hand; Dmitri and I came to a stop and crouched low. There were a lot of bushes and some tree cover in this area, along with some old worn out fences and elements of brick. But I could make out a faint light source bouncing off one nearby wall of an adjacent building. Signalling for Dmitri to stay behind me, I crept forward, peering around the corner.

About half a dozen men, milling around the entrance to the hospital. They had no vehicle, but had
erected some industrial lights so the area was well-lit. I stared at the black, unmarked uniforms, the AK-47s they all carried. Serious weapons, maybe more than I could handle with my single shield.

They talked quietly amongst themselves, amiably, a few laughing. They were at ease. My heart pounded. Was this SHIELD? How had they gotten ahead of us already? How did they find out? Shit, I was already too close, I had to get out before they saw —

Something cold and hard pressed into my head. A voice spoke in a thick Russian accent, "Identify yourself."

For a long moment, I didn't do anything. My entire body went still, before I slowly raised my hands.

The man grabbed my shoulder, lifted me up and turned me around. He had release one hand off his gun, lowering it to do so, and that's when I acted. My back had only just hit the wall behind me when I shoved his weapon aside and threw myself at him.

The force knocked him down immediately. The man let out a cry, but I was already straddled over him, ripping the knife from my boot and raising it up when —

"Mia, stop!"

Dmitri’s voice rang out, causing both of us to freeze. I looked up to see running out of his hiding place, hands raised. "Don't hurt him!"

"Dmitri?" Said the man beneath me, surprised.

"Да, Igor, это я." Dmitri said, but his eyes were looking up, past me. I looked around, and was startled to find the rest of the armed team, all six of them, forming a semicircle around me and their downed man, weapons pointed at my head. "Don't shoot her, she's my friend!"

But the men didn't stand down. Not until the one underneath me, Igor, finally belted out in Russian, "Well, you heard him! Stand down!"

Lowering the knife and stepping off, I tried to hide my shaking hands, a distraction to my own embarrassment. As a way to appease them, and maybe apologize, I offered a hand to Igor, saying, "Мне жаль. I thought you were SHIELD."

"Ah, you speak the language?" Igor looked mildly impressed, taking my hand hopping back to his feet. He was taller than me, and a good hundred pounds heavier, perhaps in his late thirties. Igor smiled, and it was like all the tension in the air dropped. The other men seemed to relax as he spoke jovially, "Do not worry yourself, it's of no consequence. Not everyday I get caught off guard. A bracing experience! Dmitri, where did you find this girl?"

Dmitri just shrugged, looking rather pale despite the smile. "This is Amelia. She's my friend. She saved my life today.

"Amelia! Well met," Igor said, holding out his arms and taking me in a great bear hug I wasn't expecting. I gasped as I felt a few ribs crack in the embrace. If I hadn't known any better, I'd mistake Igor for a super soldier, too. "If you were a little older, I would suggest drinks! But you Americans, you have rather... antiquated drinking age, yes?"

I decided not to tell him I couldn't get drunk anyways. "The thought is appreciated."

Igor had an infectious personality, it seemed. And apparently the leader of this small troupe. As we
gathered together, Igor gave Dmitri a solid pat on the shoulder, and Dmitri's knees nearly buckled beneath him. "Your father has been very worried about you, young man! About time we get you out of here, yes?"

The small team escorted us through the dilapidated hospital. On the short journey, Dmitri and the security team clearly knew each other well, and spent the time catching up with each other. The men seemed fond of Dmitri, treating him like a younger brother or a nephew, playfully pushing him around and making jokes, but not being too harsh or too rough.

Meanwhile, I was beside myself with anxiety. My heart was still pounding from my interaction with Igor. How could I mistake these men for SHIELD? How did the Russian not click for me right away? I'd been so caught up in the moment that these details didn't register; all I saw was tactical gear, large weapons, big men and had immediately interpreted a threat. And nearly killed one of them because of it.

Maybe I was losing my touch.

The team brought us to a large, open courtyard that lied in the middle of the hospital complex. A large helicopter sat at the center, its blades still, another six men guarding the exterior. I understood now why Dmitri's father chose this spot; it was easily defensible with the four walls surrounding the area, and the multiple floors meant the aircraft was well hidden from ground view.

But all thoughts of self-doubt vanished as a man emerged from the helicopter. As soon as he appeared, Dmitri rushed out to greet him. "Отец!"

The man, Lev Kasyanenko, turned around just in time to catch Dmitri in a warm embrace. They exchanged laughter, a brief but warm exchange. I smiled at the sight, heartened and relieved. Dmitri was finally safe.

Dmitri said something to him then, pointing back at me. His father lifted his head to find me, and my smile disappeared. I recognized him.

It was the Chairman.
Bitter Protocol
Book 2
Just wanted to thank winterinthewind on tumblr, who created the new covers for Bitter Protocol and Rebel Columbia! Definitely check out her blog, she's awesome and has a lot of great artwork :D
I couldn't breathe.

"Dmitri, get away from him!"

I wanted to pull him away, but found my feet frozen to the spot. I couldn't make myself move. Not with the Chairman's sharp, cold eyes — his presence, in the flesh — pinning me to the spot.

Every instinct was screaming at me to run — run, get the hell out of here as fast as my feet could take me. I was too close, far too close; if anyone said the trigger words now, I'd hear them and that'd be the end of it. I wouldn't be able to escape in time. I had to run and never stop running.

But I couldn't move.

Dmitri frowned at me, clearly not expecting this reaction. His once happy reunion had suddenly turned sour. "Mia? What's wrong?"

It had to be a mistake. There had to be. This wasn't Dmitri's father — he had to be confused, or… or something. Anything, to make this not true.

"You don't know who he is!" I said, raising my voice and trying not to sound as terrified as I felt. I doubted I was successful. "H-he's not your father!"

"What're you talking about? Yes, he is," Dmitri looked from me, to the Chairman, back to me again. He was starting to look distressed. "Why are you acting like this? This is what you wanted, wasn't it? For him to get me out of here?"

No. No, it was the farthest I ever wanted. If I only I'd known.

"I-I'm sorry," Dmitri now said to his father, in an undertone. Like I was a friend embarrassing him at a family event. "I don't know why she's like this, she's usually so —"

"It's alright," The Chairman said gently, raising his hand to stop Dmitri, reassure him with a pat on the shoulder. Not once in this entire exchange did his features ever shift. He was ever calm, calculating, maybe even amused by all this. Not at all afraid that I knew who he really was. "I believe there's been a misunderstanding. Your friend here —" he nodded to me, speaking louder as if I couldn't hear every word. "— seems to have mistaken me for someone else, someone she believes is an enemy."
The Chairman looked exactly as I remembered him. Tall and rigid, distinctive cheekbones, dark hair, sharp green eyes — exactly like Dmitri's, I realized, the breath leaving me like I'd just been punched in the gut. Standing side by side, I could now see the resemblance. Dmitri really did take after his mother, but those eyes could only belong to one man.

All this time. All this time and I never knew.

"You are the enemy," I whispered, so soft I was more speaking to myself than anyone else. I starting to feel light-headed. The gun weighed at my side. I knew if I unholstered it, I could shoot the Chairman before anyone could stop me.

But I was surrounded on all sides. Twelve men, all armed. I'd never get out of here alive.

And not in front of Dmitri.

"I have no animosity for you," The Chairman said, his English clear with that refined accent that had been so ingrained in my memory. The last I saw and heard him was through an old TV in the Crucible; too far away for me to ever find, for anyone to bring to justice. And now, he was standing right here, twenty feet away. Acting like nothing ever happened at all. "You've done me a great service protecting my son, and because of that I am indebted to you. Please regard whatever grudge or war you think there is between us, gone. A truce, if you will."

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. A truce? Was he serious? Like this was all it took to wipe the slate clean? Hell no.

My gaze had been so focused on the Chairman, that when I finally looked at Dmitri, the truth hit me. He didn't know. He didn't know anything. The hurt and confusion on his face, and the Chairman's words, all said one thing: Dmitri was innocent in all this.

That's why the Chairman wanted the truce. To protect Dmitri. To keep him out of the crossfire.

And he knew it would work. Because Dmitri was the one thing, the one person we both cared about.

A strange thought echoed back to me then. When I first met the Chairman, I had thought he sounded like a father. At the time, I didn't think there had been any validity to that instinct, because what kind of monster would have children? Children like Dmitri?

But yet, here he was. It made a sick sort of sense, now.

"Mia," Dmitri spoke to me now, pleading. "Mia, you can still come with us."

When it was clear I was unresponsive, caught like a deer in the headlights, he approached me. The Chairman's security force parted away for him to speak to me privately, but I could feel their gazes. My outburst had riled them up, and now the initially friendly appearance had completely disappeared. They knew I knew they knew.

"Mia," Dmitri said again, softly this time as he placed his hands on my arms, shaking me gently. "Please. It's our last chance. Don't waste it. Don't stay here."

"I can't," I whispered, my voice hoarse. My hands were so cold I couldn't feel my fingers. Only the shield on my back grounded me, reminded me I was still present in this reality. Everything else felt completely unreal. "Not with him."

Before, I was just resolute in my goal. Now, the very idea sent sheer terror through my veins.
Deliver myself directly into the hands of the Chairman? I'd rather take my own gun and shoot myself.

"Why? What's wrong with him?" Dmitri demanded; his tone despairing. He looked so helpless and bereft, I wanted to tell him everything. But it would only hurt him more, and I didn't want to think of what the Chairman would do to me — to his own son — if I did that. I didn't know if the Chairman was capable of hurting Dmitri, his own family, but considering what happened to Diane… I didn't want to risk it. "You don't know him."

"He's a monster."

Words I regretted immediately. Dmitri released me, recoiling as if I'd slapped him. He stumbled back a step, then another. Something changed in his eyes, then. First shock, pain — then guarded, bristling. "You're wrong, Mia. Maybe one day you'll see it."

I knew then that I had ruined it. Ruined any chance I had at ever getting Dmitri to listen to me, to believe a word I said. Now I regretted not telling him everything back in the hotel, how I became a super soldier, how I learned everything I knew. How could I be so stupid?

As I watched Dmitri walk away, desperation kicked in, and I shouted, "He did this to me!"

My words were raw, awful and cracked and more vulnerable than I had sounded in my life. All the pain I ever endured, condensed into five terrible little words. Tears burned at the corners of my eyes. Dmitri spun around, caught off guard, but by then he had returned to his father.

He'd opened his mouth to speak, but it was the Chairman who said, "I had no part in the way you were born, or whatever happened to you. I'd like to apologize on their behalf — whatever they did clearly seems to have traumatized you to a great degree. Someone in your condition needs help, young lady."

My blood seethed at those words. Discrediting me before Dmitri had a chance to question anything. Hands clenching and unclenching, my words were quiet, hoarse. "You would know."

"If your choice really is to stay, then I wish you good luck, Amelia," The Chairman said, and I wondered how truly sincere that regretful tone was. "These aren't safe waters for a young girl."

"That's it? You're just going to let me go?" I wasn't sure I heard right.

He blinked, as if confused by this. "Why would I make you stay? It's a, ah, free country, as you call it."

Unbelievable. I couldn't fathom why the Chairman would let me go twice when he had all the opportunity. First in Sokovia, and then now. What opportunity was he waiting for? What moment would possibly become the right time to active the Soldatka protocol? If now wasn't a good time, I couldn't imagine what would be.

Deep in my gut, I knew that if the third time came around, I might not be so lucky.

Maybe I should take this chance while I could. Before he changed his mind.

Taking a step back, indecision clawed at my gut. On the one hand, I wanted to get the hell away from here, from the Chairman. Even SHIELD felt safer than this. But I was terrified of leaving Dmitri behind. Call me crazy, but I didn't feel comfortable leaving him with his father. Had I already pushed Dmitri too far away? I didn't want his father to feed him more lies.
On the other hand, Dmitri probably was safer with his father. The Chairman seemed genuine in his thanks, in his desire to protect Dmitri. The same could not be said for SHIELD. In the end, it probably didn't matter. Dmitri would be going with him no matter what I did now.

"Fine," I muttered, deciding not to argue anymore. I still had my guard up, wary that the Chairman would take back his word when my back was turned. My eyes turned to Dmitri; this time, he didn't speak up. So I said, as farewell, "I'm sorry. For everything. Please be safe."

It was the best I could do, and I knew it wouldn't make up for anything. Still, Dmitri gave me a tight nod, his lips pressed thin.

With that, the rotor-blades started to spin, and the entourage boarded the helicopter. First Dmitri, and seeing him disappear made my heart lurch. All I could do was believe that this was the best choice. I suppose I wouldn't really know until all this was over.

"And one last thing," The Chairman paused as he stepped into the aircraft, turning to me with a slightly less amused look on his face. He had to raise his voice in order to be heard over the roar of the prop engine, and the wind swirling around us. "If you do discover who's behind Diane's murder, I would appreciate it if they found justice."

That caught me off guard, and I was so stunned I didn't respond in either denial or affirmation. He wanted me to find Diane's killer? Of course, by the time I thought to ask, the Chairman was gone.

I didn't wave as the aircraft took off, just watched as it took off. The blades caused a great, dusty whirlwind, and the remaining security force and I had to lift our arms to protect our faces as the aircraft rose into the sky. By the time the men lowered their arms and looked around again, I was gone.

Finally caving to my instincts, I ran fast, and I ran hard. Tearing through the old halls and bursting out into the night, leaping over chunks of brick wall and old benches. I could barely see all the obstacles as tears burned in my vision. I hadn't run this fast since my race with Steve.

How much had changed since then.

Very quickly, my breath became uneven, shaky and heaving. Not because I was overexerting myself, but because a sudden onset of utter terror was coursing through me. The same terror I had felt before, only pushed back as I fought between the bizarre cocktail of emotions I had felt while in conversation with Dmitri and his father. Now, however, the original shock returned full force. Like a sucker punch to the gut, I suddenly couldn't breathe, couldn't think anymore. The tears wouldn't stop.

I stumbled over a loose chunk of pavement and nearly ate shit on a weedy lawn. I caught myself just in time, then hurled myself forward. Looking around, I had no idea where the hell I was; old dilapidated housing, most missing rooftops or entire upper floors. No cars or people. The hospital was nowhere in sight.

The attempt to get back to my feet was almost more than I could manage. Stumbling, trying to catch my breath, I fell against a low brick wall and promptly collapsed behind it.

It provided little cover, none at all to be honest. But it was something to lean against as I pressed my arm to my face and tried to smother the sobs as they wracked up my chest.

I tried to rationalize myself, tried to push it back like I had last time, but it was no use.
It was only then did I realize how close I came to becoming reactivated as a Crucible agent. I mean, actually realize it. The only reason the Chairman didn't use my trigger phrase was because of Dmitri — because of whatever domestic lie he'd constructed for his son. All my claims, all my wild accusations, would suddenly hold a lot more weight if I were suddenly turned into a mindless robot in front of him.

In a weird sense, I felt betrayed, but I wasn't sure how or by whom. It wasn't like Dmitri had any idea, and no big move had been played on me. At least, not that I knew of. And yet, I still felt shaken, like everything I'd ever known was a lie. I'd put faith in a truth that wasn't real, and now I was suffering the fallout. And it hurt that Dmitri hadn't believed me, to have my word disregarded. In the aftermath, it made sense. If someone had come to me, telling me that my mom, a person I'd known my whole life, was a tyrannical monster that killed innocents and ruined lives, I wouldn't believe them, either.

I wondered at the chances of it all. How could I have not noticed sooner, how could I have not put the pieces together? Dmitri had never shown me pictures of his father, I'd never asked; none were kept at the apartment in New York or the house here — not when Diane didn't want any reminders, I guess. It just… never happened.

And if I had figured it out sooner, what would I have done then?

The circling thoughts did nothing to help my current state, and eventually I gave up exploring the hypotheticals. It didn't matter. What happened had happened.

Right now, I just wanted to tell someone. But the only people who could help were SHIELD, and they weren't on my side. I was alone, and that hit me, too, all of a sudden. I was alone. Initially, I'd been glad at the thought, for Dmitri to be gone and safe, and for me to act at whim without having to worry about anyone else. The idea felt a lot different now with my options for allies draining.

But I still had Steve. I'd see him again in only a few short hours. Then I could explain everything that happened; he'd know what to do, know where to go, and I wouldn't be alone anymore. I still had the shield and the notebook. As long as I got to the rendezvous on time, everything would be fine.

And maybe — just maybe — Lev Kasyanenko really wanted me to find out who killed his ex-wife. That is, if it wasn't him that was behind it.

At this point, all options were on the table. I hadn't thought of the Crucible simply because SHIELD had been so present, I immediately assumed they were involved somehow. But what if they weren't? What if I had something wrong?

Well, I still had the notebook. Only one way to find out.

✮✮✮

Nine O' clock.

The Freedom Wall.

It was the same as I last saw it, the marble pavilion with its columns and great memorial with its hundreds upon hundreds of golden stars. The inscription on the floor. The milling civilians, adults
and children who wandered around the center pond in quiet stroll. There was a tour group, and the
guide's voice was the loudest thing in the area. I blended in well with them, and pretended to be
listening in as I kept an eye out. Steve would have to be showing up soon.

I hadn't slept since Dmitri left, but I did grab a half a dozen bagels at a café and cup of coffee. The
bitter taste did more to wake me up than the caffeine. I drank the coffee and ate three of the bagels,
saving the other half for later. Before getting to the wall, I wrapped my shield in my green jacket
and yeeted it up a tree in the park, to come back to later. I would've liked to have kept it on me but
in public it'd draw too much attention, and I didn't want to literally wear a massive target in case
SHIELD were watching.

Which, I later found out, they were.

But I didn't know that as I meandered with the tourist group, trying to look for a tall blond super
soldier with invisibility. A ball of nervous energy, I had a hard time keeping still. Under the
morning light I felt incredibly exposed, and especially vulnerable without my shield.

I wasn't sure how long I was supposed to wait. I didn't know how a rendezvous was supposed to
work, or how Steve wanted me to interpret it. If Steve wasn't here at nine on the dot, was I
supposed to leave immediately? Come back tomorrow morning? It seemed like jumping the gun; I
decided to wait the full hour, just in case.

As far as I could tell, I'd been here first. Despite the many missed family gatherings over the past
couple months, I didn't take Steve to be someone who was always late. Not for something like this.

If he wasn't late, then what was stopping him from showing up?

The answer arrived shortly enough.

At around 9:15, I spotted a woman in a dark leather jacket out on the lawn past the wall of stars.
She wasn't doing anything suspicious, just standing still with her hands in her pockets. But her
position put her on higher ground, giving her a good vantage point of the area. I couldn't see from
here if she had an earpiece, but I could just catch the subtle movements of her lips moving. Talking
to someone that wasn't there.

Dread coiled in my stomach, and I glanced over my shoulder. Two men, also dressed in dark
clothing, walking into the pavilion. Not necessarily side by side, but close enough to feel as though
they were a unit. Neither of them had seen me yet; quickly turning my head around, I looked at the
plaque in front of me, trying to think of something to do.

That's when I spotted the numbers.

In front of the wall was a wedge of marble inscribed 'THE PRICE OF FREEDOM' — scrawled
seven numbers in pale blue chalk. I squinted at it, kneeling down for a closer look.

5553942

My heart skipped a beat when I recognized it as Steve's handwriting. He'd left a phone number.

There was no other accompanying message, no other indication of where he was or where he'd be.
But Steve had been here, and he'd known that it wouldn't be safe to meet. Blood pounding, I
quickly took my sleeve and rubbed it over the numbers, scrubbing them out before anyone else
could see.

Numbers firmly imprinted in my mind, I stood back up and got the hell out of Dodge. Quietly, of
course.

The plainclothes agents didn't seem to notice I was even there; I spotted no tails as I made my way back to the tree where I'd left my shield, with the jacket still tucked around it to hide the color and design. Would it still look weird? Yeah, but a dull green was a lot less noticeable than shiny silver and red. After retrieving it, I headed back into the city, for the first electronics store I could find.

On the way, my footsteps were fast but even. I went at a brisk pace, trying not to rush and grab attention. Heartened by this new plan in my head, I had to do my best not to get ahead of myself.

Still, for the first time since I saw the Chairman — hell, since I left the Triskelion — I felt good about something. Like things were finally getting better, just a little bit.

From there, I picked up a prepaid cell phone: a burner phone, to use and dispose of as I saw fit. Buying the cheapest cellphone and hoping this wouldn't turn into a beacon for SHIELD to find me, I dialed the number almost immediately after leaving the store.

It went straight to voicemail. There was no personal message, no recording of Steve's voice to let me know it was him.

Disappointing, surprising even, but I rolled with it. Deciding if Steve really was on the other end, I skipped introducing myself. He'd know who I was. "Got your message. Still in the city, I'll let you know when I find a safe spot. Something… something kind of big happened. There's a lot I have to tell you. Only in person."

I paused, tempted to end the message there, before adding, "I hope you're okay. Please call me back."

Click.

Now I just had to find a good hideout and wait for Steve to call back. And, in the meantime, start reading the rest of Diane's work.
This headache was going to kill me before anyone else could.

Leaning back, I dropped my head against the wall behind me, rubbing my eyes. The afterimage of dozens of words still flashed in my retinas, all scrambled and unreadable.

After leaving the Freedom Wall, I’d found an abandoned warehouse in southern DC. I ran so far I might've ended up in Maryland. Hard to tell, but the place was old and dark and relatively dry. Safe, too, for now. There was construction gear all over the place, the building covered in white tarp, industrial light stands placed in corners and along walls across both floors. It seemed like someone planned on renovating the place, but now it seemed put on hold or abandoned. Everything was covered in dust. And yet, I could still hear the faint buzzing noise coming from the cords attached to the lights. They were still connected to a power grid somewhere.

The place did need an overhaul. Some of the walls and pieces of the floor had caved, leaving large holes in their place. Some place were sprayed with graffiti from past intruders. But there was no one here when I entered, and I found no signs of anyone having been here recently. Choosing a spot on the second floor, I camped out and began my deep dive into Diane Hawkins’ notes.

And, as one might guess, progress was slow and painful. I was maybe halfway through now, and had spent most of the day getting there.

I had better luck with her photo collection. Clippings, snapshots, security footage, all of the same man, across decades. I had them spread before me in an arc, ordered chronologically. The earliest was from the 60’s. One in Dallas, Texas. Another in Ho Chi Minh City — once called Saigon, in Vietnam.

Diane had written all the locations on the back, alongside dated events that apparently coincided with when the images were taken. Despite the differences in each picture, the subject, the man, was the same — not easy to tell unless you were looking for it. He always had his face turned away, down, never letting his face get captured. One or twice might've been a coincidence, but over a dozen times? A professional who knew how to avoid getting caught.

But he couldn't hide his physique, the sheer size of his body. In all the images, it was clear to see that he was easily over six feet tall, two hundred pounds and change. Not an easy form to hide, but as Steve had proven to me, you didn't need superpowers to be invisible. Aside from these pictures, there was no visual evidence of Constantin's killer.
Or who Constantin believed it to be.

Even though his face was hidden, I knew who it was. The Winter Soldier. Clearly, Diane did as well, if she was able to recognize him in all these pictures. And she didn't even have the benefit of a face.

Her next diary entries explored how she came in possession of these images.

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**August 31st, 2012.**

I have made contact with this new source.

They call themself Cambridge One. I haven't discovered the meaning of this name, only that it might be a reference to the Cambridge Five, British traitors to the Soviet cause during the Cold War. History notwithstanding, our first interaction came in the form of notes attached to bank deposits. (In an effort to provide better protection of my sources, I will not disclose the kind of code therein, or the account number used. That's what my memory is for).

Our first dialogue is a trade. My identity for a piece of the puzzle. A sliver, really. I doubt he trusts me, perhaps even believes I might have killed Constantin myself.

Time will tell if I can get this one to trust me, too. For now, all I have is another name.

*Isdalen.*

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**September 7th, 2012.**

Another communique. Cambridge One tells me to wait. For what, I do not know. Maybe to make sure I am who I say I am. Maybe just to test my patience.

What I do know is that Isdalen is a place. Somewhere in Bergen, Norway. Meaning "ice valley" in its native tongue, Isdalen is a completely unremarkable location — a piece of largely uninhabited land, rather treacherous with icy cliffs (hence the name), but otherwise a regular hiking spot for locals. Nothing at all interesting about this place.

Except for one thing.

The Isdal Woman.

On November 29th, 1970, a family discovered the corpse of a woman wedged between two rocks (see attached news clipping, translated to English). When police later investigated, they found her body was burned, but only on her front, not on her back. All the labels on her clothes had been removed.
This only begins in the strangeness of the case.

A few days later, police recovered her suitcases at the Bergen Railway Station. Inside, they discovered a myriad of odd clues. Eight different passports, all with different identities. Wigs, cosmetics, fine clothes, and a variety of currencies. The police were able to trace her last whereabouts with this — a chain of hotels across Norway and Europe. Using multiple aliases, and often switching rooms while at each hotel, the woman seemed to be on some sort of journey, but with no clear destination.

And that's it. The case went cold. The police couldn't find her real identity, and no one appeared to recognize her. They can't even be certain if she's Norwegian, or even European. No clues as to what she was doing in Isdalen, who murdered her, or why. The case remains open to this day.

The obvious can be stated. Her actions and her personal belongings indicate a woman who didn't want to be found — and with the means and skill to accomplish it. Her implied wealth casts doubt on my initial theory — an average woman from a well-to-do family on the run from an abusive homelife. But I quickly dashed that idea. If she were rich, with a well-known family, then her disappearance would've made it to the news. At the very least, someone would have reported her missing, and her face would be up on national media... wherever she's from. A wealthy family might also mean that someone outside of it might have an easier time recognizing her without being close. Yet none of that occurred.

It may be flimsy but it's notable that after all these years she still remains a complete mystery. Which leaves my other theory — a spy or government agent of a kind. And considering what I am investigating, the more likely reality and what Cambridge One wanted me to uncover.

Perhaps this Isdal woman is yet another victim of this elusive Winter Soldier.

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**September 25th, 2012.**

Progress made. Cambridge One seems to believe me when I told them that I was a friend of Niko, and not his killer. I relay to him what I learned of the Isdal Woman (public knowledge and whatever theories I could extrapolate from it), and he seemed approving. That I was on the right track.

In return, they have given me another piece of information. Operation Paperclip.

Again, something that is public knowledge. Operation Paperclip was the US Government's attempt to acquire and assimilate German scientists into national projects. Taking place mostly between 1945 and 1959, the Joint Intelligence Objectives Agency (JIOA) managed to obtain over 1600 foreign scientists.

Many of them were former Nazis.

It was a move of pragmatism over morality. The men of science were brilliant and could be of use for US interests; perhaps those in charge at the time saw service for
the US as penance for the Nazis’ crimes. But the truth is, they merely offered a way for these men to escape justice. And in turn, they changed history.

For instance, Werner Von Braun and his V-2 rocket were integral to the formation of NASA. It was his technology that put the first man on the Moon. He had greatly contributed to American victory in the Space Race — against our new enemy, the Soviet Union.

But I don't think Cambridge One wants me to look at Von Braun.

There are many other, lesser known scientists in the massive list. And I'm not even sure if its the men they want me to be looking at. Operation Paperclip also "rescued" many of the scientists' families, so they could all reside together, keep them happy and complacent. Could one of these 6000 other people be what Cambridge wants me to look at?

We shall see.

October 13th, 2012.

I have been unable to find whoever it is Cambridge One wants me to find. Its like looking for a needle in a haystack, and so many of these men have committed such a myriad of crimes I'm not sure which particular one is so heinous that it should grab my attention. They were all terrible in one way or another. Their families are likewise guilty, but with less acclaim, and with far less interesting details. After only a week, I gave up my search on possible relations, and focused solely on the scientists.

I am starting to think I am on the wrong path. Perhaps CO does not want me to look into these men's past. Perhaps he wants me to see what they were doing for the US.

In the meantime, Cambridge One has provided me with more clues to chew on. First, was a strange delivery. A bouquet of flowers with a flash drive hidden in the petals. An anonymous admirer, of course.

The flash drive contained… well, simply, a million images. Some are security footage, others are photos for newspapers, others still, candid shots of family vacations, honeymoons, amateur photography… my initial scan through the first hundred or so seem to reveal no clear connection. The security footage is especially boring, thousands of frames going second through second of some odd, random location…

I will spend some more time scanning through them all. Cambridge's only helpful tip was that this was all known footage collected from a single week in 1981. From there, I have to work it out myself.

But that it is not what leaves me so shaken. Something about this leaves me… unsettled. Its not so much the method of CO's delivery but rather… his choice of bouquet. Canna flowers and daffodils — my favorites.

Perhaps I shouldn't be so surprised. Cambridge One knows my identity, after all, it wouldn't be so difficult for them to find my favorite flower.
But how did they find the exact bouquet from my senior prom night?

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*October 29th, 2012.*

A breakthrough.

The images are all taken from Catalina Island in November of 1981. Its amazing how much footage was made and collected in that small time frame of only a week. But so much happened.

Natalie Wood's death, for instance.

She was the first face I noticed, first in the background of a restaurant scene. The photo had been of a couple taking a picture together; just one table over sat Wood with her husband Robert Wagner, and fellow actor Christopher Walken. It was the last night she was seen alive.

More images detailed the surrounding week, and night, of her death. Much of these details I already knew, so I was just looking at candid snapshots of a tragic story.

Until I noticed another repeating subject.

A tall, dark-haired man, in nondescript clothing. Always turned away from the camera, his face never seen. In all of the photos I scoured, he only appears in three. In the background outside of a window during a marriage proposal; standing atop a building on a yacht group picture. And a blurry form in security footage of a pier.

And then I discovered a fourth. A fan had taken a picture with Walken and Wood; all three are smiling, but Wood isn't looking into the camera. Her eyes are to the right, focused on something outside of frame. Its not until I spot the reflection of a man in the window behind her, do I believe I know what she saw.

Her eyes wide, fearful. Perhaps she recognized him.

He is always alone. A baseball cap hides his features, and a great brown coat covers any distinct features about his body. But he is there, lingering, like a predator stalking in the shadows.

Is it the Winter Soldier? I still do not believe how the same man who might have killed Wood, is active enough still to eliminate Niko Constantin.

Just another piece of the puzzle. I have collected those images here, in my notebook.

It is not the only discovery I made. I believe the man from Operation Paperclip that Cambridge One wanted me to find was one Arnim Zola. Swiss, brilliant, former HYDRA before he was incorporated into the SSR. He died in prison, 1972.

Cambridge One confirmed that it is Zola I am looking for. If they already knew, I asked, why make me search?
They wanted to see if I was as good as Constantin thought. I had satisfied them.

I do not appreciate more tests. I feel as though Cambridge is playing a game with me. Why be so blithe in the delivery of dangerous intelligence? I do not think Cambridge One is taking this as seriously as I am.

Anyways.

Zola has no known records after his initial arrival on US soil. Perhaps the US, the SSR in particular, wanted to wipe him off the map. Unlike Von Braun, Zola was not a name they could use without shame. At least, that's what I like to think. But I believe the reason to be more nefarious.

I will update when I find more.

The diary continued for a few more entries; Diane getting dates and names and scouring image sources on her own — finding more and more shots of this mysterious man. That's where I stopped, unable to take anymore without a break. My eyes still burned, so I turned to my cell phone.

Every hour, I had called Steve's new number. Each time, I got a voicemail. I didn't leave any more after the one I had already made. I was just anxious, impatient for word back. I wondered what Steve was waiting for. I wondered if something was wrong. What was he doing now? I made myself angry, thinking he might be asleep or something, missing my calls entirely on a whim.

But no. It had to be important. I remembered the way his voice sounded, when he called me in the Triskelion. My chest squeezed, heart aching, just thinking about it now. Steve had sounded… scared. And I'd never heard him scared before.

Warm sunlight fell on me from the dusty windows across the room. They were so filthy that nothing but hazy light could filter through. I squinted and shielded my eyes, looking up towards the ceiling. It was evening now. Another night until I made my way back to the rendezvous point. Maybe this time Steve will be there. Maybe he'll call me before then.

Along with the photos, I had an assortment of snacks with me. There was a gas station a few blocks down I had checked out around noontime, and raided the vending machines. Using up all the quarters and singles I had in the stolen wallet, I bought all the available beef jerky, energy bars, and water bottles I could fit into my backpack. Those morning bagels felt a long way off.

Now I was snacking out. Not healthy in anyway, but I hoped what it lacked in value it made up for in calories, which is what I really needed. I hadn't had a solid meal in a while. Since Sam got me that pizza, really.

God, that felt like a million years ago.

The beef jerky was gone within the hour. A decision I regretted, since the energy bars were much less tasty, even worse when all I had was water to wash it down. But I suppose I shouldn't complain. I could be dead. Or worse.

I needed a distraction. I went back to the notebook.
December 29th, 2012.

The files I uncovered in the storage unit have given me new insight. The renter, one John Muller, inherited the unit from his father, Dr. Müller — one of the scientists recruited from Operation Paperclip. Dr. Müller pioneered in mechanical prosthetics and had an advanced understanding of the human nervous system; well before his time. He was also an associate of Arnim Zola during the war, and whom Zola personally requested to be put on his team after the war; a connection I decided to investigate.

Tracing Dr. Müller's family led me to his only son, John Muller. Born in America, no family of his own, John Muller led a secluded life in his Chicago home, suffering from severe agoraphobia before finally dying of old age last year. This seems to scan with storage records I recovered later; John Muller only visited his father's unit once, after Dr. Müller's death. It had remained entombed since.

After finding the location, I bribed the facility supervisor to let me into Müller's unit. It only took five thousand dollars, but it was a price well paid.

The unit contained only a single filing cabinet. Within it, I discovered dozens of confidential government files. Tapes, lists, science reports… records dating from before the war, well into the 70s. Dr. Müller had managed to hide the existence of this storage unit and its dangerous contents by renting it under a pseudonym, and paying only in cash. A similar transaction continued with his son, who paid in bank credit.

The files revealed more than I can write here. I will record what I found most important.

Firstly, Dr. Müller did work with Zola before the war, but the files I have remark on something that happened after. It seems they first met via a commission for an advanced arm prosthetic that Zola needed for a patient; only Dr. Müller could make one, using what appeared to be rare metals and revolutionary mechanics and circuitry. The recipient of such an arm is only referred to as 'the Asset'.

Interestingly, this project was not for the Nazis or the Americans. Looking through these files, I was surprised by the amount of Cyrillic text. And then I realize — America wasn't the only one who thought to steal German scientists for their own needs.

Russia had gotten to Dr. Müller first, after German surrender. Zola, too. In fact, it was the US that rescued them from a Siberian bunker in 1950, malnourished and overworked. Whatever they had been working on, this so-called Asset, was nowhere to be found.

I do find a name. The Winter Soldier Project.

It seems Arnim Zola, Dr. Müller, a number of other Soviet scientists had created a
type of… super soldier (?) that still lives to this day.

I doubt the SSR have or had any idea of this Winter Soldier when they first took him in. I'm sure if they knew, they would've had second thoughts.

Within the files I also find a large floppy disk — eight inches wide, an IBM type 1 diskette. Hasn't been seen or used since the 70's.

I have no idea what's on it. The disk is unmarked, but carefully stored to protect it from dust and scratches. I'm not even sure if its still viable, it's so old. There's only one way to find out.

Time to find a computer.

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**January 3rd, 2013.**

It took me a week and charming several professors at Columbia, but I finally got my hands on an IBM System/370. It's one of the same that helped run the Apollo missions, and the only functional one in Manhattan I could find.

It is, frankly, massive. It takes up a room the size of my apartment — along the walls and arranged in rows are dozens of computer banks. The heat they generate is immense, but is cooled by a state of the art AC system.

All that aside, I finally insert the floppy disk. It takes nearly fifteen minutes to boot — initially I thought that was just its standard processing time, until it finally loads, and I see just what's inside the floppy. An entire database of names, dates, events. People, places, evidence files, intel. As I go through it, I'm surprised to find entries as recent as the late 90s. All compiled by the SSR. Probably what they used back in the day.

It makes sense after the fact. Despite the obvious obsolescence of a machine this old, it comes with one advantage modern computers don’t — it is entirely unhackable from the outside. Its older than wireless, than the Internet, than dialup. The completely analog system means its completely secure. It's why the US government uses a similar system to run and protect their nuclear arms program. Can't have any enemies turn our weapons on ourselves.

There is an incredible amount of data here, more than I know what to do with. And I only bought myself a few hours with this machine, so I had to use my time wisely. Making things more difficult, the files do not have a search or filtering system, so I have to click each through each file chain one at a time.

I come across interesting bits of intel, stories that the SSR covered up. A female US Airforce pilot gone missing after her plane crashes, testing a new, volatile energy prototype. The work of Hank Pym in quantum mechanics; missions against the Soviets performed by a duo known only as Ant-Man and the Wasp. Evidence of extraterrestrial life on Earth. Some kind of rabid feline that can consume an entire man.

None of it is relevant, however, as intriguing as it all sounds. Another day, perhaps. What I do find worthwhile, though, is extremely valuable.
The Winter Soldier project had multiple subjects over the decades, it seems, only to come to an abrupt end around 1991. Something went wrong. Their subjects were not viable. It seems they perfected the Winter Soldier experiment back in 1945, and were unable to replicate those results again.

Can't say I can complain.

After that, nothing more about replacements, or creating more. However, I did come across an unusual transcription of a bugged phone call between two Russian agents in Moscow, during 1997; they discuss the loss and eventual retrieval of 'the Asset' that happened a year previous, the successful mission he performed despite it. And, apparently, in his absence, the Asset possibly fathering a child.

There is no other mention of this child anywhere I can find, so I can only assume it to be a mere rumor to be discarded, as these men have.

What's more important is that this confirms who is responsible for Plamondon's death. The timing, the mission set during the summer of '96, the language they use, 'eliminating the target' — who else could it be? The Russians wanted him dead.

This is a staggering discovery — this could change modern politics as we know it. Relations between America, France, and Russia may never be the same again. What if this starts a war? Could Plamondon be another Franz Ferdinand?

And amidst it all, I wonder; what made the Winter Soldier disappear? What had gone wrong on that mission that made him break rank? For four whole months? Apparently they recovered him again in October, New York, in the same city they lost him in. Had he been there the whole time? What had he been up to?

I doubt I will ever have all the answers. But the ones I have now are enough.

I had to stop there, reeling with information. My eyes burned into the darkness — night had set while I read, and the room was crushing darkness compared to the brightness of the page when I had my flashlight on it.

There had been other Winter Soldiers, or attempts at least. Dr. Muller had made that arm — the Soviets had taken him when they conquered East Germany and their side of Europe.

And the other thing. The child. Reading that had sent a weird jolt through me. A sense of deja vu. Just as the timing struck to Diane as odd, it did for me, too.

1997 was my birth year. Although my mother strictly never spoke of him, I knew from my birthdate, the fact that I was born roughly four months premature. Counting back five months from February, and I would've been conceived sometime in the summer or fall of 1996.

The same time the Winter Soldier was in the wind, in New York City. Plamondon was killed only twenty blocks from her home in Hell's Kitchen.

A chill went down my back. I snapped the book closed, between suddenly sweaty palms. The action was so abrupt it made an audible clap, echoing throughout the spacious, dusty room.

No.

No.
It had to be a coincidence.

But it was all there. The Asset, a super soldier, killed Plamondon — Diane already knew the Winter Soldier had committed the act, and I knew it, too. Who else could have done it?

Yet, it didn't make sense. From the sound of it, the Winter Soldier had somehow broken his protocol — just like I did. But how? I'd never seen him break, not so much as flinch, even once. How could a man who had been so thoroughly reconditioned by the KGB, for decades doing their dirty work without question, suddenly snap in 1996?

I guess I had the same questions as Diane. How? Why? And why then?

I couldn't conceive the soldier — the weapon — that trained me having any personality or identity left after what was done to him. The fact that he was also Bucky Barnes hit me like a late train. Holy shit.

James Buchanan Barnes was the Winter Soldier. James "Bucky" Barnes, presumed dead in 1945, made into an assassin by 1950, and escaped in 1996… might have actually met my mother. Might have...

My hands trembled and I set the book down, scanning the ground, hoping for some answer, the truth to pop out. But all I saw were the pictures in front of me.

The pictures of my father.

No. With a great sweep of my hands, I dashed them aside, sent the photos scattering. I scrambled to my feet, hands against my stomach, feeling sick. No, no no. It wasn't true. I was just overthinking this. Seeing connections where there were none. Beginning to pace, I began to recite a lesson I learned in my Statistics class: Correlation does not equal causation. Correlation does not equal causation…

I didn't know what to do. So I reached for the phone.

"Sorry, the person you are trying to reach has been disconnected…"

What? I withdrew my hand, staring at the screen in bewilderment. Did I have the number right? I did. Why was Steve's phone suddenly not receiving calls? Was it dead? Was he —

No, don't think about that. Steve was fine. He had to be. Don't think about him being dead, don't think about the Winter fucking Soldier being my dad, don't panic, don't panic, don't panic…

I was panicking.

Deep down, something in me said: You're not ready for this. You're not ready to know.

Too late.

I wondered, vaguely, if that's why Mom never said anything. Because she recognized him, too.

God, I didn't want to think about this. I had to be sane. I needed to wait until I got a second opinion.
Someone who was unbiased, someone who had their head on straight, who could tell me I was mistaken, that I was conflating one thing for another. To give me a rational explanation for what was such an obvious connection in my head.

But I didn't have that yet. I had to wait.

I wasn't sure I had the patience anymore. Steve's phone was either dead or broken, I had no way to contact anyone, no safe place to go. This sudden revelation had me overwhelmed, and in my growing desperation to just understand had me grabbing for the notebook again.

This time, I didn't care to read in order. I was so worked up it was hard to read anything at all, so I just kept flipping through pages and pages of Diane's notes. Slap, slap, slap. The pages wrinkled and bent in my hand; in my fervor I almost ripped a few.

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**January 20th, 2013.**

Something just occurred to me.

If that floppy disk hadn't seen the light of day since Dr. Muller put in the storage unit back before 1974, how did he manage to download information from the 1990's? I haven't —

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**Skip.**

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**February 1st, 2013.**

I've contacted Cambridge One about it. I no longer believe Dr. Muller or his son were the last to see the contents of this file cabinet —

---

**Skip.**

---

**March 10th, 2013.**

Cambridge One is powerful; I have no evidence of this, just a sense that they're in control. Whenever they speak, I have this strange notion that I know them —

---

**Skip.**
I didn't come to a stop until I found a nearly empty page — overtaken by thick, bold handwriting. Two words, in thick black ink and underlined three times.

**PROJECT INSIGHT**

Feeling lightheaded, dizzy, I turned the page, expecting an explanation, but there were none. The pages were all blank after that. This was Diane's last entry before she was killed.

What the hell was Project Insight?

I flipped back a few pages, trying to find the beginning of the entry before that. But just as I found the page, I heard a creak.

It came from below.

Dropping to a crouch, I turned my flashlight off and set it gently on the floor. There was no light up here except for thin moonlight streaming through the windows.

Heart pounding, I remained still and listened.

Nothing. The warehouse was silent. Not even a mouse skittering across tile. Still, I could pick up on something. A vibration of some sort in the floor. Something moving nearby.

Then I heard it again. A creak below. Like a door hinge.

I crept forward, towards a hole in the floor. The warehouse was in shambles and in some places the floor had caved through to reveal the level below.

There, I saw a black silhouette slipping through a side door. His thick bootsteps made only the softest of squeaks, the kind only a super soldier's ears could pick up. I squinted, using what little light in the room to discern the shape of the man's body. The automatic rifle in his arms. The night vision goggles over short-cropped hair.

Rumlow.

Shit.

Behind him, I counted at least four other agents, following his lead. All dressed in black, armed with large weapons and night vision goggles. No tactical flashlights, nothing that would give away their position.

"Everyone, on alert," I heard Rumlow whispering. "Fletcher's in here somewhere. Fan out, but never break line of sight with each other, understand?"

There was a response of silent nods, and the troop began spreading out across the floor and out of sight. Still, I could hear them moving below, and as I crept towards my backpack and shield, I heard someone say:

"So, is it true? About Captain America?"
"That missile blasted that bunker to kingdom come. No way they could've survived that."

My heart dropped out and I almost stumbled before catching myself against the wall. No. No, it couldn't be true.

But it would explain the message on the phone.

"Enough chatter!" Rumlow hissed from a distance. "Cap's old news. Focus on the objective."

My hands shook as I hook the shield onto my back. Then picked up the photos, put them back into the notebook, and tucked it into my jacket. Taking several deep breaths, I calmed my nerves, shoved all feelings aside. Everything, from Diane to the Winter Soldier to that summer of '96 — it wasn't important right now.

If Steve was really gone, then it was down to me to get this done. There was no one else left.

They hadn't cleared the bottom floor yet so I made my way to the back staircase. Leading to the rooftop, it could get me out of here before they even knew where I was.

Yet, as I crept over, I heard another sound. This time, from above.

Frowning, I peered up the stairwell, and caught a silhouette flashing in front of the doorway above, before it opened.

I snapped back before they could see me, stifling a swear before I could speak it. Trapped.

Well, I could always just jump out a window, but that would be pretty obvious. Running would be easy, but with at least half a dozen agents fresh on my tail, I wasn't sure how far I'd make it. And they were all narrowing in on me, right now. I had to come up with a plan, fast.

As I heard footsteps coming down the stairs, I bumped into one of those industrial lamps. At its base sat a switch box. And I got an idea.

Slipping across the floor, I grabbed my flashlight and threw it — not too hard, but far enough away from my current location. Then, in one smooth motion, I ran to the wall, jumped off it, and grabbed one of the metal rafters above. Pulling myself up, I balanced myself on the thin bar. In my hand, I held an unopened water bottle.

The noise of the thrown flashlight got their attention immediately. The men in the staircase had just appeared when I got up onto the rafters, while I heard rush of quiet but rapid footsteps making their way upstairs. They still wanted to be stealthy. Didn't want to jump the gun.

I watched, counting their silhouettes, as ten SHIELD agents entered the second floor. Their heads swiveled back and forth, green lenses flashing, like lighthouses in the night. Their quick movements came to an abrupt stop as they appeared, taking in the room slowly, approaching one step at a time. Careful, deliberate, scanning every inch.

But none of them looked up.

"Anyone see anything?" Rumlow whispered.

A chorus of "Negatives" followed. Rumlow let out a scoff, and said, "Well, she's around here somewhere. Gas station cameras said she came from this direction, so keep looking — "

I threw my water bottle.
It slammed into the remote below. It was large and heavy enough to press all the buttons at once.

I closed my eyes just before the room exploded into light.

Ten voices cried out, writhing in pain as they were bombarded from all directions. The one directly beneath me never had a chance.

Like a shadow, I dropped onto his shoulders and slammed the shield directly onto his helmet. It cracked and snapped in two, and my blow landed directly on his head. He dropped like a sack of potatoes, unconscious.

No one had yet noticed what had happened. Completely blinded, Spinning in circles, arms flying to their heads to cover their eyes or remove their goggles.

They'd recover soon, so I only had a few moments to take out as many of them as I could.

So that's exactly what I did.

Landing on my feet, I took out the nearest one by slamming my foot behind his knee and my fist into the side of his neck.

I was not immune to the light, either. I wanted to go for Rumlow immediately but couldn't recognize him in the haze, so I just went for whoever was closest. The third was facing me, so I whipped the shield at him as hard as I could.

It bounced off his chest, ricocheted off and striking two more before returning to me. The additional hits were knock-outs — the first one struck in the head, the second thrown off his feet and sent head first out a window.

But the first was still standing. The initial blow left him stumbling, but I was still gunning for him.

He hadn't yet recovered before I grabbed him by the throat, lifted him off his feet and slammed him into the ground. He went limp under my grip.

In a crouch, a hand landed on my shoulder. First confused, then gripping hard. Without waiting to see what they were doing, I yanked the knife from my boot and whirled around, slicing first his wrist, then the strap of his weapon. It dropped before he could grab it. He did manage to succeed in grabbing my arm, but I slammed him with my shield.

The blow sent him flying into the man behind them, and they cried out together as they landed on a weak part of the floor and fell through.

Seven down, three to go.

I looked around, squinting in the light. My eyes adjusted rather quickly, to my luck. Rumlow was ten feet away, struggling to get his goggles off. He called out to his men, but many had stopped responding. He seemed to fight between getting his vision cleared and reaching for his radio, perhaps to call in support.

I went for him.

Unfortunately, Rumlow got his goggles off first.

He sidestepped my knife but not the strike that followed. The edge of the shield struck him across the chest, shoving him back — but Rumlow retaliated just as fast.
The baton came out quicker than I could dodge it. I saw the flash of metal right before it struck me, and managed to turn my head just in time — the blow glanced off my jaw, but it was enough to get a taste of what it could do.

Electricity cracked, sending a terrible jolt through my face and neck, down to my shoulders. The pain was so sharp and sudden, I nearly collapsed. I managed to catch myself on my hands, the urge to gasp overwhelming me, but I couldn't — the electric jab had seized my jaw muscles closed. I could only breathe through my nose.

The knife fell from my hands and Rumlow kicked it away before I could grab it again. I didn't have the time to recover before Rumlow rammed the electric baton into my side. Another burst of pain exploded just under my ribcage. This time I did gasp, and my arms gave out beneath me.

Rumlow spat out a curse. "Alright, whose not dead? Sound off!"

I closed my eyes, let myself catch my breath for a moment, for one blessed moment. God, how did I not see that one coming? The electric shocks reminded me of the Extremis soldiers, in a way; elemental power used for pain. But this felt worse, in a way. Sure it didn't burn, didn't searing wound, but the electricity could spread so much farther, and force my muscles to act against me. This was not fun.

"I-is she down?" A reedy voice called out, wincing in pain.

A thick hand grabbed me by the hair and lifted me up by the head. "I don't know," Rumlow replied, and I squinted up to see the shadows of his face silhouetted by the bright lamps. "Are you, Fletcher? Don't make this harder than it has to be."

I grit my teeth, but closed my eyes. The shield fell from my hand and clattered to the floor.

"Good girl."

But I wasn't done yet.

With one good kick, I sent the shield straight into Rumlow's shins. Shouting, he let go immediately, dropping to the ground and clutching a leg.

That wouldn't keep him down for long.

But I didn't have time to take care of Rumlow. As I rose again, the two remaining agents stared at me in shock — then raised their weapons and fired.

I flinched, raising my shield in time to take the volley, backing away from Rumlow so I could better hide behind a column.

Bullets snapped off the paint and drywall, quickly eating away at the frame underneath. I was afraid they were just going to go right through it, but then Rumlow shouted, "Quit firing, you idiots, I'm right here!"

He was indeed uncomfortably close — shrapnel from the bullets and pieces of drywall had fallen on him and he was scrambling backwards, grimacing as he got to his feet.

It gave me just enough time to handle the rest of them.

As soon as the firing stopped, I dove out of my cover and swung again. The shield went straight for the gunman closest to me. He tried to raise his weapon sideways to protect himself, but the shield
dinged off it and went up, striking him in the chin and sending him back off his feet with a grunt.

I lunged forward and caught the shield, swinging it to my left as the last gunman turned to fire on me.

The shield struck the barrel of the gun, swinging it wide as he fired into empty air. It knocked him off balance and I finished the blow by delivering a swift kick to his chest, sending flying into a lamp behind him. The agent went bowling over, smashing glass along the way, and didn't get back up.

"Jesus Christ," I whirled around, to Rumlow — the only one left standing. In one hand he had a baton. In the other, a pistol.

He raised it and fired.

I stumbled back, caught off guard as I lifted the shield and absorbed the bullets. I counted them as I looked around, looking for the closest window to jump out of — but Rumlow must have anticipated this, as he used the gunfire to make a quick approach.

The firing stopped, magazine emptied, and I had just turned towards a window when he grabbed my shield and yanked it back.

It didn't come off my arm, but it did jerk me back into an awkward position — my arm pulled away, leaving my side exposed. I cried out as he delivered the baton to my left side. I gasped — I had meant to send a fist in retaliation but it never made it. The electric shock seized my body and my arm dropped, shoulder muscles clenching against my will. My arm clutched against my body, unable to move.

Rumlow didn't let up, using my immobility to wrench the shield from my arm and threw it away. I watched, bereft, as it skittered across the floor before falling through a hole.

Hand now free, Rumlow reached for his other baton while I writhed on the floor. It was hard to breathe, much less think. At last, he removed the weapon from my side, and my whole body went limp, gasping.

Pacing around me, Rumlow sneered, "Fascinating, isn't it? What pain does to a body."

My brain was still reeling from the electric shocks, but in the back of my mind, I was bewildered. *Is he... is he monologuing?*

Rumlow came to a stop in front of me, and I craned my head back to look up at him. The STRIKE leader smirked. "Pain is where our power comes from. It's a lesson we all have to learn."

*Holy shit. He is monologuing.*

I didn't have the chance to comment before Rumlow struck again. With both batons now, he slammed them into my exposed back.

A strangled cry escaped me, more wretched than I wanted to admit. Again, Rumlow sustained the exposure. Again, he pulled back and began to speak.

"That's how we're taught, you know," He continued, and I would've rolled my eyes if I wasn't curled up in the fetal position. All my muscles were acting against me; I could barely move. It was a challenge to even breathe. I could still hear him, pacing again. "It's how we learn discipline."
A strike to my thigh.
"Control."
Forearm.
"Resilience."
Calf.

"You'll learn, too," Rumlow said, coming back around to my left side. There was a small, almost rueful smile on his face. Like he was going to regret this, and enjoy it along the way. "Eventually."

He struck for my collarbone.

This time, I was ready.

The amount of effort it took to catch the baton before it hit me was nearly insurmountable. It was agony just to get my muscles to obey me, but there was a surprisingly, freeing release as I did.

That release was quickly interrupted, of course, upon skin contact. The energy surged through my fist, and I bit back a cry of pain as I jerked it away and into the floor. Rumlow grunted, tried to yank it out of my grip, but that was the thing — the electricity had seized the muscles and tendons in my hand closed.

And I had a very strong grip.

Another good yank and I pulled Rumlow towards me, off-balancing him. His eyes went wide for a split second before he realized what I was doing, and rolled over me, trying to pin me down. His other baton went to my right side, where he'd struck before, and the pain was horrible — but I was expecting it.

Rumlow looked victorious when I punched him in the gut.

He reeled back, coughing, winded. He let go of the second baton, and I shoved him off me, releasing the first baton.

He managed to roll with the blow, recovering from the punch quite fast, already on his hands and knees.

Right where I wanted him to be.

Swiveling on the ground, I sent a good kick on Rumlow, still in a curled position on the floor. He looked up just in time to take my shoe to the face.

He fell back, right into the hole behind him.

A loud crunch followed. I remained there, curled up on the floor, shaking and sweating, watching that gap like my life depended on it. Watching, listening, waiting for Rumlow to pop back up somewhere like the evil gopher he was.

But there was nothing.

Wincing, I pulled myself up and dragged myself over to the hole. At the bottom, Rumlow lay, unmoving, over the body of one of his comrades.
Hopefully dead. Probably unconscious.

I wasn't going to stay and find out.

Three stars

Every muscle in my body ached as I stumbled out of that warehouse. I had few actual lacerations, but by god did I have some good burns and bruises.

In my rush to leave I didn't grab all of my belongings. Just my cellphone and a water bottle, because I was famished. The notebook and all its contents was still in my jacket. After retrieving my shield, I made my getaway, into the night.

A few blocks out, I realized I still had my cell phone in my pocket. Suddenly worried that I might've broken it by accident, I pulled it out, and was pleased to see it was still in working order.

And had one voice message.

My heart soared at the sight, and instantly all my anxieties were gone. Steve was okay! He called back! When did he call back? During the fight? I didn't even notice...

But as I selected the message and held it to me ear, it wasn't Steve's voice that came through.

"Hello, Amelia." It was Alexander Pierce.

"I suppose I don't have to introduce myself, or explain how I got your number. We are SHIELD, after all. But I was hoping you would pick up." He let out a long sigh. "I wish I knew how to make this stop. You're in a lot of danger, Amelia, and I know you just want to do the right thing. You're just a kid, and I don't want to see you get hurt in a war you shouldn't even be involved in. So I'm offering you a proposition. A, er, a truce, I guess. Amnesty."

"Please, come to my home, and we can talk about things. I promise, it's not a trap. There's not going to be an army waiting to capture you. Just me, my dog, and maybe some leftovers. We can... we can work something out. Get you out of this, get you home safe. No arrests, no charges. You'll be safe here. I promise."

I pulled the phone away, staring in mute surprise at the little screen as Pierce's voice listed off his address. "I know you have every right not to trust me right now, Amelia. But things are only getting worse out there. Captain Rogers might not be coming back for you. I know if you were my daughter, I'd be doing everything in my power to keep you safe. So I'm offering myself as an ally — your only ally in SHIELD. Please, don't waste it."

And with that, the message ended.

I swallowed, my throat dry as I let it all sink in.

Steve was gone. I just got out of a bad fight, still trapped in a city I didn't know, in some war beyond my understanding. My father might be the man who trained me, a man who died a long time ago.

I was completely alone.
I didn’t know what to do.

My hand went to my chest, to the compass still swinging from my neck. Despite everything, I managed to keep a hold of it; the cool green metal was a light balm. I looked up towards the night sky, the infinite stars, taking a deep breath, its presence a reminder.

Releasing the breath, I dropped my head. Put the phone away. Made a decision.

And started to run.
Thirty minutes later, I was on the stoop of a neat modern home. At 8pm, it was dark except for a few windows further back — heart pounding, I pressed the doorbell and waited.

My mind was still spinning from the revelation in Diane's notes. The desire to pace returned as I stood restlessly under that doorway. Could James "Bucky" Barnes, now some machine, really be my father?

It couldn't be true. I didn't want it to be true. Suddenly, inexplicably, I wanted my old life back, the version where I pretended Steve was my dad, as weird and occasionally uncomfortable as it was. At least I didn't feel horrified by it.

Something hit me, then. Something Peggy had said when I visited. That I looked like someone she knew. She never did recall, but could she have been talking about Barnes?

It was possible — they had to have known each other, right? She was a big ally to the Howling Commandos.

Unfortunately, I couldn't ask. Not now, not unless I wanted to SHIELD to rain down it's entire force on an old woman's house.

I didn't really expect an answer to the ring, and I waited for an entire minute before doubt overwhelmed me. With a turn of the heel, I changed my mind. Stupid, this is stupid, he can't help you, I need to go someplace else…

"Amelia?" Just as I turned my back, the door opened. Alexander Pierce stood just inside, wearing a robe and pajamas. He had a cup of coffee in one hand, and glasses perched on his nose. He looked like a grandpa that had just been disturbed from his nightly viewing of Jeopardy.

"I, er, I got your message." I felt a wave of embarrassment, but it was brief. "Did you mean it? You won't sell me out?"

"Of course not," Pierce replied, sounding just a little miffed that I'd question it. When I stepped back under the light from the hallway, Pierce's eyes widened, and he did a double-take. "My God, you look like you've been through the wringer. Please, come in, come in…"

With somewhat frantic motions, he stepped aside and gestured for me to come indoors. I considered the open doorway for a long moment, chewing my lip. Something in my head was telling me this felt too easy, in a way. Help never came so readily for me. No solution was ever delivered to me so neatly on a silver platter.

But I was hungry, aching, exhausted. I could only imagine how I looked, what would've caused Pierce to react to my appearance that way. In many ways, this day had broken; not physically, but in every other way. First, the revelation about Dmitri and the Chairman; then the fact that Steve is apparently gone, either dead or missing in action. And finally, possibly the worst of all depending
on its veracity, was the idea that the Winter Soldier might be my father.

Just one of these was bad enough, but all three? I felt disoriented, frayed at the edges, pulled in every direction. I didn't know which problem to solve first, which one I could handle in the midst of being constantly hunted down by SHIELD.

At the very least, Pierce would've been a pragmatic solution. No one in SHIELD would suspect to find me here of all places. Right under their noses.

And Pierce had been kind to me. Mysterious and vague, sure, but kind.

In the end, I was too run down to find another solution. I couldn't keep running the whole night, trying to find another safe house only to be chased out a few hours later. Right now, I needed food, rest, and just… time to think. To reorganize, reprioritize. Figure my way out of this.

So I took a deep breath, and stepped inside.

"I know you must have a lot of questions, I can only imagine what you're feeling right now. But I promise, we're completely safe. This house has state of the art security..." Pierce led the way to his kitchen, through a hallway with windows on either side, giving a nearly three-sixty view of the lush landscaping and the river beyond. In fact, there were huge windows in every room we went through, the furniture minimalist and vaguely retro. It was beautiful and luxurious, but all I saw was a killbox with no way out.

It seemed Pierce lived here alone — all the coats and shoes by the door were men's, one size. Photos hanging on the wall indicated family, but there was a decidedly empty feeling about the place. It reminded me vaguely of Diane, but this felt different. There was a character to it, while Pierce's home was carefully organized, orderly, not a single piece out of place. Or maybe I just felt weird about stepping into someone's home. It was always a personal, private place, and often said more about a person than they could for themselves.

As we passed by a framed Rothko painting, Pierce paused only a moment to glance at it. At first, I thought he was studying the artistry — only for him to reach out and tap the side, realigning the frame so it was perfectly straight. Pierce stepped back to analyze it again, before nodding to himself in satisfaction.

When he noticed me staring, Pierce seemed to remember himself, and offered a chagrined smile. "Ah, sorry. I run a tight ship, as you can see."

I smiled back, but it was awkward and half-hearted. "Oh. Uh. No worries."

Pierce chuckled, shaking his head to himself, and continued as if nothing happened. "And this is why I live alone..."

This weird chitchat did not put me at ease in any way. I knew Pierce was trying his best, but honestly I wanted to cut right to the chase. As we entered the kitchen, Pierce moved at an easy, gliding pace, clearly comfortable with the area; I, on the other hand, stayed a few paces behind him, halting every couple seconds to scan a dark corner or out a window. So many damn windows...

"Oh, did you want something, by the way?" Pierce's question broke my line of thought. I looked over to where he stood, by the open fridge, under the kitchen lights he just turned on. He had to squint slightly under the brightness. "Water, milk? I'm sure you must be starving. I've got a, er, leftover meatloaf, if you want it."
"I want to know why SHIELD is hunting Steve," I said before I could reconsider; my words came out sharp, so abrupt I startled myself. The anger came roiling out too fast to stop — I was on a roll. "I want to know why SHIELD took over Diane's murder case, why they wanted his son for questioning, why this fucking STRIKE team decided to use live ammunition on me when I didn't even do anything!"

By the end, I was shaking, breath heaving, lung shuddering with bottled up emotion. My fists were clenched so tight that when I finally forced them open, I saw I had cut myself with my own nails. Looking back up at Pierce, I saw his stunned expression, and my face flushed in shame. Way to keep it together, Amelia.

"Meatloaf's fine," I said in a small voice.

"Mr. Pierce, is everything alright? I thought I heard yelling — oh!" a woman appeared in the kitchen, following a rush of footsteps. Dressed modestly in a skirt and apron, she blinked at me in confusion, then turned to Pierce. "I didn't know you were having guests."

Her appearance startled me, and I was immediately on my guard. Posture tensed, feet wide, center of balance low, ready for a fight. But her appearance was unassuming and I felt a twinge of doubt, wondering if I was just being paranoid. The woman was middle-aged, dark hair graying at the temples, with what sounded like a Slavic accent. She moved primly but I could see the laxness of her shoulders, the weight of her body; no SHIELD agent, not an agent at all. Just a regular woman. A housemaid. Still, I didn't know someone else was here. I had assumed we'd be completely alone. Pierce, glancing between the two of us, seemed to sense the problem and quickly intervened.

"Ah, my apologies, Renata. It was a… last minute call." Pierce smiled, but it wasn't as easy as the last time. He gestured to me and said, "Renata, this is Amelia, the daughter of a friend. Amelia, this is Renata. She's my woman of the hour, always keeping this place top notch…"

"Ah, you're too kind, Mr. Pierce, too kind," Renata grinned, apple cheeks beaming at the flattery as she flapped her hands, as if to wave away the complement. And just like that, the tension released. "Is there anything I can help with, then?"

"Actually, I think Amelia here would really appreciate something to eat." Pierce said in an upbeat way, but his expression seemed melancholy, sympathetic as he shot me a look. "It's been a long day for us both."

Renata asked no more questions; either she wasn't very curious or she was paid not to be. Either way, the kindly smile she threw my way was genuine, as was the offer to take my coat. I could only shake my head no, feeling bad for having reacted the way I did.

Pierce ushered me into the nearby dining room, to speak privately while Renate began working away in the kitchen. The sound of running water, clattering pots, hissing steam, and the thok-thok of a knife on a cutting board were surprisingly comforting. It reminded me of home, of Aunt May cooking in the kitchen while I did homework at the table.

What a long ways away that felt now.

"Please, make yourself comfortable," Pierce offered me to sit at the head of the table — black mahogany, thick and study, could sit at least ten people. The surface was utterly smooth, unscratched. I wondered if Pierce actually entertained anyone here.

After a second's hesitation, I relented, shrugging off my shield, my backpack, my coat. Dropped it
all at the foot of the table with a big sigh, and sat myself down. It wasn't until the weight was off my legs did I suddenly feel how tired I was, how my body sloped forward without the shield pulling it back. I might've actually blacked out for a moment, until the smell of meatloaf brought me back. Pierce, having just placed the recently-microwaved meal in front of me. He sat down in the chair to my right and gave a silent nod as an indication for me to eat.

I didn't need to be asked twice. As soon as I got over my self-consciousness, I picked up the fork and started to eat.

As I began my devouring of the meatloaf, Pierce started to speak. "Amelia, I want you to know that I am going to give you full disclosure, for anything you ask tonight. To the best of my ability, at least. Anything and everything we talk about tonight will be completely off the books. Not a word of it will leave this house." Pierce inhaled. "All I ask is that you give me the same honesty in return. I know trust is a very difficult thing for you right now, but I can't tell you all that I know if I don't know all that you know. Do you understand, Amelia?"

I nodded quickly and almost choked on a piece of meatloaf in my enthusiasm. Was I going to be completely honest? Absolutely not. But I was going to tell as much of the truth as I was comfortable with, in order to get what I needed.

"So you wanted to know why SHIELD considers Captain Rogers a threat," Pierce sighed, taking a second to think about that answer. Fingers lacing together across the table, his gaze wandered the room, taking in the black glass and the night beyond. "We believe that Rogers may be hiding something in regards to the assassination of Director Fury. When questioned, we found his story didn't add up, and when he realized we suspected him, he decided to run. Now I don't know about you, Amelia, but when a man decides to run from authority, it makes him look guilty. Like he has something to hide. Maybe there's been a severe misunderstanding, but for right now, Steve Rogers has successfully evaded capture, and seems to be operating on his own agenda."

I paused eating to take this all in. Steve had never said what had led to him jumping out of a building, but I assumed it might've been a fight. Something that convinced him SHIELD wasn't trustworthy.

And Pierce was using diplomatic language to hide the vagueness of SHIELD's side of the story. I wasn't convinced. Keeping a straight face, I said, "So, what was it about his story that didn't add up?"

"We had evidence to believe that Fury hired a mercenary in order to attack a SHIELD vessel, the Lemurian Star — the same mission in with Captain Rogers was tasked with saving the hostages. What we didn't know at the time was that there was another objective: to steal valuable, encrypted information that was also onboard the Star. We believe Fury was trying to sell this information, and this sale went sour, leading to his death."

"But what does this have to do with Steve?"

"Because I don't think it was an accident that Fury chose Roger's apartment that night he died. I think Rogers' knows its significance, too. Perhaps he wasn't directly involved in the secret sale, but his presence alone on that vessel calls his entire reputation into question. Fury valued Rogers as his one of his best assets. His second best asset was Black Widow. Rogers' partner, and the woman responsible for stealing that information. She and Rogers are now on the run together. Does that seem like a coincidence to you?"

I blinked, startled. Steve and Natasha were on the run together? I didn't realize she was involved, too. I struggled to come up with some other excuse, another possibility, but couldn't find any. I
didn't know anything about the Black Widow, and hadn't had enough communication with Steve to say anything in his defense.

"That does sound pretty bad," I admitted reluctantly, looking down at my plate of half-eaten meatloaf. Three slices, almost finished and I was still hungry. For the moment, my appetite abated. I didn't want to consider that Steve would really be part of something like that.

"Now I can't say what the truth is, because I don't know, either," Pierce said, raising his hands as an indication of fallibility. "What I do know is that when I tried to talk to you again, about all of this, you decided to follow Rogers' example and escape as well. Now I know you had nothing to do with the Lemurian Star, Amelia, I have no doubt of your innocence in all of this. But I want to know why you ran. Did Rogers tell you?"

"More or less," I said with a shrug. "He told me not to trust SHIELD. So I got out as fast as I could."

"A creative interpretation of orders," Pierce said, raising his eyebrows, smirking slightly at his own joke. "Well, I can't say you didn't perform them outstandingly."

"Having a loaded gun pulled on me with no warning tends to be a pretty good motivation." I said just as quickly. Me, still salty? More likely than you think.

"Ah, right," Pierce hung his head, and I felt vindication at the self-reproach. "That's my fault entirely. I had informed the man intended to escort you to be careful, because I was aware of your… alleged talents, as Agent 13 described them. I meant it as a warning for him to not come off as a threat, not to see you as one. The quarantine also didn't help matters, I imagine. I truly am sorry, Amelia, I should have chosen a better man for the task. Someone with a more level head."

"And the STRIKE team?" I demanded, still keenly aware of the sensation of getting electrocuted a half dozen times. "No offense, but Rumlow needs a psych check."

Incredibly, Pierce seemed more aggrieved by his information than surprised. "Yes, I've gotten… complaints about his behavior before. Rumlow leads his team with an iron fist, and he's very passionate about protecting SHIELD's ideals. I wish I could say I had control over the man but I think the betrayal of Captain Rogers has affected him deeply. They were friends, if I recall."

That was hard to believe. I couldn't imagine Steve ever being fooled into friendship with a man like that. Steve may be new to the 21st century but he wasn't born yesterday. People like Rumlow always existed, and I had to believe that Steve could see his type from a mile away.

"But you don't have to fear him anymore, I promise," Pierce added quickly, perhaps guessing that I wasn't convinced. "He's been reassigned, focused solely on capturing Captain Rogers and Agent Romanov, and no one else. A fact I'm sure he'd thankful of, considering the thrashing you've given him and his team."

More flattery, trying to get on my good side, but this time it worked. I couldn't help but smile a little, still proud of my escape in our last encounter. "Good."

"I assume you're also responsible for removing Dmitri Kasyanenko from our custody?"

"Yes," I said, pretty sure they knew that already, so felt no need to deny it.

"You know you seriously injured several of my men."

"Yes," I said again, unashamed. "They hurt my friend. He wasn't under arrest and they were taking
him against his will, without a lawyer or anything. I had to do something."

"And where is your friend now?" Pierce asked, and looked about the room in a show of curiosity. "I see he's not with you now, and I doubt you'd leave him alone unprotected, given all you did to save his life. Not that it was in any danger to begin with, of course."

"I got him out," I said. My turn to be vague. Pierce could be as honest as he liked but I wasn't going to betray Dmitri for anything. Not even when his father was the Chairman (another fact I decided to keep to myself).

"Out of where?"

"The country." I didn't know that for sure, but it was probably true. I doubted the Chairman would want to stay in America for very long.

"Ah. Well, that explains how he completely vanished from our radar," Pierce didn't look pleased by this, but I couldn't say I felt the same. "How did you get him out?"

"We contacted his father," I replied, choosing my words carefully. "He apparently has a lot of connections, and got Dmitri out last night. Maybe they went home, I don't know."

"Home as in… Russia?"

I shrugged again, cagey but trying to act casual. "Maybe. They never told me. I didn't ask."

"Hmm. Probably for the best, then," Pierce nodded slowly, pressing his lips together. A finger tapped the hardwood surface. He glanced at me again, eyes narrowing slightly. "Are you sure you didn't overhear anything? Dmitri didn't say where they might've gone?"

"No."

"And Dmitri's father, was he there?"

"Yes."

"And was this the first time you'd ever met."

My heart skipped a beat. "No."

"You're sure? You'd never seen Dmitri's father before last night?"

This time, I didn't break eye contact. "I'm sure."

I wasn't sure what he was looking for. My heartbeat was starting to pick up and I was doing everything in my power to continue acting normally. Did Pierce know something? Did he know something was up with Dmitri's dad? Did he have an idea that it might be the Chairman of the KGB? Or was he just looking for more information, a way to trace Dmitri's whereabouts?

Pierce opened his mouth again to speak, but was interrupted when Renata appeared, a plate of steaming pasta in one hand. She came in all smiles, and received them in return — not at all like we were discussing topics of national and personal security, the fate of people we cared about.

As she set the pasta before me, Renata saw the empty plate of now-finished meatloaf and clicked her tongue. "Oh, Mr. Pierce, you've ruined her appetite!"

"No, no, its fine," I said, pulling the plate of pasta towards me. For a moment, Pierce looked
surprised, almost a little miffed, and I decided to go to bat. I gave Renata a grateful smile and picked up my fork again. "I'm still hungry. Really need the calories. I'm an… athlete."

It sounded so dumb as soon as I said it, but Renata seemed pleased. She clasped her hands together and said, "Oh, well then, I'll leave you to it. Let me know if you two need anything else."

"It's alright, Renata, you can go home," Pierce said with a wave of his hand, smiling in thanks. "You've done more than enough. I've got it covered."

"Ah, well, if you say so…!"

As soon as Renata had disappeared, the air of tension returned. Half-time had ended. Back to the game.

I decided to take the lead this time, before Pierce could ask me about Dmitri again. "So why is SHIELD interested in Diana Hawkins' murder?"

"I believe you already asked me this question, Amelia."

"And I'm asking you again."

Pierce eyed me for a long moment, perhaps weighing his options. Or maybe reconsidering this proposition entirely. Of course, I already knew. I just wanted to see what Alexander Pierce knew, or what he was willing to tell me under this guise of full disclosure. I waited expectantly, taking a bite of ravioli (I wasn't lying when I said I was still hungry. My last full meal was nearly two nights ago).

"The last time we spoke, I told you I suspected it was more than a coincidence that Fury and Ms. Hawkins were attacked at the same time, on the same day." Pierce began. "I will admit, I was not completely honest. SHIELD was already aware that Ms. Hawkins was working on a big story, something that could call into question the state of our national security. So we'd been keeping tabs on her, trying to get a better idea of what she was working on. Diana Hawkins, may she rest in peace, was one hell of a paranoid woman and we could not find a damn thing. So, when she was killed, I had reason to believe it was for the story she was covering."

"You made it sound like she and Fury were connected." I replied, remembering how it felt the first time. Knowing what SHIELD suspected of Fury now, I wondered if SHIELD suspected Diana had any knowledge of Fury's underhanded dealings. Now I knew, with some certainty, she didn't — at least not with this Lemurian Star. "Now you know they aren't?"

"To some degree," Pierce said. "She may have treaded into the same waters as Fury, but I don't have evidence to say that she had any idea of what he was doing, or that it was him specifically doing it. I do believe, however, that it still had much to do with America's interests. Fury was keeping tabs on her, too. And Fury never does anything without a reason."

All of that just told me what I already figured; Diana was killed for what she knew. No surprise there. I thought over my next question carefully; there was so much in Diana's notes that I wanted more information on, but the questions were near endless. What was the most important?

Then I remembered. The last page of her notes.

"What's Project Insight?" I asked.

Whatever it was Pierce expected me to ask, that definitely wasn't it, because his face went two shades paler. His hand slipped from under his chin and he had to catch himself against the table.
Still, aside from the slight widening of the eyes, Pierce recomposed himself quickly — this was as surprised as he ever got.

"Now that's an interesting question." He finally said, smiling slightly.

"So it's real?" I leaned forward. "...Whatever it is?"

"How did you hear about it?" Pierce asked in turn, without answering.

I pulled back, realizing I might have shown my hand. "It's what Diana was looking into. I saw her notes."

Better than saying I have her notes, at least. But I had to convince Pierce that I knew it was real, it was valid information, so he couldn't blow it off. Judging by his reaction, this was a lot bigger than I realized.

"You saw her notes?" Surprised again. "SHIELD believed they were destroyed, or hidden. So you found them?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't turn them in?"

"It was right when SHIELD had taken over the FBI's case." I replied, trying to phrase it as best as I could without coming off like a fool. "It seemed weird to me, and I didn't like SHIELD to begin with. When Fury died, I hid them, so I could come back and read them later. By the time I did, Steve had told me not to trust SHIELD, and I'd already been chased by STRIKE. So yeah. I didn't turn it in."

"You hid it in Steve's building." Pierce guessed, raising his chin as he came upon a new understanding. "So that explains why it took you so long to help Agent Thirteen. And why you returned to the location. Had you planted the vibranium shield there as well?"

"No. A, um, a friend did that for me." I said, making a face. That had been pure luck, but I didn't want to say it. Honestly, the only reason I was alive was less through skill and more through good fortune — what little of it I had. But it was always just enough. "Anyways, I read the notes. She was looking into a French diplomat's assassination — Plamondon. Then an ex-KGB agent, who'd been her source, was killed, and she basically stumbled upon this giant conspiracy. Dozens of assassinations, across decades. All done by one man, a soviet agent. The Winter Soldier. He killed Plamondon. In her notes, she said you knew him."

"I did," Pierce went very still for a moment, his expression turning first melancholy, then grave. "He was a good friend of mine. These are very serious accusations you're making, Amelia. SHIELD has suspected an agent known as the Winter Soldier to be responsible for his murder, but we never had substantial evidence that he even existed."

"He exists," I said. "He still does. Diana had evidence of it, and plenty more. She figured out that he must be a kind of super soldier, able to live longer somehow, and that he's the only one. More were made, but they failed. She had old documents from the 40s and 50's, from when he was first brought into the fold. How he has a metal arm. How it was made by a scientist brought over by Operation Paperclip. She has it, it's all there, I swear it."

As I explained, my entire energy shifted, from guarded to persistent, desperate, entirely passionate in what I knew to be true. Finally, I was telling the head of SHIELD, the man in charge of everything, that the Winter Soldier was real, that he was a threat and they had to take it seriously.
But Pierce didn't look convinced. His brow furrowed deeply, and he pinched his nose beneath his glasses, shaking his head. "This is all... very interesting stuff, but I don't see how —"

"When you said you believed Diana and Fury to be connected, I knew you were right," I interrupted, trying to keep my breathing even, as my words came out rushed and frantic. "Because the Winter Soldier killed Nick Fury."

"What?" Pierce jolted slightly, staring at me. "How do you —"

"Because I saw him, I recognized him," I continued. Maybe I should've felt bad interrupting him, but it was such a relief to get this off my chest. To finally tell someone, someone who had power, who could do something. "I met the Winter Soldier before. The attack on Tower Bridge last year? That was him, too. I was there, I tried to stop him. SHIELD picked me up after, but when I told them, they didn't believe me. But he killed Plamondon, he killed Diana's source, he killed Fury. He probably killed Diana, too. He works for the KGB, who still exist, who can still do all this without getting caught because no one thinks they're still active anymore. Whatever's going on, the KGB is involved, and it might have something to do with this Project Insight. It was the last thing Diana had in her notes before she was killed. Please, Mr. Pierce, you have to believe me."

"I-I do, I believe you, I just — I'm sorry, it's a lot to take in," Alexander Pierce, looking shaken, took off his glasses with trembling fingers. He ran a hand over his face, and for the first time, it hit me that he was old. The lines in his face had become canyons of age and experience, pain and loss. He'd only had this job for a few days. And now it was being turned on its head yet again. "S-so you're telling me that the ones who killed Fury — who he might've also been selling information to — is the Russian KGB, defunct for over two decades?"

"They're still operating, just not in Russia, I don't think," I said. "They've spread out, relocated. Further into Europe. Sokovia. Places where no one expects to find them."

"I see." Pierce was quiet for a long moment, rubbing his chin in careful contemplation. His gaze was far away, fixed on the floor but not really seeing it. Then, finally, "Project Insight is SHIELD's answer to rising global threat. The world has become chaotic, unpredictable, but we have developed an algorithm that can now predict not just the actions of individuals, but their future. We can see what choices they make, what kinds of people they will become. If they'll become heroes. Or threats. With this algorithm, we can find and intercept these people before they can hurt anyone. It's still in development, we haven't launched it yet.

"It was an idea conceptualized by Fury and approved by the Council. I had my reasons against it, but Fury had brought me around to see his side of things. Of course, that was before I knew about his actions regarding the Lemurian Star..." Pierce rubbed his eyes again. "Oh, this changes everything..."

"S-so you believe me, then?" I asked, even though I already had an answer. Still, I had to be sure. "Am I still — I don't want to get in trouble for this. I know I'm not supposed to know. And I don't want Steve to get hurt. I don't think he has any idea of what Diana discovered. I tried to tell him but... I don't think it got through. I don't even know if he's still alive —"

My voice broke and I couldn't continue, finding myself suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. Relief at finally speaking everything (or... almost everything) that had been weighing on me, but also a terrible realization that I might still be too late.

"At the moment, Captain Rogers current status is unknown," Pierce answered, and after a moment, set a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. "I believe he's still alive, Amelia. I have no doubt about it. He's... he's one tough bastard. And when I'm able, I'm going to offer him the same deal I
gave to you. If he's got as much sense as you do, he'll take it. And we can have this all sorted out, and then deal with the real problem."

I nodded quietly, swallowing at the lump that formed in my throat. I hated this feeling, hated how childish it must make me look. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, the first thing is arranging a meeting with my fellow Councilmembers, and asking them what the hell they were thinking with this Project Insight," he told me. "It's clear to me that this whole endeavor has been severely compromised. Insight is set to launch in forty-eight hours. I have a mind to cancel it, indefinitely."

He emphasized it with a wink. "You've done me a great favor today, Amelia. Maybe it's too soon to say, but to hell with it — you're going to change history." He smiled warmly, softly. "Your father would be so proud of you."

I tried to smile back, but it faltered at that last sentence. "Y-yeah. I hope so."

"Were there any other questions you had? I think I learned everything I needed to," When I shook my head, Pierce nodded, "Right. In that case, I think it's time for both of us to get some rest. Fair to say the next few days are going to be big ones."

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My bed that evening would be a real one this time — after Pierce showed me to his guest room, he bade me goodnight and shut the door. Like everything else in the house, the guest room was minimalist but comfortable; queen bed, a bureau, a closet, a desk, a reading chair; again with the overlarge windows, which I covered with curtains almost immediately. And for extra measure, I stuck the desk chair under the doorknob. I noticed after a quick appraisal that the room had its own bathroom, and quickly took advantage of its shower.

It gave me time to think over what just happened. Alexander Pierce had answered all my questions, just as he promised. I had a feeling he was still holding back, but I knew more now than I did before, and it gave me a new context for what I already learned. On top of it all, I had managed to keep the notebook to myself without having to show it or give it away, and I considered that a win. I didn't want to give that away until I had a solid plan on how to spread its information.

And he had given me hope. He believed Steve was still alive. It meant we still had a chance.

I had no pajamas so I wore the same clothes as before, although I did find a large white shirt in one of the bureau drawers. Wearing something clean was a thrill all on its own. I found a small amount of security when I put MJ's bottlecap bracelet back on. Somehow, it had managed to stick with me throughout it all. Maybe it was silly to still wear it at this time, but I wanted to. A reminder for the home I wanted to return to.

Sleep would be a different question.

It came to me fast, and it came fitfully. Exhaustion overwhelmed me as soon as I hit the pillows, but I might have thought twice if I'd known I'd find myself walking in that wintry forest again.

That same goddamn dream.
Heavy footsteps crunching in the deep snow. Pristine white as far as the eye could see. Craggy, razor-edge mountains reaching into the sky, disappearing into the thick clouds above. Snow and wind buffeting from all sides. Still, marching on regardless.

The soldier, directly ahead of me. A silent, moving statue. He said nothing. I did the same.

Columns of bare trees passed us on either side. This time, I recognized a few. The same path as last time. We were heading towards the same village as before.

I thought knowing this time around might give me power over this memory, this dream, this whatever it was — but I couldn't pull away. I couldn't stop or change anything. I was an audience trapped inside my own head, watching it all as if it were happening to someone else.

But the cold felt real. The metal in my hands felt real. It couldn't be anyone else but me.

Just like last time, we came upon a ridge high over a valley. Below us, the buildings all clustered together in their modest little town. It was daylight. People were out and about. I couldn't tell if this was before or after the man with the mustache had been killed on his front porch. If it was after, it seemed everyone had forgotten about it, moved on with their lives; moving about at an easy speed, chatting with their neighbors. Not blocking their windows. Not keeping their children inside. Not looking over their shoulders.

I crouched next to the soldier, and this time he pointed out the next target. Far down in the village, walking along a path in the empty crop fields, were a pair of children, maybe teenagers. A boy and a girl, playing in the wide open space, their laughing ringing out even from here.

I couldn't see their faces from here. The soldier only pointed to one. The girl.

When I looked down through the rifle sight, I found the target easily. She was watching the boy as he made a funny impression. Her back was turned towards me, so all I saw was a pale blonde head. *Good.* I thought to myself, in a mind that wasn't my own. *Easier this way.*

I didn't really consider why.

"Сделай выстрел." The soldier ordered.

And just like last time, I told myself not to do it. I wouldn't. *I wouldn't.*

Not a girl. Please, not this girl.

It was so easy I wanted to cry. There was no one around to stop me. She had no protection. Not even the boy could really amount to much. There was a possibility he might get hurt, too, and that just made it worst. Two kills for the price of one.

How could I do this?

It didn't matter. I had to.

The soldier remained silent. I thought I'd be chastised, or have that same order repeated. Instead, perhaps guessing that I was working up the will to resist, the soldier picked up his own rifle, and settled it on his knee.

My heart nearly stopped. If I couldn't do it, he would.

No matter what happened, the girl would die. All that mattered was who pulled the trigger first.
I wasn't sure what would happen to me if I didn't do it.

My focus returned to the sight, mind racing. The girl, dancing with the boy. Her hair was long and unkempt, and I couldn't make out her face. A moving target was more difficult to hit, but all one had to do was track her actions. Fire where she was going to be next.

My finger fell on the trigger. I tried to pull it back, but it wouldn't shift. Either I did it, or the soldier did.

*It has to be me,* I thought in my mad sense of logic. *No one else. Only me.*

I had to do it before he did.

Each heartbeat slammed into my chest with the weight of a sledgehammer. Each second that passed was a missed opportunity. Another one for the soldier to take.

Then, the girl stopped dancing. Her face turned, finally in view.

My heart stopped. I recognized her.

It was me.

*Boom.*

My eyes flew open, a gasp leaving my chest. Heart racing, I swung my body up and away, filled with the instinct to *run.*

Knees hit the floor, a soft rug. My hands braced against cool hardwood, and suddenly I realized I wasn't in the forest anymore. No, Pierce's home. A bedroom. In America. I was safe.

It was just a nightmare.

Taking deep, gasping breaths, I tried to calm my nerves, but something was off. The gunshot in my dream still rang in my ears. I winced, rubbing my head. It was like it really happened.

I also heard a different ringing. I looked over, confused. The metal lampshade, on the bedside table. It rang softly, as if something had hit it. Like an object. Or a loud noise.

I blinked, frowning. Wait, did a *gunshot* wake me up?

And just like that, my heart was pounding again. *Oh god. Someone's in the house. Alexander Pierce is in danger. Had to get out, had to find —*

I rushed to the door, but jumped back when it opened away from my hand, outside my will. Hallway light flooded in, blinding me for a moment, before I saw Pierce standing in my doorway. "Amelia, are you okay? I thought I heard shouting, or screaming?"

"I-I —" Frozen, I could only gaped wordlessly for a second, trying to wrap my head around what I'd just experienced. I *had* to have heard something. That gunshot was real. But Pierce was fine, and there was no gun in sight. Finally, I slumped against the door frame, adrenalin draining from me and leaving only a headache in its wake. "S-sorry. I had a nightmare, I guess. I thought… I thought I heard a gunshot…"

"A gunshot? No, there wasn't a gunshot," Pierce frowned slightly, shaking his head. "Must've been from your dream. Are you feeling alright, Amelia? I can get you some melatonin if you're having trouble sleeping."
"N-no, I'm fine," I murmured, rubbing my head. It still rattled with the gunshot from my memory. Or… whatever it was. I didn't want to think about it. I decided not to tell Pierce that there wasn't strong enough melatonin in the world to help me sleep. "Just exhausted, that's all. I'm sorry I woke you."

"After the experience you just had, I can hardly blame you for it," Alexander Pierce replied, waving it off. "Try to get some rest, alright? I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay," I said, and just as I was about to close the door, I paused. "And thank you. For listening to me."

Pierce smiled. "Of course. I'm a man of my word, Amelia. I'd never let you down."

"Yeah… you know, I just realized," I said, tilting my head as a new thought occurred to me, from our previous conversation. "... You never asked me what I was doing at Tower Bridge when it was attacked. Or how I knew the KGB was in Sokovia."

It was sudden and abrupt, and maybe now was an inappropriate time to bring it up, but I couldn't help it. Just as well, because Pierce looked a little taken aback. "Oh! Well, I do have a, er, a vague understanding of your time in captivity, how you escaped and all. I didn't want to question it and possibly make you relive a traumatic experience…" Pierce frowned at me, noticing I was no longer paying attention. "Amelia, are you alright?"

But I couldn't answer. I wasn't all right. Because right behind Pierce, down the dark hallway, the Winter Soldier appeared.
Pierce didn't understand until he, too, turned around. "What the hell —"

He did a double-take at the sight of the Winter Soldier, lurking in the background. Pierce threw up his hands and said, "I thought I told you to stay back!"

The Winter Soldier blinked at him, silent. Only the gleam of his eyes could be seen in the darkness.

Then there was me, who barely registered any of this. For a few long seconds, I could only stand there, frozen, my brain racing but unable to react — trying to decide between running and fighting, fleeing or protecting Alexander Pierce, who just stood there, calm as could be.

In the face of the man who killed his best friend.

The man who was staring straight at me.
Then Pierce's last words finally hit me, and something clicked. I didn't understand what he said, what he meant, not then — not with the panic racing in my blood. But somewhere, someplace in my brain finally pieced together that this was wrong, that my life was my first priority.

So I ran.

I shoved past Pierce and took off down the hall to my left, away from Pierce and the Winter Soldier.

I probably should've gotten my shield first.

But it had been resting against the bed behind me, too far away, and by the time I even thought of it, I had already placed both Pierce and the Winter Soldier between me and it.

Couldn't go back.

"What are you waiting for?" Pierce's voice echoed behind me. "Go get her! You started this mess, fix it!"

I almost didn't believe it was him. The impatience and anger sounded like it came from a different man entirely.

This is wrong. This is completely wrong.

I tried to remember where the exit was — where any exit was. But I couldn't remember. Pierce's home was huge; a mansion, really, with different modules interconnected by a series of hallways. Somehow, I managed to make it to the kitchen. From there, it was only a straight shot to the front door.

I didn't see the body before I tripped on it.


The answer to the gunshot.

Swallowing my rising nausea, I stumbled and kept going. I turned down the next hall.

The Winter Soldier stood there, waiting for me.

I gasped, skidding to a stop. Only I had taken my shoes off, leaving me with only socks. Socks on smooth marble floors. I had so much forward momentum that when I tried to stop, my feet slipped out right from underneath me, and I hit the floor hard.

Landing hard on my hip, I was already scrambling backwards, trying to get back onto my feet. I didn't even see the Winter Soldier lunging for me.

A metal hand snatched my ankle. I fell before I could even get up. My chest landed on the steps leading up to the kitchen, and the small table set nearby. Just close enough to reach.

Straining, I snapped my arm out, grabbed the leg of a chair, and swung back. Wild, unfocused, just throwing a big piece of furniture behind me. The Winter Soldier ducked, and the chair shattered across his shoulders. He released me and I kept going.

I wished desperately that I had any of my weapons on me. Shield, gun, knife. All of it was left behind.
Behind the table is one of those wide windows. Large enough for a grown man to jump through. Seeing my escape, I grabbed another chair and threw it at the glass.

Only to watch the chair bounce away, glass unharmed.

Bewildered, but too terrified to sit and wonder, I decided to risk it and threw myself at the glass, too, thinking it was a fluke. A few cuts wouldn't matter if I could get out of this alive.

But the glass didn't give. I bounced right back as if I'd hit a solid wall.

I crashed into the table behind me, both sides of me now aching from the impact. My headache had increased tenfold.

"Remember what I said about state-of-the-art security?" Pierce called out, appearing down the hall from which I'd came from. He seemed deeply amused by my failed attempts. "Shatterproof glass. Strong enough to block a rocket. And a super soldier."

Gritting my teeth, I spun around, facing the Winter Soldier. For some reason, he didn't come after me immediately, despite the amount of time I'd wasted just trying to break the window. His eyes flicked to Pierce, then back to me.

When he looked at Pierce again, possibly confused by something, I dove for the kitchen counter.

The sudden move kicked the Winter Soldier into action, and he brought up his arm just in time to block the butcher knife I'd whipped out of the stand. It clanged off and I swung again, but he caught the offending hand, twisting my wrist until it hurt too much to hang on. I tried to resist, but the metal grip didn't yield, absolutely crushing. I hissed, letting the knife clatter to the floor.

At the same time, my other hand was reaching for another weapon.

Just as the Winter Soldier yanked my wrist back up, I brought the cast iron pan down on his head. His metal arm too busy holding mine, the Winter Soldier didn't see it coming, much less block it.

The blow connected with a satisfying clang and it set the Winter Soldier off-kilter. He grunted and let go, and I swung again.

Blam!

A bullet knocked it out of my hands.

I whirled around, alarmed. Pierce, still standing there, only with a gun in his hand. Raised towards me. "You're making this a lot harder than it has to be, Amelia."

For a split second, I thought I was done for. Pierce had me dead to rights with that gun on my chest. I had nothing, no shield to protect me, nothing to hide behind.

Until the Winter Soldier recovered and stood up again, completely oblivious as he stepped right in front of me.

He reached for my shoulder, or my throat — didn't matter because he never touched me. I was just a little bit faster. Leaning back on the counter, I braced my back against it as I lifted up both legs and slammed my feet into his chest.

The Winter Soldier fell back — honestly it wasn't as strong as I'd hoped. He caught himself before he could fall off the edge of the steps, not even knocked off his feet. But it startled Pierce, who
jumped back, which was enough for me. With his aim thrown off, I darted left. A bullet ricocheted off the wall as I pivoted on my heel and tore down the hall.

A beeline for the door. I was there.

I was almost there.

As soon as it appeared, my heart soared. I had a head start, I could make it, I just had to get this damn door unlocked first —

My hands shook trying to unlatch the door, undo three locks that must have been part of the whole "state-of-the-art security" thing. In the back of my mind, I knew it was taking too long. But I couldn't smash my way through the door any more than I could through a window. It was thick and heavy, and without my shield I wasn't getting through that with time I didn't have.


And then two hands slammed onto my shoulders and yanked me backwards. Thrown through the air, I had no control over where I landed. All I knew was that behind me was a kind of living room, couches and chairs. But it was the glass coffee table that broke my fall.

Glass cut into my back and arms, slicing through cloth like butter. My back hit the table stand underneath, bruising. Head snapped against the floor beneath. Stars flashed in front of my eyes, and I was slow to recover.

Ears ringing, I just barely made out the bang as the front door was slammed shut again. Freedom, denied. So close…

I didn't have time to get up before a fist grabbed me by the hair and lifted me up by the head. My vision was still blurry — I couldn't see much, but I knew by the strength and the presence above me was the Winter Soldier. I had one hand trying to pull his off, while the other scanned the floor for a weapon.

Tiny glass slivers cut into my hand, and my blood smeared against the pristine white floor. My hand caught against a shard large enough to grab onto. My fingers clenched.

I slammed the jagged glass upwards, as close as I could figure the Winter Soldier to be.

It connected, but not as well as I would've liked. A good bodily stab would've been preferably, but I only grazed him on the side. The arm, maybe. I knew I cut into flesh when I heard the exhale, the only indication of pain the Winter Soldier would give.

It also wasn't enough to let me go, but enough to loosen the grip. I was clenching the glass so hard it eventually broke in my hand, useless. Throwing the pieces away, I grabbed the offending arm, shifting my weight upwards, the pressure away from my head. Using it as leverage, I lifted myself back onto my feet. Not quite standing, but enough to deliver a good kick to the side of his knee.

I wasn't sure if my bare foot would've done much harm past the armor he was wearing, but his knee gave way just a tad. His weight shifted and I finally twisted out of his grip, delivering my knee to his sternum at the same time.

It knocked him back a few inches but the Winter Soldier was hardly dazed. In an attempt to establish dominance, and maybe work out a few issues of my own, I followed up that kick with a
jab of my left fist — which he caught with his other hand, yanking my arm away and nearly throwing my head over heels.

I gasped, managing to roll through the fall, but the Winter Soldier still didn't let go of my arm. I ended up on my front, but with my arm horribly twisted behind me.

The pain was immense. The muscles in my left arm screamed at me, and I could barely move my hand through the tension. Tears sprain into my eyes as a hand was braced against my back, preventing me from retracting my arm.

My options were limited now. Either I caved, or I thought of an exit fast, because I couldn't last long like this.

Growing desperate, I squeezed my eyes shut, sucked in the pain, and spun to the left, free fist swinging.

It was not a good move. In fact, it made my arm hurt even worse. But it was the only direction I could go in that wouldn't dislocate my shoulder entirely. It also pulled away from the bracing grip.

And, with a stroke of luck, my fist connected directly with the Winter Soldier's jaw.

There was enough force behind it, from all the fear and anger I was feeling, that I actually managed to knock him back. The Winter Soldier's head snapped away, and he recoiled sharply. My knuckles bled from impact.

I wrenched away, and his fingers only caught against the bracelet. The thin string broke almost immediately. Bottle caps scattered across the kitchen floor.

But my arm was free, hanging by my side.

As I scrambled away, feet slipping across broken glass, leaving blood footprints in my wake — it occurred to me that the Winter Soldier hadn't actually struck me. Hadn't tried to hurt me... well, aside from throwing me into a table. But I knew the way he fought. If I were some random punk he wanted to kill, I'd be dead four times over now.

But he wasn't trying to kill me, was he? Pierce didn't order him to kill me.

That truth hit me hard. Pierce didn't order that. Pierce controls the Winter Soldier.

Which meant it wasn't the Chairman who controlled the Winter Soldier. He had nothing to do with Fury, or Diana. This is why he wanted to know.

Pierce had been in control this entire time.

I was a fool.

And still, my mind drew back to the first question. Why wasn't the Winter Soldier giving as much as he took? He was keeping up just fine, but I was not as hurt right now as I expected to be.

Until I made a mistake.

I had just turned away, sharp and fast, when the Winter Soldier lunged again. He didn't catch me. But he did catch the compass hanging from my neck.

The cord went taut, catching against my throat. I choked, falling backwards, trying to grab the improvised garrote, wriggle my way out, anything, but it was already too tight.
Now behind me, the Winter Soldier twisted the cord, pulling it tighter and drawing me closer. Throwing myself away from it only had me gasping. He was using the cord, forcing me back and down. If I hit my knees, I was done for. Every effort I made in my struggle was just to keep stranding, to keep fighting. And I was losing.

I couldn't breathe. The stars were in my eyes again.

"Прекратите драться," the Winter Soldier said — a demand, a whisper. Just loud enough for me to hear.

Stop fighting.

I grit my teeth, wishing I had the air to respond boldly. "I-if you insist!"

With no other choice, I decided to follow the motion, instead of resisting it. In a last ditch attempt to get some air, I threw myself backwards, into the Winter Soldier.

We both went down with a mighty crash.

The cord snapped in the fall. I hit the floor, gasping and coughing, clutching at my freed throat. I tried to get back up again, tried to get out of there while I still could, but my body was wracked with sudden coughing and hacking, the blood rushing to my head. I was dizzy as soon as I tried to rise to my knees, and fell back again, the world spinning around me.

Oh, god, this is it, I thought.

Head against the floor, I watched as the room danced. A few inches in front of me, the compass spun across the floor, rolling in increasingly smaller circles before finally drumming to a stop.

And I watched, still dazed, a metal hand picked it up.

My eyes followed the action, up as the Winter Soldier, kneeling next to me, took the compass. His eyebrows furrowed quizzically, left cheek bruised. He wasn't wearing a mask, I realized belatedly. This entire time, his face had been completely open. Only now I finally registered it, looking up at the man as he decided to look over this compass, rather than finish the job.

What's he doing?

I didn't get it, until it hit me. It wasn't just the Winter Soldier. It was Bucky Barnes. He knew that compass. He'd seen it before.

Unable to help myself, I gasped, "Recognize it?"

The Winter Soldier's eyes flicked to me, cold and still. He studied me silently for a long moment.

"No." He finally said, and dropped the compass.

I caught it in midair. "You should," and slammed my fist — compass inside — into his face.

My blow caught against his nose, my fingers hardened by the metal clutched in my palm. The Winter Soldier grunted, and it gave me enough time to rise to a stand — my knees quivered beneath me, still shaky with dizziness. My footing was halting, unbalanced. The world still swirled around me. My feet and hands bled from walking across glass and bottle caps.

My back hit the wall behind me. Nowhere to go.
The Winter Soldier retaliated almost immediately with a blow of his own; a metal fist landed into the wall a split-second after I ducked.

Still braced against the wall, using it for support as I regained my bearings, I jabbed out again, nailing the Winter Soldier under his outstretched arm. But my hand only hit metal. I hissed in pain, caught by surprise. I had no idea the metal prosthetic extended so far into his torso.

Great. Now my hand was really bleeding.

Deciding not to waste the opportunity, I struck again immediately, aiming a little lower. This time I hit flesh.

At the same time, the Winter Soldier yanked down a photo frame from overhead and smashed it down on me. I barely had time to raise my arm in defense before the glass hit. My left arm, already weak from the previous turnabout, almost gave out under the blow. I stumbled back, wincing.

My leg bumped into a side table, the lamp on top of it.

As the Winter Soldier advanced, I picked up the lamp and threw it. Instead of running away, however, I used it as a distraction. Darted to the right, coming in for another feint.

And then I saw the knife sticking out of his belt.

Seeing an opportunity, I grabbed for it, but the Winter Soldier must have been anticipating it. Not a second before I had grabbed it before he swung his arm and knocked away my hand — the knife spinning away into the air, far out of reach.

My eyes followed its arc, watching another hope dashed away — when I should've been paying attention to the Winter Soldier's other fist as it came for my face.

I never saw it coming. A strike across the face, sending me back across the floor.

I went down again, falling against a couch, head spinning. This dizziness was going to be the end of me, I just knew it.

But I didn't stop. I still had my eyes on the knife. It lied on the floor across the room, just beyond the couch. If I could make it —

The Winter Soldier coming up behind me. Raising my foot, I kicked him back and lunged forward, fighting against the dizziness as I half-crawled, half-stumbled for the one thing I could use to protect myself with. I came across the twin to the lamp and threw that behind me, too. Buying myself as much precious time as I could.

And it worked.

I climbed over the end of the couch, dropped to the floor, and lunged for the knife.

My hand wrapped around it just as the Winter Soldier grabbed my ankle and dragged me back.

I spun around on the floor, lashing out. The Winter Soldier took the blow on his metal arm, blade clashing uselessly. His other hand still had a hold of me, too far away to touch. So I used my forward momentum and launched myself at him. The best defense was a good offense.

My aim was a little off. The dizziness was making it hard to judge distances. I aimed for his jugular but the knife hit the air just beyond that, grazing only his skin. The Winter Soldier caught
me, hands clamping around my torso, before lifting me up and slamming me down, away from him.

I hit a chair and knocked it over. I ended up rolling across the floor, knife still in my hand — compass in the other. I wasn't letting go of that if I could help it.

When I got to my feet, the Winter Soldier was directly across from me. A knife in his own hand — I didn't see where he got it from, but I had no doubt he had more in the arsenal that was his own body.

In the dark room, I was hit with a feeling of deja vu. This was just like in the Crucible.

Only this time, I wasn't here to learn.

My breath was heaving. I didn't know how much I had left in me. I was already exhausted from two days of running. A full meal and a few hours of fitful sleep hadn't done me as much good as I wished.

Trapped in a house with my enemy, facing off against the man who trained me, I knew I didn't have a lot of hope.

But I'd rather die than surrender.

The Winter Soldier waited for me. Maybe he thought I'd make the first move.

I did.

Lunging. A flash of steel. He parried the first blow and blocked the second. A fist followed up a missed slash and I took a blow to the ribcage. It left me winded but I was still standing.

Stab, thrust, feint. Moves I'd learned. Moves he'd taught me. I made them with confident ease, but too desperate. The Winter Soldier deflected them with practiced efficiency. I'd say there was a grace to it, but he wasn't trying to be good. It wasn't an artist performing, but a machine functioning.

The best I managed were a few nicks. Nothing punishing, nothing that the Winter Soldier could probably feel. We went back and forth — I used an ash tray as a distraction. He swiped me onto a couch.

I rolled off and used a cushion as a hasty shield to catch a falling blow.

The knife tore it to shreds, almost taking my hand with it before the Winter Soldier ripped it out of my hands.

As I tried to retaliate, I slipped on the floor. At first, I didn't understand, how could I slip, why was it wet — until I looked down and realized the floor was covered in traces of my blood. The glass had cut my feet to ribbons.

I didn't notice the pain until then and my knees nearly collapsed beneath me. But I grit my teeth and fought on, deflecting a blow before I earned a puncture wound to my shoulder.

The Winter Soldier knocked me back with another shove of his arm. I ended up pinned between him and the wall — knife grinding against knife, just under our chins. He was so much stronger than me, it was like pushing back against a mountain. My own breath was being crushed out of me. Even as my own blade inched closer to my neck, I wondered if I'd suffocate first.
Our faces were inches from each other. Even still, the Winter Soldier was so contained, so disciplined that I couldn't even feel his breath. Then there was me, gasping for air as I tried to stay alive.

Through the inevitability of our position, I ended up staring too long at his face. And it hit me, even in the dead eyes, the stoic exertion, that it was the same face as the one I saw in the museum. It was Bucky Barnes.

My father.

Something caved in my chest, then. The last stronghold, the last piece of myself willing to fight, crumbling. If he had just been another fallen hero trying to kill me, I might've felt differently about it.

But not my father. Not the man my mother had been in love with once, a long, long time ago.

This couldn't be him. I didn't want it to be.

How could it be?

My eyes burned, my chest aching and tightening with a sudden level of fear and vulnerability I didn't expect. I never knew this man, I never knew what he was like. I never had a real father who was there for me.

But it wasn't horror I felt.

It was despair. It was *betrayal*.

My own father was trying to kill me.

A strange sound left my throat then. A weak cry, like a wounded animal. A child abandoned.

"Why you?" I whispered, my voice breaking, wincing in pain as I felt a rib crack. "Why did it have to be you?"

It wasn't even directed at him. More at the universe, for this cruel twist of fate.

The rise of emotions overwhelmed me, breaking my resolve. The Winter Soldier blinked, his eyes scanning up and down my face, as if realizing I was watching him, too. For a split second, I thought I saw confusion. Maybe even uncertainty.

It was gone a moment later.

My arm gave way. Knees buckled, I dropped just in time for the knife to embed in the wall behind me. I slipped away, gasping for breath, chest aching, coughing and trying to push away the dizziness as it returned.

The Winter Soldier just kept going. Ripped his knife out of the wall, advanced. I tried to scramble away, choking on air and tears.

I saw his hand reaching for me and panicked. I tried to duck out of the way, but I slipped again. This time hit my head. I saw the metal edge of the side table just before it struck my temple.

The world went black.

It came back fast, but not fast enough. By the time I regained consciousness, there was a metal arm
around my throat, the point of a knife just under my chin.

I tried to fight back but found my arms pinned. I seized, struggling, but the Winter Soldier didn't budge. He had me in an unbreakable headlock. My knife was missing. The compass, still clutched in my hand, the metal cutting into my skin.

Across from me, on the half ruined couch, sat Alexander Pierce.

He had been entirely absent until now. I wasn't entirely clear on how much time had passed, but Pierce just sat there, checking the clip as if he had all the time in the world. As if shooting people were just another thing on his list of objectives.

Although he looked the same, wore the same clothes as earlier this evening, he appeared entirely different now. The way he carried himself was straighter, yet also more relaxed. A sly, subtle confidence that wasn't there before.

"Awake now?" he asked, not glancing up at me. "Good. You're no use to me unconscious. Or damaged."

He cast this last word with a hard look at the Winter Soldier — whose face I couldn't see. But I felt a slight catch of his breath, the halt of his chest. It was unexpected, and I was so disoriented that I didn't know how to interpret it. Was that… fear? Trepidation?

The Winter Soldier was never afraid. He wasn't afraid of anything. Or anyone.

Or so I thought.

"You've led quite the adventure, Amelia," Pierce continued, clicking his tongue, at once both disapproving and impressed. Unflinchingly cold in his tone, in the cool expression of his eyes as he regarded me. "But I'm afraid that's coming to an end now. You had your chance at life. I wish I could say things could've been different — but this is, in fact, inevitable. It's what you were designed for, after all. To let you be anything else would be a poor waste of resources."

I just stared at him, uncomprehending. Partly because I was still too rattled to make sense of the words, and partly because it sounded so wrong coming from what I had first believed to be a kind old man, just trying to do his best. But now all that remained was the unflappable air. Everything else, replaced by a different nature. He had hidden it behind feigned humbleness, the character of an average man placed in an unaverage life. A snake in the grass pretending to be salt of the earth.

I trembled, my knees aching, bleeding against shattered glass. I gave one last tug before sagging. It was no use. The Winter Soldier was too strong. I didn't have enough fight in me left. Something had broken me, inside and out.

It all happened so fast — less than five minutes ago I'd just woken from a nightmare. And now I was really in one.

The urge to cry returned with a force, but I held back as long as I could. I didn't want to cry. Not in the face of someone who couldn't care less.

"W-why?" I asked, my voice strained and raspy, barely a whisper. Confused, bereft, forsaken.

"Why? Why am I doing this?" Alexander Pierce asked, frowning at me as he slipped the magazine back into the gun. I thought he might aim it at me, but instead he set it on the floor between us. Almost like a taunt. A weapon to stop him, just inches from my reach. "Do you want the philosophical reason, or the practical one? All organizations, even ones like ours, have noble goals.
But for me, personally, the reason why I'm here? Because I'm the only one willing to do it. There are terrible things in this world, Amelia. Things that are out of control for the common people. Things they're helpless to fight against. And then there's people like me, who have the power, the ability to stop it. Why shouldn't I?

"Some would consider it my duty. I know I do, and I won't take fault for my methods. Others can complain all they want, but sometimes you have to get your hands dirty in the mud trying to build something better. I want that better world, Amelia. I know it's possible. Project Insight will help make it happen. You will help make it happen. All these deaths, all these murders, they're for a reason. Everyone has this terrible idea that HYDRA only spreads chaos and destruction — when our ideals are the exact opposite. Maintaining order is the only way to fix this world. Absolute power and control. And sometimes that means taking away freedom to keep everyone safe."


"Oh, you didn't know?" Pierce asked, sounding mildly surprised. Then, from his robe, he pulled out the blue notebook. Diane's notebook. "I guess Hawkins didn't find out as much as I thought. Shame. She might've been of use to us."

With that, he tossed the book aside, casting it into the darkness.

"HYDRA never died, dear. Sure, the war ended, but you can't kill an idea once its been sown. We survived, in pieces, first, seeding ourselves into the very organization that wanted to destroy us. And over time, we grew — until SHIELD was no longer SHIELD anymore. Until they became the very thing they wanted to destroy." Pierce smiled a rueful smile. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"So, then, the KGB —?"

"Still exists." Pierce waved his hand dismissively. "Consider them a small section of our organization. Lev has high hopes for his little group, but it's too... Soviet for my taste. HYDRA was founded on the ideals of purity and homeland. I don't intend to change that any time soon. All you have to do is keep them busy, make them think they're important, and they'll do what they're told. You were my idea, after all, but I let Lev take the lead on everything else. He still thinks you're his creation. What a fool."

He just chuckled to himself, shaking his head as if it were all just a joke. "I will give him the boy, though, he was clever enough to pull that one off. But I'll have that matter fixed soon enough."

The world shifted beneath my feet, and I was starting to feel nauseous. This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be happening. All this time, I was worried about the Chairman, when the real threat was right in front of me. "So, everything else you said to me, that was all a lie?"

"No, not everything," Pierce said. "I may have held back a few times, led you to come to your own conclusions, but no, I never lied to you, Amelia. I wouldn't do that. I was telling the truth that no one knows you're here. In fact, no one will even know you're missing at all. It'll be like you simply vanished into thin air. Much like the last time, only no faked deaths this time."

"You're insane."

"Ah, typical," Pierce just scoffed, not impressed in the slightest. "Maybe one day you'll understand. But I'm not going to make you. To be quite honest, I don't really care. It's not your job to understand."

My heart started to race at the implication. "A-and why are you telling me all of this?"
"Because you won't remember." Pierce said, his eyes meeting mine again, the amusement slipping from his face. "Бунтарь."

Buntar. Rebel.

I seized against the chokehold, eyes widening. No.

"Колумбия." Kolumbiya.

Horror, panic, filled me anew. Briefly, I forgot about my exhaustion, struggling against the Winter Soldier's grip, trying to get my feet under me, trying to free my hands — just something that could help stop this.

"Стремящийся". Eager.

"No!" Now, now the tears started to spill. "P-please no!"

It was happening. It was happening again. And I couldn't get away. I couldn't close my ears. I couldn't do anything.

"Девяносто." Ninety.

That's when I remembered the knife at my throat.

"Баюкать." Cradled.

I didn't know what else to do. Anything was better than being their soldier. I was too panicked, too scared to think of anything else, anything less permanent.

But I pressed my neck against the knife anyway.

"Марионетка" Marionette.

The sharp edge burned against my skin and for a sharp, almost blissful second, I felt blood drawn.

"Четыре." Four.

But the Winter Soldier jerked his hand back, alarmed. He tossed the blade away, and for a brief second I could breathe normally again, warm blood dripping down my neck. I fought again, writhing in my newfound freedom of movement, but it was already limited, and the hand returned just as quick. Metal fingers gripped my chin, forcing me to be still.

"Начало." Threshold.

Still, I struggled, hoping the Winter Soldier would squeeze tighter, trying to choke myself in the wild, reckless attempt to render myself unconscious before the protocol was finished.

I could feel my arms start to weaken. Starting to resist me.

"Золото." Gold.

The world, growing thin.

The Winter Soldier struggled to keep me still. I couldn't breathe anymore. Stars flashed in front of my eyes.
"Завод."

Factory.

By the time he was finished, my world faded to black. The stars vanished. All fighting ceased. The last tears dripping off cheeks. The room was quiet, filled only with the sound of breathing.

Pierce tilted his head slightly, raising one eyebrow. "Are you ready to comply?"

No response.

He leaned forward, repeating in a harder tone. "Are you ready to comply, soldier?"

With no more resistance, the Winter Soldier let go. No reaction. Body sagging on knees. Head hanging from shoulders, hair falling limp.

Then, slowly, rising to my feet again. Face, blank. Eyes set forward, open, but unseeing.

Opening the mouth, a dull sound coming out.

"Ready to comply."
"Damage report?"

"Negligible, sir."

The cold cement walls of the bank vault surrounded the operation. Empty safe deposit boxes lay open, rows and columns of polished metal.

"Minor bumps and bruises, a few lacerations. A few cracked ribs."

Around two dozen agents were hard at work in the basement underneath Newman Bank and Trust — which had foreclosed several months ago.

"There's extensive damage on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet, but we've stitched them up and they're already starting to heal."

The electricity in which they used, to power both the flickering green fluorescent lights, as well as the advanced equipment they kept around, did not appear on the local power grid.

"We've seen no trouble in mobility or fine motor skills."

"Excellent," Alexander Pierce was relieved. His glasses were perched on his nose to better read the report the analyst had given him. The events of the previous few hours had gotten a little out of hand, but they were, in the end, favorable. He glared at the Winter Soldier standing next nearby. "Good to know the Asset didn't do too much harm before we could make any use of her first."

The Winter Soldier, who'd been standing very still, shifted ever so slightly on his feet. His gaze flicked up to meet Alexander's; the Secretary's expression was so scathing that the assassin flinched, just a degree, and looked away again.

Sound echoed strangely down here. Both too loud and too contained at once. With too many people, it could easily become suffocating, but the vault was surprisingly quiet. Aside from the click-clack of keyboards, the whir of machinery, and low whispers shared between bowed heads, there was very little distracting noise.

In one corner, the *soldatka* sat, quiet and still as a medic carefully stitched up a cut on her hand. The girl didn't flinch, didn't shift, didn't blink; the only movement were her eyes, drifting back and forth, watching the needle as it slipped in and out of her skin.
The tears, long gone.

She did not appear to notice that she was being watched.

The Asset's performance tonight had been less than satisfactory. Least to say, his arrival in Alexander's kitchen late at night had been *inconvenient*. Alexander still wasn't sure what made the Winter Soldier disobey a direct order like that — he'd never done it before, so now had been significant. Had the soldier heard the girl's voice, recognized it?

Alexander cut another look at his asset. The Winter Soldier, too agitated to look at Alexander, had focused his eyes on the girl instead.

Hmm. Alexander wondered how much this apparent connection would cause a problem. Only time would tell.

Honestly, the only thing he hadn't been able to fix was Renata. That was a genuine mistake. Had nearly turned the entire night into a disaster. *She* had been Alexander's one true regret of the night. It was hard to find good help in DC. Now he had to find a new housemaid.

"Mission-ready, then?" Alexander asked, studying her for a moment. He'd read the reports of all the times the girl broke or bled out of her protocol whilst in the Crucible; keeping an eye out for those signs now would save him some trouble later. As of yet, Alexander saw nothing. The perfect little soldier.

"Y-yes, sir," The analyst nodded, eyes wide behind thick lenses. He wore a bowtie and had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His name was Branson. "All is functioning perfectly."

Alexander liked Branson. Branson showed just the right amount of *fear* for a man of his position.

"Good," Alexander smiled, and checked his watch. "I have a flight to catch in an hour. Have her prepped by then."

It was time to visit an old friend.

✮✮✮

**EIGHT HOURS LATER**

The beauty about quinjets was how quick and efficient they were. If it weren't for Stark's contributions, Alexander Pierce doubted he and his small team of STRIKE agents would've reached St. Petersburg in such good time. Hmm, Stark… Perhaps Alexander owed him a visit, too…

The STRIKE team took out the manor's security in under thirty minutes. They were so good, in fact, that Alexander was able to walk right through the front doors without raising the alarm.

The marble halls stretched out in all directions. Formerly a Tsar's palace, the estate now belonged to the people — or rather, an esteemed banker.

And his son.
Alexander Pierce himself did not stick out. This was an occasion for a suit, and he never let a single hair out of place. He strode confidently inside, following the trace of voices somewhere deep inside. The elegance, the gold filigree, the grand oil paintings — all passed by without a glance.

His earpiece relayed that the target was in the French smoking room off the East wing. Alexander couldn't help but smile as he entered the thickly carpeted room, the red velvet curtains. It was warm and lush in here; the perfect haven from the unseasonal blizzard outside.

"Здравствуйте." He greeted upon opening the doors. Father and son had equal expressions of shock when the doors opened and Alexander appeared. "Smoking, Lev? I thought you quite years ago."

Those dark brows scowled, and he pulled the cigarette from his mouth. "This is a bold move, Alexander. Are you sure it's the one you want to make?" He jerked his chin towards the bodyguard standing in the corner, speaking in Russian: "Igor, get Dmitri out of here."

"But —" the boy began, looking between his father and Alexander in growing alarm. When Igor tried to pull him away, Dmitri pulled himself away, only to be snatched back again. "Wait, what's going on?"

He clearly had no context for the situation. Alexander almost pitied him.

As it was, Lev should've kept more security on his person.

"Never mind, Dmitri," Lev replied without looking at his son. His eyes were firmly locked on Alexander's. The shoulders under his black jacket were stiff, but he had the eyes of a man undaunted. "Just a misunderstanding between trade partners. It'll be over shortly."

"Yes," Alexander said, with a serene expression. "It will be."

Igor dragged the boy to the other exit, the grand double doors behind them. Thick, heavy wood painted white with gold filigree and handles. Wonderfully crafted, impossibly gauche, and a terrible thing to be splattered with Igor's blood and brains after he'd opened them and met the gun on the other side.

The bang ricocheted off the walls. The windows rattled. Dmitri cried out and both he and Igor, sans face, crashed to the floor. An acrid smell filled the air.

The boy scrambled back to his feet, returning to his father's side, unable to tear his eyes away from the Igor's body. Or from the girl who shot him.

"...Mia?" Dmitri whispered, horrified, as she stepped into the room. Hair braided back, dressed in black tactical gear, and a newly painted shield — same red star, but now with black and grey stripes — she hardly looked like the girl who'd waved him off only a day before. In fact, she wasn't the same girl at all. The soldatka just wore her face.

At least, Alexander hoped, that's what the boy would realize. And if he didn't, he will soon enough.

Normally, she'd wearing a mask, goggles, to prevent facial recognition. But Alexander didn't see the point of it for this mission. Everyone here already knew who, and what, she was. And there was something truly special in watching their entirely individual and separate reactions when they had recognized her.

Sometimes Alexander couldn't resist a little drama. It was, as they say, the spice of life.
"An ambush!" Lev snarled, staring at the soldatka before whirling on Alexander in a rage. He grabbed Dmitri and pulled him away, placing the boy behind him, away from both Alexander and the girl. What was it like to face your own creation after having it so effectively turned on you? Alexander delighted in the irony. "We had a deal."

"Oh, don't be like that, Lev," He tsked, shaking his head in feigned disappointment. "You knew it would come to this. It was always going to come to this. Diana's death was a warning, and you failed to heed it. Did you really think you could steal HYDRA's reigns from right under my nose?"

The faintest glimmer of a smirk appeared on Lev Kasyanenko's face. The pride of a man who knew what power felt like. "As if you knew what to do with them."

"Oh, and you do?" Alexander found this idea very amusing. "You, a tyrant who couldn't even crush a civil war in his own country? I gave you Sokovia, and look what you did with it!"

"Dad, what's he talking about?" the boy asked in Russian. He seemed to be having difficulty tearing his gaze from the girl, who looked back with nothing behind her eyes.

But his father only ignored him. Lev spat, showing how much he cared for that opinion. "I took Sokovia for myself. It was already in the mud when I found it. And I held onto it, even when your move with that French diplomat almost cost us everything."

"And yet," Alexander gestured to the soldatka. "Look what fruit it bore."

"Oh, don't pretend like you meant to do it." Lev scoffed. "I discovered her existence first, and it wasn't until we activated her for the first time did you finally see the worth in it. Everything she is, I created."

The boy looked horrified, turning to his father with dismay written across his features. "You knew about this? About her?"

He pointed to the girl, and Lev faltered, just for a moment. Alexander smirked. It was entertaining to see a man's lie come crashing down on him. What fairy tale was the boy led to believe about his father? Alexander wanted to gloat, to rub it in Lev's face, but he'd rather see it play out naturally.

"It's complicated, Dmitri," Was all Lev could say, not meeting his son's eyes. Instead, the Chairman glared at Alexander, deciding to place the blame of this situation on him instead. "I'll explain it to you later."

"That's awfully optimistic of you, Lev," Alexander replied, screwing up his lips like he tasted something sour. He never liked dealing with Lev; in many ways, they could've been equals. But Lev was younger, with much more to lose. And a history far easier to exploit. "But if it makes you feel better, sure, she's your creation. She was molded by your hands. And you'll die by hers."

Lev's eyes widened. Alexander nodded to the soldatka, who had been watching the pair, but listening to him the whole time. Waiting for the signal. And now she had it.

She raised the pistol.

"No!" Before she could pull the trigger, the boy jumped into her line of fire — in front of Lev, who for the first time in all that Alexander ever knew him, looked panicked. But Dmitri was oblivious to it all, focused only on the girl, his hands up. "Amelia, don't!"

The girl froze. Alexander's smile wavered.
"Dmitri!" Lev hissed, trying to weave around his son, trying to put the boy back behind him — but the *soldatka*'s weapon followed Lev, and wherever it pointed, Dmitri quickly stepped in front of it. The struggle lasted only a second, maybe two — but they seemed to stretch out forever in front of the gun. "Dmitri, stop it! You don't know — !"

"Amelia, this isn't you," Dmitri said, completely ignoring his father. His words were pleading as he stared into those unseeing eyes. "I-I don't know what they did to you, but I know you, Mia, I know you. You wouldn't do this. Y-you're a good person. You've always been a good person. You're my friend, remember?"

Until this point, Alexander had paid the boy no mind, considering him an extraneous detail to be taken care of quickly. But Lev's son had proved to be an unexpected variable. A remarkable sense of bravery, at the very least. The boy certainly saw something in the girl that Alexander did not. Or, perhaps, the boy had taken advantage of a loophole he didn't even realize was there. Alexander only wanted Lev dead. The boy wasn't the target. The *soldatka*'s single-minded nature had its limits.

"Touching words," Alexander clucked his tongue, pacing around the room so he was standing next to the girl, turning towards his hosts. *Better to see the fear in your eyes, the wolf said.* Alexander smiled. "But I'm afraid Amelia isn't here anymore. Isn't that right?"

He reached out a hand, and tucked a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. The *soldatka* didn't blink.

"Dmitri…" Lev had managed to pull his son a step back, away from the girl and her weapon. But Dmitri just shook him off.

"Amelia, it's me, Dmitri," the boy gestured to himself, voice shaking. He tried to smile, a show of friendliness, but there were tears in his eyes. Tears of confusion, of betrayal. Such a pretty boy. An innocent one. Who cared for the girl that was no more. Had Alexander been any other kind of man than the one he was, he might've been moved to show mercy.

But sometimes mercy wasn't enough.

This entire time, the *soldatka* hadn't said a word. Programmed only to answer to those superior to her, she seemed entirely deaf to the boy's pleas.

"Remember?" Dmitri asked.

But in that moment, her eyes seemed to flicker.

The gun lowered, just a fraction.

A smile began to spread across Dmitri's face.

She pulled the trigger.

"No!"

The bullet slammed into the boy's chest. It went straight through, hitting Lev standing behind him, too late to throw his son out of the way.

Both went down.

Alexander let out a sigh, shaking his head as he stepped over their bodies. Broken, bleeding, still
clinging to life. "Oh, Lev, I thought you would've learned by now. Never mix family with business."

Lev snarled something in Russian that Alexander did not care to listen to. Words of a dying man. Curses, vengeance, probably other things that he would not live long enough to see through. He said something to the girl as well, but she gave even less of a reaction, and simply slipped past them, her eyes washing by as if her victims had simply become part of the scenery.

"До свидания, Lev," Dasvidanya. Alexander just continued walking, leaving Chairman Kasyanenko to clutch his dying son in his arms. He cast his old friend one last look over his shoulder. "Or, should I say, John."

The soldatka, silent as ever, fell into step behind Alexander.

Although he would never admit it, Alexander had held a small moment a doubt when the girl hadn't fired immediately. He'd heard how certain phrases and images can displace programming; it had been recorded in her training at the Crucible, and before that, in her father, who needed a memory wipe every so often, to keep the man underneath buried away. And each time, a little more of him was rubbed away.

Soon, he imagined, the same would be made of the soldatka.

"You did well," Alexander told her, once they had boarded the quinjet. "Especially with his son. He's seen too many movies, I think. Poor boy must have fallen in love with you. Or what used to be you. Such a shame."

The soldatka didn't respond. Alexander didn't expect her to, but smiled nonetheless at her non-reaction. She had passed her test. She was well and truly HYDRA.

Even if she hadn't been successful, Alexander had his STRIKE team to ensure a complete objective.

The STRIKE team remained on the ground; gunfire filled the air around the mansion as a battle began to wage between them and the Chairman's forces. It would not be one that STRIKE could win, but it didn't matter — the damage had already been done. After ordering an evac, Alexander waited patiently for the pilot to initiate take-off.

There she stood, as the STRIKE team came charging back in — a few men short, but they didn't go back for their fallen. Perhaps it would've been different if Rumlow were there.

"It's time to go back home," Alexander said, to the group at large, but gazing at the soldatka in particular. "There's still business I need you to take care of."

Her eyes followed him as the secretary walked off, humming to herself. Then she looked down at her hand. Clutched in her fist since the moment she entered the Vault, was the compass.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from the drifting needle.
art by me (:  

(this was the scene i had in mind when I drew this lmao)
48 HOURS AGO

"Steve, you can't."

"Why not?" Steve demanded, wheel in one hand and a cell phone in the other. "Why shouldn't I? She has no idea why we weren't there at the rendezvous. I can't even imagine what she's thinking right now…"

He flicked the flip phone open, but Nat plucked it from his hand before he could dial anything. "No. Just look on the bright side; at least we can get updates from her."

They were already well into New Jersey now, on the way to Camp Lehigh. The highway slipped past them in a blur of trees and farmland. Steve was tempted to turn the truck right around and go back to DC, but Natasha was tense in the seat next to him. He wondered what it'd take for her to mutiny.

"I promised I'd be there." And Steve was a man of his word.

He hated that this had to happen. It was his fault, he knew. Steve should've picked a better rendezvous spot, something public but a little less… famous. But it had been the first place he could think of, the first place that Mia would immediately remember, he thought. He probably would've made the rendezvous if it hadn't been for Natasha joining his little fugitive act; not that Steve was blaming her, oh no. He was glad for the help. But Natasha Romanov had very different priorities, and how to attain them.

Natasha had been patient, but only for a short while. She agreed to wait on heading to the bunker for one night, in order to catch up with Mia; when that ended up not happening, thanks to the sudden arrival of Rumlow and his STRIKE team, Steve wanted to retreat and regroup for another attempt. The mall had been a close call, the memorial had been even closer. The next time, they might not be so lucky.

And Nat wasn't going to risk it. Either they were going to get caught, or SHIELD was going to find the bunker first. Neither option was particularly great. So Mia ended up on the short end of the
The best Steve could do was leave a number for Mia to find. Which she did, thankfully, if the voicemail was anything to go by.

Least to say, the day had been a mixed bag.

"I know," Nat sighed, and for a moment Steve believed she understood how much this pained him deeply. Or perhaps she was just trying to mollify him. "I'm not saying you can never call her, just not right now, get it? This cell phone is single use only. One call and we trash it. Save that for when we know what we've found, okay? That way everyone can come together with everything we know."

Steve had to admit, there was a logic to that plan. But he didn't want to say so out loud. It still felt wrong to leave Mia behind. Twice. Even worse now that it seemed like she discovered something important. "It's just… she's on her own, Nat. I don't know how long she'll last out there. We should've waited."

"And risk getting caught with what we already know?" Nat raised a single eyebrow. "You're smarter than that, Rogers."

He cut her a sharp look. "Don't test me."

"I'm not, okay? I'm just asking you to have a little patience. Besides, we're almost there anyways. Thirty minutes until arrival, we take a look around, and then we call her, okay? I'll punch in the numbers myself," Nat offered, giving him an imploring look.

Steve huffed, twisting his grip on the wheel. The leather squeaked in protest, and he sagged back into his seat. "Fine," he grumbled, not at all happy with this.

Nat folded the flip phone away, tucking it into a pocket. She cast him a wary look, perhaps sensing she'd done some damage. "I'm sure she'll be okay, Steve. From what you've told me, and what little I've seen of Mia, she's a capable girl. She can take care of herself."

"That's the thing, Nat," Steve inhaled through his nose, and sighed. "She shouldn't have to."

24 HOURS AGO

"HYDRA died with the Red Skull."

There was no way. Steve refused to believe it. Everything he fought for couldn't have been for nothing.

And yet...

"Cut off one head," Zola said, his image duplicating across the screen. "Two more take its place."

Of all the things Steve expected to find in a secret room in a secret office on Camp Lehigh, this was not one of them. Not 200,000 square feet of 70's-age databanks, whirring in a symphony of spinning reels, powering the entire consciousness of a single man Steve thought died years ago.
And yet, here he was, a face on a giant monitor in the center of this monstrosity, surrounded by more screens and keyboards — covered in dust, but recently equipped with a USB port.

Someone had wiped away the dust in order to install it. The clean element had not yet collected more age; Steve wondered how long ago the last visitor had been here.

And who it had been. Fury?

Steve didn't want to believe that Fury knew that this — Zola, HYDRA's echo — was down here, and did nothing about it.

Nevertheless. He and Natasha didn't come to this cold, dark room just to be given riddles and lies.

"Prove it."

"HYDRA was founded on the belief that humanity could not be trusted with its own freedom." Zola replied. His face disappeared to reveal a montage of scratchy imagery. Film reels, newspaper clippings, cut-outs and symbols blinking in and out, superimposed over video and photos. "What we did not realize was that if you try to take that freedom, they resist. The war taught us much. Humanity needed to surrender its freedom willingly. After the War, SHIELD was founded, and I was recruited. The new HYDRA grew. A beautiful parasite inside SHIELD. For 70 years, HYDRA has been secretly feeding crisis after crisis, reaping war, and when history did not cooperate, history was changed."


"That's impossible." Natasha said. Steve didn't think he'd ever heard her sound afraid before. Daunted. "SHIELD would've stopped you."


"You mean," Steve began, his fists clenching at his side. "With the Winter Soldier."

"Oh! How clever!" Zola's laugh crackled with static. "It appears someone has taken a peek at the underbelly! Ah, the Winter Soldier, a ghost of SHIELD. The Fist of HYDRA. I had a hand in his creation myself. One of my proudest achievements. Erskine thought he had spirited away his little formula, but he forgot he had a collaborator. I took his ideas, and I perfected them."

Steve's heart lurched at the portrait of Dr. Erskine when it appeared; his mind made no sense of the mathematical and chemical formulas that followed, but he knew what it was. The Super Soldier Serum. His mind scrambled to keep up with what Zola was saying along side it.

Another Super Soldier? That might explain the longevity of this so-called ghost that had killed Fury.

"He used to be someone else before that." Steve said, fists clenching. "His name was Bucky."

"What?" Natasha blurted, utterly aghast. Only this time, it was directed at Steve.

Steve winced slightly, but ignored her for the moment. He'd never told Nat what Mia had told him; of course Nat would have a reaction to it. She was the only other person who'd knew the Winter Soldier was real. In fact, Nat was the reason why Steve ended up believing Mia… at least partly.
"Occasionally," Zola said, his tone dropping. "An artist must destroy a canvas before they can create a masterpiece."

Those ominous words sent a chill down his spine. It wasn't a straight confirmation, but Zola didn't laugh or mock him either. And Steve had known the scientist from a previous life; Arnim Zola was never known to give a straight answer. Clever, but not clever enough to call Steve's bluff.

Natasha's eyes flicked from Steve to the screens, her shocked expression quickly morphing into a calculating one. Her eyes narrowed. "...And have you made any other of these masterpieces?"

"Don't insult me. As if one could ever outdo the original." Arnim sniffed, clearly offended by the inquiry. Once a scientist, always a scientist. "My design, my magnum opus, was meant to be immortal, to last generations past my time. But I was pleased to discover, rather recently, that my masterpiece has sired its own legacy. Long may HYDRA reign supreme."

Sired a legacy? What the hell did that mean? It sent Steve's mind racing, piecing together the puzzle. If Bucky was the Winter Soldier, did that mean he had a child?

One that HYDRA knew about. One that HYDRA would've taken advantage of.

There was only one other Super Soldier in existence that Steve could think of. And she never knew her father. Which could only mean…

Oh, God.

Steve and Natasha exchanged looks; Steve's was pale — Nat's was grim. They didn't have to speak in order to understand what was going on in the other's head.

"And this legacy, who is it?"

"'Who' is a rather generous term. There is no 'who' when it comes to our weapons. Only a 'what'."

Another non-answer. Steve wanted to punch that green pixelated face. "You know what I mean."

"I assure you, I don't. HYDRA does not believe in individuality; the names of an asset's previous life no longer bear meaning in their existence. For that reason, I do not care to learn them."

"How considerate of you." Natasha muttered.

It was clear that Zola wasn't going to answer his question, or was possibly telling the truth that he simply didn't know who Bucky or Mia were. Either way, Steve decided to forge ahead. He had enough to work with now — time to focus on what he was really here for. "So what's their purpose, then?"

"Getting impatient, hm?" Zola chuckled. "HYDRA created a world so chaotic that humanity is finally willing to sacrifice its freedom to gain its security. Once the purification process is complete, HYDRA's new world order will arise. We won, captain. Your death amounts to the same as your life. A zero sum."

Steve's own face, marked by HYDRA, reflected back at him.

His fist connected with the screen. The image smashed. Glass cracked from one end to the other, pixels dying immediately. Steve had to admit, as unbecoming as it was to lose his temper, it felt
pretty good.

Until Zola's face appeared on the screen to the right, sounding mildly annoyed, "As I was saying…"

Steve was getting sick of this game. "What's on this drive?"

Zola took his sweet time answering, pondering the question with a sigh. "Project Insight requires… insight. So I wrote an algorithm."

"What kind of algorithm?" Nat asked, stepping in next to Steve to stare at the smaller image of Zola's face. As if she could read the expressionless pixels for the truth. "What does it do?"

"The answer to your question is fascinating. Unfortunately, you will be too dead to hear it."

Around them, the room groaned ominously. Metal walls closed in over their only exit. Steve acted fast; thrown his shield, but it was too late. The barricades were already closed, locking them inside.

And that's when things went… wrong.

Very wrong.

12 HOURS AGO

Steve and Natasha had survived the bunker attack.

Their cellphones had not.

All their communication devices had been smashed. Almost getting crushed by three tons of concrete and explosives tended to do that.

Steve was furious at himself for waiting. He had naively assumed that the bunker expedition would go well. But a strategy never survived first contact. They'd been overconfident, and now they were drifting downstream without a paddle.

It had taken the better part of the night, making their way back to DC. Most of it was on foot. Natasha had woken up shortly after Steve got her out of Camp Lehigh — STRIKE had landed immediately afterwards to check for their remains, but Steve was pretty sure they had no idea they'd survived. He didn't spot any tails for several miles before reaching a gas station.

They bought supplies and water, and patched up in the bathroom. Natasha wanted to steal a car, but at this time of night, there were none. And they couldn't wait around for some unsuspecting civilian to drop on by.

Besides, it was better they didn't draw attention to themselves. Steve was highly aware of the security cameras in the station. How beat up they looked. The cashier had given them each a funny look, perhaps alarmed by the amount of ash and dust on their clothes, their scuffed up faces. But the kid didn't ask questions; the expression on Steve's face forbade it.

So they left the gas station peacefully. It was a long walk to Sam's house.
Nat did not want to go there, but Steve was out of ideas. They needed help, and Sam was the only person he could think of. "He's a good man." Steve told her. "We can trust him."

"If you say so," Natasha muttered, apparently not trusting his judgement at all. She'd only met Sam once; Steve wished she had a little more faith.

Nevertheless, Nat stood next to him in the backyard of Sam's house. Steve knew Sam was back from his run; he'd heard the footsteps echoing inside the house, the sound of a fridge being opened, the cap taken off a jug. Natasha didn't believe him when he said Sam was home, until they knocked on the glass door of the back patio and lo and behold — Sam appeared.

They couldn't explain everything to Sam at once. The man was understanding, at least, and let them get cleaned up before they started to discuss things over breakfast. Steve had to admit, the hot shower felt pretty good after almost getting blasted out of existence. The pancakes? Even better.

Of the three plates, Steve's had the biggest stack. At least a dozen.

Across the table, Sam was already eating, waving his fork around as he spoke around a full mouth. "So explain to me again about this whole HYDRA business? Are you saying its been here this entire time, hiding behind SHIELD?"

"That's what it looks like," Natasha answered glumly. She didn't seem interested in her pancakes; instead, she had a peach in her hand. She'd only taken a few half-hearted bites so far.

Steve's heart went out to her. SHIELD had been everything to Natasha. Her hope, her savior. To know it was just as corrupt as the system she escaped couldn't be easy.

"And you two are the only ones who know?" Sam asked, his eyebrows climbing higher and higher up on his forehead. "You're the only ones who can stop it?"

"We think so," Steve said. "At the very least, we're the only two we're sure we can trust. We had Mia, but..."

He couldn't continue, staring down at his glass of orange juice. Suddenly, Steve didn't feel so hungry anymore.

"You don't know where she is?"

The first thing Steve had done when Sam welcomed him inside was to use his phone. He had memorized the number that Amelia had used, and couldn't type it fast enough. But his excitement, his relief, was only met with further dismay.

"Sorry, the number you are trying to reach has been disconnected..."

Disconnected? What happened? It'd only been a few hours...

Only it hadn't been a few hours. It'd been a whole day since the proposed rendezvous. It'd been even longer since Steve had last seen Amelia. So much could have happened. So much had happened. And her last message had been ominous. She'd discovered something important, and now he was worried that it may have had something to do with this problem now.

What had she learned?

More importantly, how was Steve going to tell her what he'd learned? that the Winter Soldier — the man who trained her, nearly killed her, the man she was utterly terrified of, the man who
"No," Steve said at last, setting the glass back onto the table without taking a drink. "I left her in the Triskelion, and from her last message, it seemed like she managed to escape on her own."

Sam seemed mildly impressed by that, and held open his hands. "Well, sounds to me like she can take care of herself. Maybe she's fine, in hiding. If SHIELD — er, HYDRA — had her, wouldn't they make it obvious? Use her to get you to turn yourself in?"

"Maybe…" Steve said, sharing a glance with Natasha. It seemed odd, that SHIELD would so persistently adverstise Captain America as Public Enemy Number One, but say nothing of Amelia, another fugitive. Steve wanted to believe it was some sense of honor, of fairness, that prevented them from chasing after an innocent girl — but Amelia said she'd been chased in her message. Clearly, SHIELD was interested in capturing her too.

They just didn't want the public to know about it.

It was odd. Steve just didn't know what it meant. "Either way, they haven't announced anything yet, and right now they think we're dead. I'd like to keep it that way, for as long as we can manage."

"We can operate better under the radar now," Natasha added, straightening. This statement seemed to give her a bit of energy, a new light lifting her gaze. Steve could already see the gears starting to spin in her head, the inner workings of the spy in play. "We need a new game plan. The question is, who at SHIELD can launch a domestic missile strike?"

The answer came to Steve immediately. It hit him so suddenly, that he felt stupid for not thinking of it earlier. "Pierce."

He didn't want to believe that a man as straight-laced, down-to-earth as Pierce seemed could possibly be HYDRA. What he seemed. That was the key part. Steve only met the man once; clearly, he'd underestimated the Secretary, allowed himself to believe in the sincerity of Alexander Pierce's grand speeches of peace.

To think Steve had outgrown his own gullibility.

"Who happens to be sitting atop the most secure building in the world," Natasha replied, screwing her lips to one side. That was a problem they could not easily remedy.

"But he's not working alone," Steve replied, looking out the window. "Zola's algorithm was on the Lemurian Star."

Natasha paused, then looked at Steve. "So was Jasper Sitwell."

Steve met her gaze. A look of mutual understanding passed between them. Steve took a deep breath. "So the real question is, how do the two most wanted people in Washington kidnap a SHIELD officer in broad daylight?"

It was Sam who had the answer. Steve and Natasha were equally surprised when Sam dropped a thin file on top of table in front of them. On the cover was attached a large photograph; a desert landscape, with two men taking center focus. Sam, and another man with a young, boyish face, their arms slung over each other's shoulders. Each dressed in identical tactical gear, wearing some kind of backpack or parachute. It was hard to tell from the front. At the very least, it wasn't something Steve recognized.
Natasha recognized the location, the mission. But it was Steve who recognized the other man. "Is this Riley?"

Sam gave a curt nod, his once jovial face now subdued, hardened at the edges. "Yeah."

Steve admittedly didn't know much about Riley, Sam's best friend. Sam didn't talk about him much, and Steve didn't ask a lot of questions. He didn't need to. He already knew full well what it was like to lose a brother to war.

It was, perhaps, one of the few things they never talked about that didn't need to be.

"I heard they couldn't bring in the choppers because of the RPGS," Natasha continued, completely oblivious to this silent exchange. She cast Sam a curious look. "What'd you use? A stealth chute?"

"No," Sam said, and opened the file. He handed them a packet — schematics, Steve realized, when he took it in. "These."

Schematics. But not of a plane. Or any kind of aircraft.

Steve looked up from the file, raising his eyebrows at Sam. "I thought you said you were a pilot."

Sam leaned back and folded his arms, a smirk pulling at his face. "Never said pilot."

And that's when their plans changed.

NOW

Steve had just placed his hand on Sitwell's bald pate and shoved him into the back of the sedan when Sam got a call on his cell phone.

He was even more surprised when Sam handed the phone to him, looking grave. "...I-it's for you, man."

Steve didn't know what was going on. So he took the phone and brought it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Steve," His heart stopped at the sound of her voice. Amelia. "It's me."

"Mia!" Slamming the car door shut behind Sitwell, Steve nearly crushed the man's fingers. But he didn't notice, he was already pacing around the front of the car, gesturing everyone to round up and get inside. The call of her name alerted both Sam and Natasha to the urgency of the situation.

"Where are you? Are you okay? I'm so sorry —"

"I'm fine," She answered quietly, not waiting for Steve to finish apologizing. Her voice remained low, and Steve could hear some kind of feedback on her end. A sort of echo, like she was in a large room. "I think. I-it's been... I got away from them. From SHIELD. I'm hiding in a parking garage, just off Exit 290. I-395, heading north."

Steve relayed this information to Sam, who was in the driver's seat. Sam only gave a quick nod before kicking the car into gear and peeling out of the driveway. Natasha braced her arm against Sitwell in the back, who'd let out a cry of shock at the reckless driving. Everyone else ignored him.
As Sam cut through traffic, making a beeline for the closest highway on-ramp, Steve stayed on the line with Mia. "Listen to me carefully, Mia. I want you to stay right where you are. Don't move, don't go anywhere. We're coming to pick you up."

"Okay," she replied, her voice beginning to waver. "Please hurry. I-I don't know how safe I am, I'm... I don't know how long it'll take them to find me again. I barely got away last time."

"We're on our way right now, ETA twenty minutes —"

"Who's we?" Mia interrupted again.

"Sorry. I've got Sam and Natasha with me, you remember them, right?"

"Yes, I remember them."

"You're going to be okay, I promise."

"Okay." Her tone didn't sound particularly hopeful. That was Steve's fault. He'd already let her down far too many times.

He wasn't going to again. "Can you stay on the line with me, until we get there?"

"I can try."

As much as Steve regretted some of his actions over the past couple days, he had to admit that the timing of this was extremely fortuitous. Between planning, preparation, travel time, and execution, it took exactly six hours and thirty seven minutes to break into Fort Meade, steal the EXO-7 Falcon wingsuit, and escape without anyone knowing the wiser. It took another two to acquire Sitwell, and somehow Amelia had managed to survive on her own through it all.

That last part was entirely thanks to Natasha, who in a moment of crisis, had pulled in clutch and saved the day with a mop, a pair of sunglasses, and bar of snickers.

Least to say, Steve was not looking forward to another heist. But he couldn't deny that he might have had a little fun doing it.

The enjoyment was negated by the fact that his priorities had been reset, putting Amelia on the backburner once again. At least Sam seemed more sympathetic, and didn't attempt to make Steve feel better about the Triskelion move by showing approval.

"You did what you could," was all Sam had to say. "No one could ask for any less."

It was nice to hear, but Steve still wasn't sure it was enough.

"What was it that you found out the other night?" Steve asked as it occurred to him. "Your message said it was urgent."

"I-It is, but I don't want to say it over the phone," Amelia replied, sounding nervous. Her voice dropped another register. "They could be listening."

"Good point." As badly as Steve wanted to know, keeping it out of HYDRA's hands was more important. He glanced over his shoulder at Sitwell, who glared back suspiciously. "We're also bringing some... extra luggage. We can talk about it when we're safe. I have a lot to tell you, too, Mia."

"About what?"
"About…" Steve fought for the right words. For a number of reasons, not including HYDRA, it was not appropriate to tell her over the phone. "It's about your dad."

That earned him a strange look from Sam, who mouthed What? Steve just shook his head at him; he could explain later. It was the one thing he and Natasha had forgotten to inform Sam about; the nature of the Winter Soldier, and what that had to do with Mia.

"My dad?" Amelia repeated, and there was a long pause. "I thought — "

A burst of static cut her off, and Steve didn't catch the rest of it. "Mia? Hello? Can you hear me?"

"— can't — garage — don't know —" were all the words Steve could make out before the line went dead.

He cursed under his breath, and tried to redial. It only went to voicemail.

"Okay, so," Sam began as soon as it was clear that the phone call was not going to be continued. He shot Steve a wary look. "I know this may not be the best time to ask, but uh… I thought you were Mia's dad. Is that… did you lie to me?"

"I didn't lie." Steve replied immediately, then regretted it. He did lie, because he knew it wasn't true at the time. But the lie hadn't been for Sam's benefit. "Well, I guess I did. But neither of us knew the truth so… I just wanted to be there for her. We finally talked it out before she met you."

"So… she just decided not to correct me, then."

"And you never said pilot," Steve reminded him, and Sam capitulated with a shrug and a nod. "But I have an answer for her now. And not one she's going to like."

"How come?" Sam asked, but when Steve threw a significant glance over his shoulder, Sam glanced in the rearview mirror at Sitwell, then rolled his eyes in understanding. "Oh, right. Our luggage's got enough dirty laundry in him already."

"Hey!" Sitwell complained, leaning forward in his seat. He cut a glance between Natasha and Steve, who both avoided his eyes. "What's going on here? Was that Fletcher on the phone?"

Natasha pushed him back again. "It's none of your business."

"You want to fit another person in this car?" Sitwell demanded, looking about their rather cramped conditions. All four seats were already occupied. "What are you gonna do with me?"

The fear was palpable in Sitwell's eyes. He seemed to think the team meant him harm, although that was furthest from the truth. At least for Steve.

As for Sam and Natasha, well….

"Relax, buttercup," Sam called back. "You can sit on the hump."

"The trunk is also an option," Natasha added with a saccharine smile.

"Kidnapping, reckless driving, and unsafe passengers, what's next?" Sitwell demanded, somewhat dramatically. He threw up his hands and asked the cabin at large, "Is no one else thinking that this is weird? Our last status report on Fletcher was over sixteen hours ago, and she took out an entire STRIKE team before disappearing into the night. We have had no contact with her since —"

"How about you stuff a cork in it?" Sam shot back. "When we want your opinion, we'll ask."
Sitwell just grumbled, folding his arms across his chest and sitting back. The rest of the car ride was made in relative silence. It was growing uncomfortable, but no one made to turn on the radio to fill the quiet — it was too tense for that. No one wanted a distraction.

"This must be it," Natasha said, as Sam pulled into the off-ramp and entered city traffic. There was a large, rectangular building up ahead; a parking garage, recognizable by its multiple open levels, hollow and dark on the inside.

Amelia had failed to mention it was also derelict, with multiple signs and tape blocking the entrance. A car couldn't pass through and Steve didn't want Sam to draw attention by just barreling through it. Instead, Sam parked it on an open parkway across the street. The noise of traffic here was fairly loud, the overpass only a quarter mile behind them, the highway bridge arching over the main intersection. It was certainly a nice, busy place to hide, but Steve noted the lack of pedestrian traffic.

He and Sam got out, leaving Natasha with Sitwell — something that seemed to make the man extremely uncomfortable. Enough that he, too, got out of the car, apparently to get some "fresh air".

"Try to run, and I'll shoot you in the back," Natasha warned with a casual glance, leaning against the side of the car as Sitwell paced back and forth. The analyst threw a forlorn glance as Steve and Sam began heading towards the parking garage across the street, leaving him alone with the Black Widow.

"Hey, man, you should ease up," Sam said, smacking Steve lightly on the shoulder as they hopped over the sawhorses blocking the vehicle entrance. Steve had brought his shield. Couldn't be too safe. "This is your big rescue moment. You should revel in it!"

But Steve could only shake his head. "I'll celebrate when we're all safe."

Sam made a noncommittal sound as they ventured into the darkness. The building had no electricity, so the garage was just a wide void, occasionally marked by circular columns lit by faint outdoor light. The deeper they went, the further they got. Steve was aware of the slope of the ground, how they descended heading deeper in.

It was one hell of a place to hide, Steve had to admit. He certainly would never want to hide here. It was cold and damp, puddles everywhere, and even with super soldier vision it was difficult to see in here. Even more so, not a lot of cover to hide behind. The columns were relatively thin, only large enough to hide a single person. It seemed not even squatters wanted to reside here.

Steve called out Amelia's name. Softly at first, then a little louder when he got no response. The place seemed entirely empty.

"It is kind of weird, though," Sam mused to himself, seemingly lost in thought. "All of this, I mean. I don't think I ever gave her my number…"

"She might've gotten it from me," Steve said, although to be honest, he wasn't sure. Giving Amelia Sam's number would certainly be a rational, reasonable thing he would do, especially considering what had happened with Kate — Agent 13, that is. But the past few days had all been a blur; Steve couldn't be sure he had.

Sam just laughed at that. "Well, thank God. I'd rather die than agree with baldy back there…Damn, it's dark in here. Shoulda brought a flashlight."

Steve silently agreed, before calling out for Amelia again. Sam fiddled with his phone, trying to
turn on its flashlight. His thumb flicked across the screen and a bright white light flared out in front of them.

And on the girl standing directly in front of them.

Both men jumped at the sight of her. Steve cursed internally; Sam swore out loud. Amelia was only ten feet away. She flinched at the light, raising her hands to cover her face.

"Ow," She said.

"Mia!" Steve let out a breath in relief. "You scared the hell out of me — why didn't you answer?"

"I wasn't sure if it was you," she replied, still having a hand up to her face. It took Sam a second to get over his shock, and lower his flashlight so she could see again. "If it was someone just pretending to use your voice, or your face, o-or —"

She sounded exhausted, her voice strained until it broke. It was around the same point in which Steve had pulled her into a hug; relief, overwhelming relief. And concern, too, ever growing. Amelia was cold, and shivering, despite the long coat she wore. Not something he recognized. So dazed that she didn't even hug him back, just leaned slightly into the embrace. The flashlight had caught against the abrasions on her face, clearly results of her previous run-ins with SHIELD. Steve was a little more surprised when his hands touched the metal hanging from her back.

He stepped back, startled. "...Is that a shield?"

"Oh," Amelia glanced over her shoulder, then back at Steve. Her shoulders slumped. "Yeah. It was under your truck."

Steve didn't understand at all. "Wait, my truck — ?"

"Look, as glad as I am that you're alright, Mia," Sam interrupted the happy reunion, throwing a thumb over his shoulder. "I think we should head out. I don't want to be in this creepy-ass place anymore than I have to."

"Yes, absolutely," Steve gave a sharp nod, remembering himself. Staying here, even for a brief catch-up, was not a good idea. The garage, while a good temporary hiding place, also made for an effective killbox. The singular entrance could be blocked, cutting off whoever was inside. Had it been anyone else who asked him to come here, Steve would've immediately suspected it to be a trap.

Putting his hand on Mia's back, across the metal shield that looked and felt exactly like his own, Steve guided the three of them out of there.

The resemblance to his shield stopped as soon as they hit sunlight. It may be made of the same material, made to the same specs, but the paint was completely different. The red star was as Steve remembered it, from the photos of Rebel Columbia he'd seen. But Mia had never shown him the shield before.

He couldn't remember if the black stripes had always been there or not.

But Steve immediately forgot about that when the light shone on the rest of Amelia. Her hair was braided back to keep it out of her face, but it also served to fully display the damage she'd received thus far. The terrible cuts across her jar. Bruises under both eyes. The purpling around her neck. It nearly stopped him dead. "Mia! What happened to you? I thought you said you were fine!"
She just blinked up at him, her gaze dull, confused. "... But I am fine. I'm standing, aren't I?"

Sam just let out a low whistle. He shook his head. "I'd say out of all of us, you've had the worst of it, Mia. Full stop."

Amelia blinked back at him. "Thank you."

Sam, not expecting that, did a slight double-take, and was a second late in following Steve and Mia as they headed back towards the car, parked just three hundred feet away. "Well, that wasn't a compliment but uh... You do you, I guess..."

It didn't strike Steve as very odd, although he did note that Mia was less expressive than usual. Not that she was very expressive to begin with, but still — this felt off. But of course, how would it not be, after she was on her own for three days, constantly on the run from SHIELD goons? He could hardly blame her if she didn't have the energy to react to everything.

Steve gave a wave to Natasha, who remained leaning against the driver's side door, watching the incoming procession behind dark sunglasses. Sitwell was still pacing, coming around the other side of the car when he spotted the returning party.

He came to a dead stop, his face turning white. "Oh, shit —"

And that's when Sitwell knew, he was one dead-ass motherfucker.

That was the last thought in his head before the bullet went through it.

Blood exploded onto the windshield behind Sitwell. It got onto Natasha, who'd been standing right next to him. She, who saw what only Sitwell did, had tried to dive for the SHIELD analyst.

But she was far, far too late.

Sam yelped, leaping back in surprise. Steve whirled around, startled by the bang, the bullet that had shot just past his ear to strike Sitwell directly between the eyes.

At the only person standing behind him. Amelia. Smoke rising from the pistol in her hand.

The weapon, turning.

On Steve.
Steve's heart stopped. "Mia, what —?"

Steve didn't have time to whip off his shield to block it. He did the only thing he could think of and dove for cover. He slammed over the front hood of the sedan before crashing to the other side.

The bullet meant for him disappeared somewhere into the engine block.

"Mia, stop!" Steve was breathless, in shock. He looked over the hood of the vehicle to implore her, only to duck when she fired at him again. "What are you doing?"

Wild dismay tinted his cry. But Amelia didn't respond. Her eyes had gone cold.

Steve tried to think of some logical explanation, but he could find none. Why had Amelia killed Sitwell? The one person they needed to break into the Triskelion, the key to their harebrained plan working. The analyst clearly knew something was up, but hadn't lived long enough to tell it. Something was wrong.

Something was very wrong.

And it was about to get worse.

As Steve scrambled for something to say, to snap Mia out of it, something hit the side of the vehicle beside his head. He flinched, finally pulling off his shield to take cover. Three more bullets hit him.

And now they were being fired upon from behind.

*What the hell's going on here?*

As Steve looked over his shoulder, trying to find the other gunman or men, Sam made the bold move. Perhaps understanding even less than Steve did, Sam nonetheless tackled Amelia without question. And just in time, as she turned her gun on Natasha (still on the ground).

The blow knocked off her arm, sending the bullet ping-pong harmlessly off pavement. The gun fell from her hand.

But Sam failed to throw her to the ground as he intended. Amelia steadied herself, widening her stance so her center of balance was low — then grabbed Sam by the shoulders and threw him.

Steve, his back still turned to look for the other shooter, didn't see it when Sam came flying over the hood as well. All the warning he got was Sam's terrified cry, before he was slammed into from behind.

His shield protected Steve from the worst of the fall, but the same could not be said for Sam, who rolled over on the concrete, groaning.
"Are you alright?" Steve demanded, scrambling to help his friend back up — making sure his shield was between them and the gunman.

"Yeah, I'm just peachy!" Sam yelled, and flinched when a bullet impacted the shield. "Who the hell is shooting at us?"

Another bullet struck the car door, leaving behind a black hole. Two more followed.

"Four gunmen on the bridge!" Natasha called back, already climbing back into the car. She pulled her weapon on Amelia, but the girl was faster — turned and took the bullets on her shield, crouching to protect her legs.

Natasha, without even questioning it, fired a full round and emptied her clip, unable to cause any harm but using it to buy time so she could get into the car. "It's an ambush! We gotta get out of here!"

Steve reeled at the sight of Natasha shooting at a kid, at Mia — his Mia — and wanted to chastise her. To shout at her. For the love of God, don't hurt her.

But Amelia was already picking up her weapon.

There was no time to snap at Nat. It was a tight spot. One on side they were receiving enemy fire from targets none of them could reach. On the other, a child super soldier, the one person Steve had been worried about this entire time, had betrayed them for reasons entirely unknown.

Sam got into the car at the same time as Natasha. Slid into the driver's seat from the passenger's side, risking direct line of fire from Mia. But he managed to start the car anyways.

The door remained open, allowing Steve an opportune escape.

It seemed insane to do so now. They'd come to rescue Amelia, only to run from her.

Fear, panic, creeped at the edges of his mind. Steve had no idea what was going on — just that Mia had just killed Sitwell, and was now firing the remaining rounds of her firearm into the sedan.

One of the bullets shattered the driver's window, sending glass everywhere. Sam flinched, started cursing up a storm.

Steve had barely managed to throw herself into the backseat before the car took off in a squeal of rubber. His feet hadn't even left the ground yet.

Only for it to screech to a halt a second later, something catching the back end.

"What the —" Looking around, Steve was shocked to see Amelia had grabbed the rear bumper and was hanging on. The car was still moving forward, pulling her along, but her strength was enough to slow the car considerably.

Sam pressed on the gas, and the front wheels squealed. Back wheels spun uselessly as Amelia lifted the rear up.

Something had to give. Natasha aimed her second pistol out the window and fired a warning shot. Amelia flinched, and something snapped - the sedan lurched forward, catching traction on the road before shooting forward like a slingshot.

Leaving Amelia behind, the torn away bumper in her hands.
"What the hell is going on?" Sam demanded as they peeled off into oncoming traffic. He had just barely managed to avoid slamming into a semi head-on and lost his side mirror in the effort. "Why is she shooting at us?!"

"I don't know!" Steve shouted back, and there was no hiding the sheer distress in his voice. As the car burned a red light, he threw a look over the seat, out the back window.

At Amelia, her figure steadily growing smaller. Her pistol rising again.

A bullet dinged off the trunk.

"Who're the other guys? SHIELD?" Sam yelled as a spray of bullets scattered against the hood. He weaved across the road to throw off their aim — driving underneath the bridge was dangerous, but it was the fastest way out of here without going back in Mia's direction. Once they had passed underneath, they would be safe from fire.

"It's HYDRA!" Natasha called, which came out more like a snarl as she struggled to reload her pistols. The second one had already been spent, used to send cover fire back at Amelia — once again blocked by that black shield.

Natasha rocked back and forth in the backseat from the violent motion, nearly smacking her face against the back of Steve's chair. "Just drive!"

They'd just passed under the bridge when something crashed down onto their roof. Something heavy.

No one had time to react before a metal arm smashed through the windshield and ripped the fucking wheel out of the car.

Sam just stared at the empty steering column, mouth opening in a loud cry of "SHIT."

Then bullets started firing in from above.

Natasha was already diving for the front seat, landing directly into Steve's lap. At the same time, Sam did the only thing he could — slammed on the breaks.

The car screeched to a stop on the other side of the bridge tunnel. The motion threw their new passenger off the roof, sending him tumbling into the road ahead of them.

A man dressed in black, hitting the ground in a roll. He had so much speed that he kept going, even as he planted his hand — shiny, silver metal — against the ground to slow himself.

The metal fingers left grooves in the cement. The man stood up.


Steve's blood went cold. The man from the rooftop.

The Winter Soldier.

_Bucky._

But he couldn't tell for sure. Not with the goggles and mask hiding most of his face. Nevertheless, the three of them stared at him in dawning horror.

A trap.
Sam reacted as anyone would. Seeing a bad guy standing directly in his path, he hit the gas. Without a wheel, they gunned straight for the Winter Soldier. Natasha raised her gun.

Only too late did they realize they had entered an intersection. Steve turned his head just in time to see the tow truck.

The large vehicle, going at full speed, t-boned the small sedan, sending it careening. Everyone in the cabin cried out as the sedan flipped, once, twice. Steve, who had the good fortune to bear wherewithal in that moment, grabbed both Sam and Natasha, slammed his shield into his door. It gave away, and they fell out as the car flipped over them.

The shield took most of the impact, but Steve lost his grip on Sam — the other man fell away as Steve and Natasha skidded across the road. An incoming SUV swerved wildly to avoid them, crashing into a taxi in the next lane.

It seemed to take ages to recover. By the time Steve and Natasha got back to their feet, the gunmen from the bridge had rappelled to the road below, directly behind the Winter Soldier. One handed him a grenade launcher.

Steve shoved Nat away from him just in time. The airborne grenade hit his shield with the power of a small rocket. The blast sent Steve off his feet, careening backwards into an oncoming bus.

The bus driver must've anticipated the danger ahead, and had already slammed the breaks, trying to turn the vehicle. But it was already going too fast, and the yank of the wheel sent the long vehicle into a tilt it couldn't recover from.

Steve, smashing into the side, was enough to send the bus crashing onto its side.

The air began filling with screams.

With Steve momentarily incapacitated inside the bus, it left both Sam and Nat without a helpful super soldier to take the brunt of the fire. The Winter Soldier had spent his second and last RPG on Natasha, who dove behind the tow truck for cover. And just in time. The tow truck was nearly launched into the air from the impact alone, causing a large enough explosion for Nat to lose herself in.

The Winter Soldier began approaching the downed bus; casting aside his spent grenade launcher, one of his comrades handed him an assault rifle. The assassin seemed intent on finishing off Steve, still trapped inside the bus.

He only got halfway there before a bullet struck him.

It glanced off his goggles, sending the Winter Soldier reeling back, diving behind the cement road divider. The bulletproof goggles had protected his eyes and saved his life.

Ripping them off, the Winter Soldier took a deep breath.

Too close.

Then he launched upwards and fired his assault rifle in Nat's direction.

Nat ducked, before bolting across the street, trying to gain as much distance as she could from the opponents. She had no idea where Sam went. All she knew was that when she looked over her shoulder, the Winter Soldier was coming after her.
Not at a run, no. But at a measured pace. As if he were out for a stroll.

Traffic had built up. People were running, screaming, standing still and watching in abject horror. Natasha tried to yell at them, tell them to get away, run while they could. A few listened. Most didn't until they saw the Winter Soldier coming.

With no other recourse, she dove behind the wall of traffic, breaking line of sight. And waited.

Sam, meanwhile, was having one heck of a time.

He'd recovered from his fall (now with a serious case of road rash) managed to avoid attention by staying low and crouching behind the crashed vehicles now blocking all traffic in the intersection by the causeway. There were civilians here. So many civilians — trying not to give away his position, Sam gestured and hissed at a couple frozen outside their stopped vehicle to get the hell out of here.

Terrified looks and an exchanged glance, and they started to run.

If only Sam had been so wise.

A fifth man was rappelling down the bridge, a bit late considering the rest were already starting to fire into the underside of the overturned bus. Steve was inside somewhere. Sam, creeping around the crashed vehicles, managed to get behind the armed team; the Winter Soldier, preoccupied with Nat, didn't see him.

Knife in hand, Sam ambushed the fifth gunman from behind. With a kick to the knee and a slash of his weapon, the former wingman knocked down the aggressor, disarmed him, and took him out with a swing of a rifle butt.

Now Sam was armed.

One of the HYDRA combatants had a minigun, and was firing it directly into the bus - then onto Steve, who'd just rolled out. He grabbed his shield just in time to take the fire. Even with a gun that powerful, it still couldn't beat vibranium.

Realizing this, Steve got an idea, and charged.

Right into the minigun, and knocked the man down flat. Right into the middle of the HYDRA squad.

He raised his shield up to defend against the first assault rifle, but he didn't see the second one behind him until he turned around - and watched as the second man was thrown back, hit by a bullet Steve didn't see.

Steve whirled around, startled to find Sam just a short distance away, firing at the rest of the unsuspecting squad, picking them off. He called to Steve, "I got this, go!"

Only a quick nod of thanks. Then Steve was tearing after Natasha. And the Winter Soldier.

Sam would regret leaving himself alone with the squad. Oh, they were easy to pick off once they were busy with Steve. Under a minute and they were all eliminated - Sam was just about to call it a job well done and join the battle down the street, when he looked around and saw a shield - coming straight for his head.

It hit him square in the chest, sending Sam backwards over the median he'd been using for cover.
He hit the ground wheezing - it felt like he'd just been hit by a truck. Pretty sure that cracked a few ribs.

Coughing, he climbed back up, and came face-to-face with Amelia.

"Aw, shit," Sam muttered, swallowing. In the time it took to drive away, crash, and deal with the HYDRA ambush, he'd completely forgotten about the other threat they were trying to escape from.

It seemed she finally caught up.

Sam was already dreading this. Not even two minutes had passed since Steve had yanked them out of the flipping car and Sam was already feeling the weight of exhaustion in his bones. He didn't like to think himself out of shape, but… well, Amelia could beat Steve in a race. Sam wasn't sure he could compete.

She watched Sam with dead, unblinking eyes. The girl who'd once laughed at his jokes and ate a whole pizza and a half — completely gone. It was the same face, but Sam was struck with the bizarre sensation that he was looking at a total stranger.

The coat she'd been wearing previously had been cast aside, revealing tactical gear similar to the Winter Soldier's. Had she been wearing that this whole time? How had Sam not noticed? Dumbass!

"H-hey, look," Sam had already been thrown by her, and was not looking forward for a repeat. Even worse, he couldn't get the fact that she was a kid out of his head. A very scary-looking kid, but still. He held up his hands slowly, gun aimed away from her. He eyed the shield in her hand. "I don't want to hurt you, Mia. I don't know what the hell's going on, but HYDRA's messing with your head, man. You don't want to do this —"

Amelia didn't wait for him to finish. She lunged at him. Sam saw the knife in her hand at the last second and ducked out of the way just in time.

He stumbled back, heart pounding. "Okay! I guess you do!"

The girl that was once Amelia attacked him with a relentless ferocity. Apparently, she had used up the rounds of her firearm and had resorted to close combat. Normally Sam would prefer this, since he didn't have a fancy bulletproof shield; but even with his superior firepower, he couldn't get the weapon leveled quickly enough before Amelia struck at him again.

Stab, slash, feint. Sam found himself constantly moving backwards, trying to stay out of her reach.

The assault rifle was taking most of the heat; Sam had already received a slash on his arm — all it would take was one lucky hit and he was finished.

He managed to parry an attack and smashed the rifle into her head. Sam regretted it immediately; not because it worked, but because Sam knew Steve would kill him if Amelia got hurt.

But Sam had the sinking feeling this wasn't Amelia anymore.

Maybe betrayal wasn't the right word for it anymore. But Sam was too busy just trying to stay alive than to figure out the logistics of whatever the hell was up with this assassin in front of him.

The strike, at least, appeared successful. Amelia stumbled back, momentarily dazed.

But only momentarily.
She recovered within a second, and slammed a kick into Sam’s chest.

His back crashed into a car behind him. Sam grunted from impact. He cast a forlorn glance at their ruined sedan. If only he could get there, get his wingsuit…

Sam glanced back at Amelia, who was approaching him silently. He was struck with a sense of déjà vu - since the moment she killed Sitwell, she'd gone entirely silent. It struck him as similar to when she had appeared at random at the VA; mute due to some kind of stress stimulus.

He wondered if it was just a coincidence.

Right now, though, Sam had a bigger problem. Amelia looked like she was about to kill him.

Sirens rang out.

To the right, from the other side of the bridge, came a police car. Sam let out a slight huff of laughter, relief. Finally, back up! Maybe the tide was finally turning —

Nope. Amelia pulled something from her belt. A metal object, the size and shape of a golf ball. Threw it right at the oncoming vehicle.

It exploded on impact, send the flaming vehicle crashing into the underside of the bridge.

When Amelia looked around again, Sam was gone. Her eyes widened slightly, caught off guard for the first time. She quickly scanned the surrounding area. The man had disappeared.

So, she turned and headed towards the sound of fighting behind her, further down the boulevard. Where the Winter Soldier was.

Where Captain America was.

Stepping onto the main road, the two super soldiers were in a heated duel, trading blow for blow. The Winter Soldier, armed with a knife; Steve with his shield. He was constantly being pushed back, trying not to get hurt while at the same time keeping the Winter Soldier's focus on him. Natasha was around here somewhere — wounded, a gunshot through her shoulder. He didn't want the Winter Soldier to have another chance at her.

He almost didn't see Amelia until the last second.

She'd come up from behind. Steve hadn't seen her since they'd left her behind at the parking lot, and to see her now, with that cruel reflection of his own shield, nearly sent Steve's heart stopping.

The pattern emblazoned across her chest. A red skull.

He saw her knife at the last second.

Steve swung his shield. It connected with hers - vibranium rang out in dual gong. Amelia feinted to the right, and tried to slip her knife between his ribs.

Steve kicked her away. The impact of her shoe against her stomach made his own sick. He felt muscle and bone give way. The blow sent Amelia flying back. She was faster, but he was stronger.

She was already getting up, but Steve couldn't keep his attention on her forever. The Winter Soldier had just grabbed him from behind.

Right before Steve was thrown against a van, he saw Amelia lunge for him. Steve ducked a
following punch from the Winter Soldier. Deflected his next strike. Looked back and saw Natasha leap out of nowhere, tackling Amelia with her legs around the girl's shoulders.

Both of them went down.

Steve took a punch to the face. Whirled back around on the Winter Soldier.

Natasha had the upper hand, if only through the element of surprise. Unlike Sam or Steve, she had little compunctions against attacking a teenager. She had killed plenty in her time in the Red Room. This was nothing.

…Except it wasn't nothing. Amelia wasn't a Widow. She was just a girl.

And a Super Soldier.

Working for HYDRA.

It made things… complicated. Natasha was an expert at complicated, but even this was new territory for her.

Still, she didn't let her inner doubts hold her back. Regrets were saved for Future Natasha.

The stranglehold only had a temporary effect before the girl solved the problem by dropping backwards, throwing both of them to the ground. Natasha gasped as the girl landed on top of her.

Shoulder screaming, Natasha smothered her cry of pain. She rolled away as soon as Amelia recovered. Dodged the swipe of her knife. Delivered a kick to the knee.

Not strong enough; Amelia barely seemed to react. Her response was merely to catch Nat's follow-up attacked with her shield. Her knuckles cracked at the impact. Nat bit back another bout of pain. That would be the first and last time she ever punched a vibranium shield.

Amelia retaliated by slamming the shield into Natasha, sending her flying back against the front of a taxi. The windshield cracked under Natasha's weight. For a brief moment, she couldn't breathe. The pain in her shoulder was immense.

She watched, helpless, gasping for breath, as Amelia stalked towards her.

Some kind of ancient, latent fear resurfaced then. A kind of fear Natasha hadn't felt since the Winter Soldier had shot through her just to kill a target.

And now there were two of them.

Fantastic.

Finally, oxygen re-entered Natasha's lungs. She coughed. Then she wasn't so helpless anymore.

As she recovered, Natasha realized that being thrown onto the car had been a fortuitous turn on her part. Now she had the higher ground.

Amelia, apparently not seeing this, went right for her anyways.

Natasha leaped. This time, she was ready.

Amelia seemed to anticipate the legs, but didn't see the Widow's Bite coming. She gasped, her first sign of pain, as the electricity coursed through her.
The Widow's Bite, combined with Nat's weight on her shoulders, unbalanced Mia and sent her to the ground. The knife fell from her hands. Natasha snatched it immediately.

In a split second, Nat had Amelia pinned to the ground. Amelia was larger but she couldn't fight back, too busy writhing under prolonged exposure to the Widow's Bite. Natasha didn't let up. Not when she had the clear advantage.

That's when Steve happened to look over, hearing Amelia cry out. He saw Nat with her gauntlet digging into the girl's exposed neck. In Nat's other hand was a dagger, raised over her head, posed to strike.

Horror gripped Steve's chest, and he momentarily forget about the Winter Soldier. "Nat, don't!"

At the same time, the Winter Soldier looked over, distracted by the same sight as Steve. Only he had a far quicker, more efficient reaction.

The Winter Soldier pulled out a pistol. Shot the knife out of Nat's hand.

Natasha, surprised by Steve's voice, then the gunshot, recoiled. The bullet nearly took off her hand.

The Bite disconnected. Amelia kicked her off.

Steve didn't see the rest of it, as his gaze cutting back to the Winter Soldier, blinking in shock. Did that really just happen?

The man seemed briefly frozen, before seeming to remember himself, and turned the gun on Steve. But there was no hiding it. Something had changed.

But Steve was faster. He didn't know what he just saw, but he knew an opportune moment when he saw one. Reaching over his shield, he grabbed the wrist holding the weapon, twisting it aside. Slammed his shoulder into the Winter Soldier's chest. Swung his shield up and behind, driving the edge into the back of the Winter Soldier's arm - he felt the metal cave.

The assassin effectively locked in Steve's grip, Steve grabbed his throat and threw him over his shoulder.

The Winter Soldier hit the ground in a roll. The mask fell off.

Turned around.

Steve, about to charge after him, came to a complete stop. The entire world seemed to slow, as the face of his best friend spun towards him.

All the breath escaped him like he'd just been punched in the gut. "Bucky?"

So, it was true. Amelia had been right.

Steve had believed it. Or thought he did. He had already suspected the truth after the Bunker, but until now, he hadn't fully realized what that would mean. During this entire fight, he hadn't fully acknowledged that it was Bucky behind that mask, that it was Bucky trying to kill Natasha, trying to kill him.

That had killed Fury.

That had become the Fist of HYDRA.
And yet, here he stood. Sgt. James Buchanan Barnes, in the flesh. Staring at Steve like he was a complete stranger.

The gray-eyed assassin stared at him. "Who the hell is Bucky?"

Then he pulled another pistol and aimed it at Steve.

He never got the chance to fire.

Out of nowhere, Sam swooped in like Steve's personal guardian angel. He kicked the Winter Soldier — Bucky — with enough force to send him flying forward, rolling across the road. He recovered again, swiftly, tried to take aim at Steve once more.

But yet again, the attack was diverted by an RPG that came flying in from behind Steve. It missed its target, hitting the parked car behind the Winter Soldier. Still, it was enough to knocked him off his feet.

Steve looked around in surprise. Natasha, crouched behind a van, had the Winter Soldier's discarded weapon on her shoulder.

Her face was pale, and she sagged against the vehicle. Her shirt was bleeding heavy.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a form slipping between cars. He recognized the blonde hair immediately. Despite everything that happened, Steve couldn't help but call out, "Amelia!"

The figure froze. A face switched towards him. Amelia, wide-eyed, lips pressed into a thin line. Hand at her neck, covering a bleeding wound. She was limping. Natasha had gotten in a few good hits in their duel.

Smoke filled the air. Blocked her from sight. When it cleared, Amelia was gone.

When Steve looked around again, the Winter Soldier, too, had disappeared.

For a brief moment, both victory and despair, Steve thought they'd won.

And then Rumlow's STRIKE team arrived.

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"I'm sorry, Nat," Steve was the first to speak on that long ride. "For getting in your way."

His arms were trapped in some kind of super-soldier-hand-cuffs. They were thick, huge, covering both forearms and essentially locking them together like a straitjacket. The metal wouldn't yield to his strength. Trapped in this truck, being taken to some unknown location where they would no doubt be executed, Steve was not feeling very hopeful for their situation. Stopping Project Insight, rescuing Mia, could not have gone more wrong.

"You didn't get in my way," Nat replied, her eyes half-closed and her voice breathy and soft. She'd been getting more tired the longer the ride continued. Sam's call for medical aid had gone ignored by the two faceless guards in the armored vehicle with them. She just shrugged her uninjured shoulder. "He would've shot the knife, or he would've shot me. Nothin' you could do about it."
HYDRA had brainwashed Bucky. That had to be it. There was no way Steve could believe that Bucky Barnes would ever become turncoat to his own country. Not even out of some misguided sense of doing good. None of this was right. But maybe it also explained why Mia wasn't acting like Mia, either.

"I thought he was an assassin," Sam said, casting Steve a doubtful look. "Why would he stop to save Mia's life?"

*Because that's what a father does,* Steve wanted to say. Instead, he replied, "I don't know. Maybe he's… attached, somehow. Maybe Pierce needs her for something."

"If her life is valuable, he wouldn't have sent her on a mission to kill two soldiers and an assassin," Natasha pointed out.

Steve didn't want to admit she was probably right. He didn't want to think about what that meant. But something about that had left a tiny seed in his heart. A seed of hope. "If that's the case, then maybe… maybe there's still some humanity left in him."

"I don't know, man," Sam looked extremely doubtful, his brow furrowing. "Your best friend just tried to kill you. I'm not sure there's much of a person left in him."

Steve didn't know if there was any Bucky left in the man who'd once been his brother. But he refused to believe that HYDRA could so completely defeat a man he himself once saw as invincible. "If there's still something left of him, maybe there's still something left of her, too."

If there was still some echo of Bucky left after seventy years, then Steve had to believe the same of Mia.

He wasn't going to give up on them.

Not yet. Not ever.
"Mission report. Now."

The Asset could not tear his eyes away from the girl. She stood off to the side, facing to the right so all he could glimpse was her profile against a column.

Pierce sat in front of him, silent as the Asset gave a monotone recollection of the events at the overpass. To the Asset's left, a technician was soldering into the metal arm, fixing the damage the Black Widow and Captain America had inflicted earlier that day.

Everything cast in a green tint, dim, desaturated. He hated the buzz of the lights overhead, the shrill whine of the gas in the soldering iron, the heavy mouth-breathing of at least six different people. He didn't like the feeling of the chair on his exposed back (where had his jacket gone?), or the pain shooting up his shoulder and neck every time the technician hit a delicate circuit in his arm.

Back in the vault. The cold room, the cold faces. The Asset could not look any of them in the eye. Those who did, either glared back of flinched away. But it was Pierce's eyes that chilled him the most.

When he finished, Pierce sat back, folding his arms. The Asset tried to hide the sudden tensing in his own shoulders — he knew that expression all too well. Pierce was unhappy. It was how Pierce had looked earlier when he had struck the Asset, when the Secretary first entered the vault less than an hour ago. For being silent. For failing to kill his target.

For recognizing him.

According to Pierce, the Asset had encountered Captain America on a previous mission last week — but such memory was lost to him.

The Asset had thrown one of the men - the same man working on his arm. They called him "erratic". Images flashed in his head. Sharp, piercing light. Snow. A train. A man. A hand.

"Bucky, no!"

He shook his head, wincing.

Waiting for Pierce's reply, the Asset risked another glance at the girl. Her presence was both a balm and a concern. He didn't know why.

Pierce frowned slightly. The Asset tried to shift his attention back in time, but he was too late. Pierce had already glanced over his shoulder, before returning to the Asset with a mysterious smile on his face.

"You saved her life," Pierce commented. "At the cost of the mission. Tell me, was it worth it?"
The Asset swallowed, his mouth and throat completely dry. He could not answer, and looked away in shame.

That response was met with a backhanded slap. "Answer the question, soldier. Why did you prioritize her survival?"

The hit stung — but worse was the internal pain, the guilt and humiliation at having failed, at having disappointed HYDRA. Pierce did not treat failure with mercy. The slap was only a preamble to what would come later.

At last, the Asset managed to grind out: "I don't know."

It was little more than a raspy whisper, gravel on asphalt. But it was the truth.

The Asset closed his eyes, preparing for another blow. Not knowing was, perhaps, even worse than not answering at all.

But it never came. Instead, the chair creaked as Pierce shifted his weight, scratching his chin and studying the Asset with a long, contemplative look.

"Hm," was all he said.

The Asset was too terrified to look at the girl at this moment — even if doing so would bring him some manner of calm, of peace.

But the Winter Soldier shouldn't know peace. And the Secretary knew that.

Still, desperation had the Asset observing her from his periphery; the pale blur of her hair, her unmoving form amongst the milling guards and scientists. If she was listening to this conversation, she gave no heed.

"I guess I can't blame you for that," Pierce said at length, an answer that had the Asset jolting a little. Pierce's tone was surprisingly soft, understanding. Almost sympathetic. "She's just like you, a marvel. She's special to you, and you can't figure out why. Almost as if it's in your very nature, rather than a choice. The very nature we tried to snuff out years ago."

Pierce only shook his head in disappointment, chuckling. "I know the feeling all too well. I had to fight something like it constantly myself, when my daughter — did you know I had a daughter? — well, she decided to follow in my footsteps and dive into the dangerous world of politics. I tried to convince her not to, to become a doctor or a lawyer or, hell, anything where I wasn't lying awake every night, wondering if she's okay. As a father, you learn pretty quick that there's nothing you can do to stop your child once she has her mind set on something. The best you can hope for is that you can protect her when it matters, and that she'll even listen to you from time to time."

The Asset, indeed, did not know that Pierce had a daughter, although he remembered being vaguely aware the man had a family. The Asset couldn't remember where or when he learned this. As it was, he couldn't decipher just why Pierce was telling him this. Unfortunately, Pierce did not pose a question, so the Asset had no place to speak.

Pierce continued regardless, musing to himself now. "I know it's pointless, but I can't help it. No amount of rationalization or logic is going to stop me from trying my damnedest. It's in a man's nature to protect his daughter. Therefore, I suppose it's only instinct for you to want to protect yours."

Something lurched in the Asset's chest. He stared at Pierce, eyes widening. "W-what?"
His voice croaked, weak and breathless, as if he'd been shot in the gut.

Pierce smiled at his reaction, leaning in as if to speak with the Asset privately. "You think this is the first time you've failed us? Seventeen years ago, after a botched mission, you went off grid, ran into a certain nursing student in New York City. You've forgotten, of course. But we never did."

"What was once our worst disaster —" Pierce gestured to the soldatka behind him, and as she came to a stop by his side, Pierce appraised her with a fond expression. "— Became one of our greatest wonders. And we have only you to thank for that, soldier."

The Asset felt as if he were standing at the edge of a precipice. Vertigo, nausea, shot from his heels to his head, and he wobbled uncertainty on his seat. He could only stare up at the two of them, aghast, breathless. Pierce looked down at the Asset with a decidedly smug expression, but the Asset couldn't take his eyes off the girl.

"You don't remember, do you?" Pierce asked, standing up.


A bridge. A cold, starless night.

Her hair had been shorter, then.

She had a scar now that hadn't been there before.

Words crept at the edge of his lips. He wanted to say something. To the soldatka. But his jaw wouldn't move, and Pierce's gaze froze him on the spot.

Daughter. The word was wild and unfamiliar, but at the same time… so correct. So right. The Asset knew Pierce was not lying to him. Perhaps the Secretary was right; the Asset had already known, somewhere deep down.

Family.

The thought came entirely unbidden, and despite the fear it sent through him, the Asset clung onto the word, repeated it. Embraced the truth of it. Daughter. Family. Daughter.

He watched as Pierce stroked a stray blonde lock, tucking it behind her ear. It had come apart, messy and loose, from the battle at the causeway. Carded fingers over her hair, placed a light kiss on the top of her head. Like a man doting on a child.

Or a pet.

The soldatka didn't react. Her eyes were focused somewhere over the Asset's head, unseeing.

Fists clenching. Metal clicked. Don't you touch her.

He wanted to rise from his seat. But couldn't. His muscles were locked into place by a force he could neither see nor understand.

Obedience.

"…Why?" he croaked, forlorn gaze turned to Pierce.
"Why are you doing this? Why are you telling me?"

"So you don't make the same mistake again," Pierce replied, intuiting the Asset's meaning. The secretary always seemed to have a terrible insight into his mind. It's part of what made him so terrifying. Pierce then shrugged, making a face, "And I suppose you had to find out at some point. You're a gift to this world. I know you can achieve great things, soldier. And to do that, you can't have any distractions."

Something in the Asset's chest seized. His eyes flicked between Pierce and the girl, a sudden fear rising at the implication. But Pierce, apparently amused by this reaction, just shook his head and laughed. "Oh, no, we're not hurting her. She's performed excellently so far. You should be very proud of her."

_I am._

No. He suffocated that thought. He shouldn't feel proud. But he couldn't remember why.

Pierce seemed to sense the conflict behind the Asset's tense but still expression. His question was phrased lightly, but underneath was a veiled threat. "Is there a problem?"

_Do not cause problems._

"Name." The Asset murmured, a curiosity rising inside him. From somewhere he had not ventured in a long time. He tried to crush it, but it was too late. Now he wanted to know, too. "Her name."

"You want to know her name?" Pierce tilted his head, smirking slightly. He placed a hand on the _soldatka_'s shoulder, shaking her gently. "I'm afraid she doesn't have one. You ripped it out of her three years ago."

_Me?_ That didn't sound right. The Asset didn't want it to be true. But he could see it in Pierce's eyes, it was true.

But the Secretary was also lying.

Because the Asset had heard a name. The man with the shield, _Ste_— the man had shouted it at her.

_A—_  

The memory escaped him, just as the Asset recalled it. His mind grasped at the traces of the sound, the shout, the name. He'd heard it. He knew he had.

_Am…_  

He knew the Secretary was lying. But the Asset had nothing. No evidence. No name. Therefore, proving Pierce correct. A lie that wasn't a lie.

"Not that it will mean anything, of course. This knowledge will just make the problem worse, I think." Pierce sighed, and checked his watch. Then turned to Branson standing just a few feet away. "Wipe him, and start over."

The Asset stared into the middle distance, hearing those familiar words. _Wipe him._ Decipher the meaning.

Erase. Destroy.

Forget.
Forget the man on the bridge.

Forget the girl.

No.

Two hands pressed against his chest, forcing the Asset back. But he didn't comply. Resisted. Eyes going up towards the soldatka. Her expressionless face. Reached for her.

*Look at me.* He wanted to say. *Please. Look at me.*

More hands. The Asset grunted. Felt the panic take hold. He didn't want to forget. He didn't want to be *manipulated* anymore.

And she just stood there. Still, unmoving. As if he wasn't there at all.

Her name. He knew her name.

"Amelia."

She blinked. Her eyes flicked down.

Skull hit the headrest. Vice clamped around his arm. His chest. Plastic shoved into his mouth. The Asset bit down, too angry, too *scared*, to do anything else.

He knew what was coming. And there was nothing he could do to stop it.

The Asset kept watching the girl. The name had done something. He knew. He'd seen it. It had to be her name.

Their eyes met. Gray on gray. His heart leaped.

*Hope.*

But it was dashed away when he saw her expression hadn't changed. She held his gaze as if she were one statue studying another. She seemed to give no acknowledgement to the gritting of his teeth, the straining of his muscles, the hand still open, reaching out for her.

She stood there, and watched in everlasting silence, as the metal descended over the Asset's eyes, and electricity crackled.

And he screamed. And screamed.

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Pierce was gone when the Asset woke up.

The Asset didn't know how he knew that Pierce had been in the Vault earlier; just that he did. And that he was *relieved.*

Pierce was a strong leader. But a fearsome one.

His head pounded with a fierce headache. His throat felt raw, painful even to breathe. The sound
bouncing off the walls did not help. The vault was a hubbub of activity. Prepping the assets, ensuring Pierce was ready and on time for the World Security meeting at the Triskelion. The Asset did not make a sound when he was redressed. The agents moved his limbs as if the Asset were simply a mannequin. Aside from the warm skin and beating heart, he might as well have been.

He was lost in his thoughts. Trying to recall the last few hours. But nothing resurfaced.

Not that this should be a surprise. The Asset recognized the chair he just emerged from. The sight of it brought a familiar ache, like a phantom limb. One of pain, of resentment. The chair, with its restraints and extra appendages, was specifically design to recalibrate the human mind.

To wipe it clean. *Tabula rasa.*

"The Secretary wants you on site in an hour," an analyst told him; trembling voice, wide, fearful eyes. Intimidated in the presence of the Winter Soldier. The card on his lanyard said *Branson.* "And the, uh, the soldatka."

"*Who is the target?*" The Asset asked in Russian.

Branson fidgeted. "I, uh, I don't speak that…"

Waste of time.

"It knows its orders," said another man, this one armed in black tactical gear. A STRIKE agent. "We make sure Project Insight goes off without a hitch. Eliminate any and all who get in the way. Rogers and Romanov are in the wind; Pierce expects them to make a move soon. If either of them arrive, the Asset's first priority is to eliminate them."

*Rogers.*

That name rang a bell, but it was silenced quickly. The Asset did not know where it came from.

He scanned the vault. It took him only a few seconds to find the *soldatka,* standing quietly against a wall of lockboxes. Analysts and agents passed back and forth in front of her as if she weren't there at all.

She did not move, did not acknowledge anyone, until the Asset approached her.

There was something different about her, and it took the Asset a second to figure it out. Snippets of memory came back to him — a fight in Pierce's home. But there was a laceration on her neck that hadn't been there before. The sight startled the Asset, just slightly, and he raised a hand to turn her chin, to get a better look at it. A wound made by a knife or dagger of some sort. Just barely sliced through the skin.

Not done by him. Already stitched up and healing, it did not look so bad. But the Asset had the strangest sense he'd known how it happened.

And had apparently forgotten.

The notion unsettled him. What happened? Who did it?

"*How did this happen*?" He asked quietly. He did not like speaking loud in a room full of people. As it was, no one seemed to notice or care that the Asset was speaking to the *soldatka.*

"*The Widow,*" she replied in the same language, her eyes set straight ahead. The girl glanced at him
once, gaze dull, before drifting away again. "Caught me by surprise. It won't happen again."

The Asset realized she'd tensed up under his hand, and she didn't relax until he retracted it. There was just the slightest hint of strain in her voice; the regret of failure, the fear of punishment. But the Asset wasn't angry.

Not at her, at least.

"Good." He replied. Some strange part of him wanted to make her not afraid. She had nothing to fear from him. But that was a lie. The Asset could kill her easily.

But he didn't want to. Not at all.

The Asset straightened slightly, this thought alarming him. HYDRA would not be pleased by that. The Asset was not meant to have reservations. He had to be ready to kill anyone, at any time. Including HYDRA's own, if need be. Even himself, if it was ever called for.

But Pierce hadn't ordered that. Yet.

"Status?" he asked her in Russian, looking over her gear. Everything seemed to be in its place.

"Operational." The soldatka replied. Injured but functional. Nothing to prevent her from participating in the next mission.

The Asset was pleased. And yet his gut twisted uncertainly…


Then it was gone again.

The Asset cast his eyes over her again. He noticed something, an errant detail, a new item. Tied to the straps of her shoulder holster with a spare bit of leather string, was a small, round metal object.

The Asset furrowed his brow. Was that…?

A compass. Not regulation. But the Asset could not find anything wrong with it specifically. A compass was useful. If he lost track of her, the soldatka could find her way back.

One less thing to worry about.

"And what's your mission?" The Asset asked her, his eyes slipping away from the compass, back to the girl's expression less face. A specialist had added grease around her eyes, part of their prep. To protect against glaring sunlight, and subvert any facial recognition technology. It made her pale eyes seemed even paler.

"The same as yours," The soldatka said. "Eliminate Captain America."

A short nod of approval. The Asset fell slightly more at ease. They were on the same page. Project Insight would continue as planned. Pierce would be pleased, and neither of them would be punished for failure.

Failure. The Asset didn't want to think about that.

He switched his attention back on the soldatka. For whatever reason, it seemed to make him feel better.
Although he knew, deep down, that he shouldn't feel any sort of sensation at all.

But Pierce wasn't here. And no one else was sharp enough to know.

Took another once-over of her appearance. The soldatka's hair was long, longer than his, and hanging loose. A problem. Loose hair was easy to grab. Couldn't leave that vulnerability open.

"Turn," he ordered, not giving an explanation. Didn't think of it, really.

Not that he had to. The soldatka didn't question it; simply did as she was told without even blinking. When her back faced him, the Asset touched her shoulder to stop her moving. She now faced the wall, blank expression reflected in the small metal lock-box doors.

She did not move, said nothing as the Asset took pieced of her hair and began weaving them together. Smooth, practiced motions. He'd done this before. The Asset couldn't remember where, or how he had learned. But this felt… familiar. Normal. Traditional. Before every mission, every exercise, he made sure her hair was braided back. The sensation of her smooth hair in his right hand brought a vague sense of comfort to him. Rarely did he get to experience or appreciate a soft texture. He caught the faintest scent of shampoo — days old. It had a calming effect.

He was careful that the plates in his metal hand did not catch or pull at her hair. Not that he could tell if he did, as the soldatka gave no indication of pain or discomfort whatsoever. But the Asset was gentle. He didn't have to be.

But he wanted to be.

It felt… right.

"I also have a message for you," The soldatka began, her head rocking back ever so slightly as the braid went along. "From Pierce. Regarding the mission."

The Asset glanced up from his work, the edge of a frown lining his face. "What?"

"He said that if at any point during the mission, if I were wounded or stuck," The soldatka hesitated. It was small, almost imperceptible — but the Asset caught the slight hitch in her voice. "To leave me behind."

The Asset froze.

She continued speaking, not noticing this. "If I have to die for you to succeed, it will be considered an acceptable loss."

Acceptable.

The Asset had gone very, very still. A bitter taste filled his mouth.

He didn't know what to say. What he could say. How he could at all express how utterly unacceptable that notion was. But the Asset was not meant to disagree. Orders were orders. If Pierce made that decision, it was for a reason.

"Why?" The Asset demanded; his voice low. It wasn't his place to question orders; but the soldatka was an underling, and he was allowed to question her. A loophole.

She winced at his tone, which only worsened the bitter taste. "Because you must complete the mission at all costs. The Secretary said he didn't want you distracted." Another pause. She lowered
her head, eyes squeezing shut in her reflection. ":...By me."

"You are not a distraction." The Asset snapped — but immediately he knew the statement was incorrect. A lie.

"The Secretary thinks otherwise."

"The Secretary —" Is wrong. Is right. Can go fuck himself.

The Asset cut himself off before any of those thoughts could be released. Treacherous, traitorous thoughts. He shook his head, reevaluated. Pierce never did anything without a reason. Suddenly, the Asset felt exposed, vulnerable; like Pierce had read his mind, somehow. Knew the Asset better than himself. How did he know, before the Asset himself could, that the soldatka would be a distraction for him?

That old fear returned.

At length, the Asset finally managed to grunt, "Understood."

It wasn't a lie, at least.

The braid finished, he let go, arms hanging limp at his side. The Asset felt nauseous, and stared at the floor. What could he do?

"It's my fault." The soldatka said suddenly, turning around. With the braid complete, her face was now exposed, revealing the fear widening her eyes. "That I'm a distraction. That I'm not good enough. I failed you. If I hadn't gotten in your way, this would be over by now. Captain America would be dead. I... I'm sorry."

The Asset stared at her, unblinking. He didn't know how to tell her that her apology was unwarranted, unneeded. Misdirected. Don't be sorry. It's not your fault. You did nothing wrong.

"No," He said at last, his voice low. "You are not the one who failed."

He didn't think the others in here could understand them, but he dropped his volume nonetheless. Admitting such a thing was dangerous, even among those he did not follow orders from. The shame in his chest built up, because he knew it was true. Somehow, the Asset had failed Pierce — something had happened recently to cause this. Shame, and regret. His failure now meant the life of someone else.

The Asset knew, deep down, he should not care for her survival. But even deeper down, he did anyways. And didn't want to stop.

But it was difficult to look at her face, at the uncertainty and fear of a soldier who had been forsaken by the chain of command. The Asset wished he knew how to make this better. But he couldn't.

What's done was done.

Unable to bear her expression, his own self-loathing and confusion, the Asset turned away from her, and began heading towards the door. It was time to go.

"Wait —" But a hand caught his arm. More of a tap, really. The Asset looked around, maybe a little too fast. The soldatka flinched, snapping her hand back as if she feared reprisal. But he didn't move, didn't say anything, just waited for her to speak.
"The man with the shield," She asked, and something flickered behind her eyes. The slightest hint of confusion. Pain. "Did you know him?"

The Asset stared at her for a long moment.

Something echoed in his head. A voice both foreign and familiar. Although he could recall the sound, the Asset could not attach any visual to it.

A word. A name.

_Bucky._

_I knew him._

The Asset grit his teeth. His expression hardened.

"No."
"HYDRA grew right under your nose and nobody noticed."

"Why do you think we're in this cave?" Nick Fury. "I noticed."

Somehow, the old bastard was still alive.

"How many paid the price before you did?"

The revelation had both inspired and sombered Steve. Gladdened, because he and his team were no longer alone in this fight. Grave, because it meant Fury had enough foresight to plan for his survival. The fact that the former director still thought that SHIELD was worth saving was beyond Steve, who'd seen what the organization had become.

The SSR had come a long way since the 1940's. Unfortunately, the system had a tumor, too big to remove and keep the organism alive afterwards.

HYDRA had slowly been killing SHIELD from the inside. Now it was time to put it down. All of it.

That seemed to humble Fury, who glanced to either side of him. To Maria Hill, his trusted lieutenant; to Natasha, his best asset and one-time protégé. Behind Steve stood Sam, his arms crossed, watching this conversation play out like a tennis match, silent and serious. Steve felt bad that he had to be the outside in all this, but if Sam had a say in SHIELD's future, he would listen. Sam had just as much a say as anyone else now.

The only others in the room were a few doctors; SHIELD medics, perhaps, patching up Natasha and keeping an eye on Fury's vitals. The man had only just recently been stabilized; it wouldn't take much stress to put the director back into the hands of Death again.

They were hidden deep within the sublevels of a decommissioned dam, in a dried-up delta off the main Potomac river. It was cold and damp down here, with faulty electricity and absolutely no heating system; hardly comfy, but it was shielded by several hundred tons of concrete and provided ample protection from HYDRA's radar and satellites. Apparently, this was where Fury and his small task force of agents, technicians and doctors. Little more than a skeleton crew, they were the only ones Fury trusted to be SHIELD anymore.

Whatever was left of it.

At last, Fury bowed his head in defeat, and murmured, "I didn't know about Barnes or Fletcher."

"Even if you had, would you have told me?" Steve was not mollified and didn't alter his cold tone. "Or would you have compartmentalized that, too?"

"It's a little more complicated than —"
"Don't start that bullshit with me," Steve cut him off, giving one good shake of his head. "That won't work, not anymore. Full transparency from now on. What did you know?"

Fury glared at him for a long moment, dim light reflected in his dark eye. He seemed halfway convinced not to answer at all, perhaps out of spite, or offense at being spoken to in such a way. Yet, at last, he sighed, shoulders sinking beneath the blanket over his shoulders. "Officially, the Winter Soldier was a ghost. Our first record of his actions was JFK’s assassination; but we had no evidence of him besides conspiracy theories and rumors.

"And the public wanted blood." Fury shrugged casually, and Steve had to remember that this was before Fury's time in SHIELD. "So, SHIELD threw Oswald to the wolves and let them tear him apart. Those in charge at the time had already suspected him of conspiring with the Russians, so it worked well for us. But we never found anything more on the Winter Soldier. I suspect, however, that he may have been active before that point. And continued to be such afterwards."

"So, you covered it up. All those murders. All those accidents."

"Yes," Fury closed his eye and shook his head. "That was before my time. I continued the tradition simply… well, it was the simplest choice. And it was easier to let the public decide for themselves what they wanted to do, then to let them sit and fester with half-truths and uncertainties. What could we tell them, that we suspected some sort of supernatural force to be behind these murders?

"A man so good that we, the premier security force on the entire world, can't get our hands on?" Nick Fury scoffed at the notion, took a sip of water to clear his throat. Took a deep breath. "We'd look like fools. And it'd just give our enemies more confidence to act against the will of freedom and democracy. So instead we cracked down on any insurgency, anything that might prove to be a problem in the future. To prevent another Winter Soldier from happening."

"And as a result, you became the very thing you tried to stop." And may have inadvertently helped create another one.

Fury shrugged, and the shadows under his eyes never looked deeper. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I agreed with Pierce on so many things. In another universe, I wonder if I might've ended up just like him."

"Well, you didn't in this one," Steve found a chair and sat in front of the table, placing his hands on top. "Is that all you know about the Winter Soldier? Is there any way to stop him?"

"Stop him?" Fury chuckled at the thought. "I won't lie to you, Rogers, I've never been more scared in my life than when I saw him standing right in front of my windshield. Whatever the Winter Soldier used to be, its not him anymore. The same could be said for Fletcher, I'm afraid."

"But there has to be something —"

"What do you want me to say, Rogers?" Fury demanded, losing patience with him. "That there's some magic switch, some secret off-button that HYDRA left in their little brainwashed super soldiers? They have no interest in who their assets used to be. They would've erased whatever was left of them. If there is a way to bring them back, then I don't know what it is. And we don't have the time to go looking for one."

"We have a narrow window for this operation to work," Natasha added, throwing Steve a sympathetic look for disagreeing with him. She tapped the tabletop with her finger. "There's a good chance the Winter Soldier will be there. Along with… Mia." Nat made a face, glancing away from Steve. "You'll have to consider the possibility that in order to stop them, you'll have to —"
Steve realized what she was implying and cut her off. "It won't come to that."

Natasha threw him a reproachful look. "Steve —"

He abruptly stood up again, not willing to give that line of thought another second. He wasn't going to kill Bucky. Not Mia. Not if he could avoid it. "The fact remains, the system that created him, we're finishing it."

Besides, if anyone was going to fight the Winter Soldier, and Mia, it would be him. Should be him. Everyone else needed to focus on the more important problem: "SHIELD, HYDRA… it all goes."

"He's right." Maria Hill said, earning a surprised look from Fury. Surprised, and perhaps a little betrayed. She cut her boss a single nod; small, but sure. She understood what it would mean for them. What it would mean for herself. A career SHIELD agent. Her entire livelihood, gone. Her reputation would be ruined. She likely might never be hired by another legitimate organization again.

Fury leaned back, frowning. He glanced at Natasha, who met his gaze but offered no word. She, too, would suffer for SHIELD's fall. A Russian traitor whose new patrons would be razed to the ground; Natasha would have no home after this, either. Nothing to protect her. No allies to hide behind.

Her history, ammunition for anyone and everyone who wanted to do her harm.

But it was still the right thing to do.

✮✮✮

They waited in the underground hangar bay.

Standing inside IN-01, amongst seasoned HYDRA agents, they were left unseen and unnoticed. The command center was alive with activity, as the counter drew closer and closer to launch second. Only thirty minutes left.

No one spoke to them. The Asset did not speak in return. He had his orders, and only Pierce could alter them — right now, the Secretary was likely greeting the incoming heads of the World Security Council. So far, no trouble had arisen; the Asset had no inclination for one or the other; he just knew his mission, Captain America, would likely die today.

And if not today, then another.

Aside from the lights of the consoles and from the hangar bay outside the windows, the command center was dimly lit. It was a sunny day outside — beautiful, really, but completely beyond those still waiting underneath the river. The Asset was not one to appreciate such a thing, anyways. He found himself mildly annoyed by the noise and sensations; the over-warm air, the humming of computer fans, the air alive with mutterings and orders; an AI that called out status updates at regular intervals. Busy, dark, and noisy. It had a claustrophobic air to it.

The soldatka waited quietly beside him. The Asset felt his eyes draw once more towards the compass tied to her shoulder strap. He had initially thought it to be an inconsequential detail, but now the presence… nagged at him.
Recognize it? You should. Strange words echoed in his head. The soldatka's voice but not, at the same time. Why would she say that?

How did he forget?

Unable to resist the curiosity, some vague thought still begging to be explored, the Asset reached open and opened small compact. He frowned to himself, disappointed and bewildered by it. For some reason, he'd been expecting to see a photo of a woman stuck on the inside of the cap… but he had no idea where he ever got that notion from.

"Is there a problem?" the soldatka asked, blinking at him in confusion. She didn't move or brush him away, stood very still while the Asset studied the object.

Snapping the compass shut, the Asset withdrew forthright. Quickly shoving all errant and unwanted thoughts from his mind, he muttered, "No. Carry on."

He tried to ignore the stare she held on him afterwards.

Just then, a voice began echoing over every PA system, every speaker and comm unit; "Attention all SHIELD agents… this is Steve Rogers."

Everyone went still, shocked. Even the Asset and the girl, who exchanged sharp looks. The target. He was speaking.

"You've heard a lot about me these last few days. Some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think its time you knew the truth. SHIELD is not what we thought it was. It's been taken over by HYDRA."

The agents in the command center exchanged mildly amused looks, a scattering of chuckles, as if sharing in a secret joke. Everyone in here was already in on the take. Nothing could stop them now.

"Alexander Pierce is their leader. The STRIKE and Insight crew are HYDRA as well." All of a sudden, those smiles and laughter disappeared. The command center went completely silent, faces drawn ashen. All except the Asset and the girl, who observed the rest with no expression. "I don't know how many more, but I know they're in the building. They could be standing right next to you."

Beneath the announcement, a burst of chatter hit every ear piece of every HYDRA agent in the complex. Bodies flinched, others stood up, or sat down. A voice — Rumlow's — ordering his STRIKE team to the top of the Triskelion, where the meeting was being held. He and another group, towards SHIELD's main control room; the orders were clear. Eliminate anyone who isn't HYDRA. Ensure the launch of Project Insight above all else.

"They almost have what they want." Steve Rogers continued. Despite the rising chaos all around them, his voice was the one calm constant. "Absolute control. They shot Nick Fury. And it won't end there. If you launch those helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone who stands in their way. Unless we stop them. I know I'm asking a lot."

An alert flashed across the screens on the command center. Bay doors opening. Initiate launch.

Gunfire rang out outside. Agents rushed to the windows to look out, seeing a force of HYDRA soldiers taking out the SHIELD agents guarding the helicarrier gangway. Beyond that, the bay operating station was under fire; the attempt to keep the bay doors shut had failed.

Project Insight was well under way.
"The price of freedom is high," said Captain America. "But it always has been. And it's a price I'm willing to pay. And if I'm the only one, then so be it. But I'm willing to bet I'm not."

Next to him, the soldatka stiffened. The Asset glanced over, frowning at her pale face. "What's wrong?"

"N-nothing…" The soldatka just shook her head. "Those words just sounded familiar, that's all…"

The Asset opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by a voice ringing in both their ears. "All units, high alert. Captain America has been spotted leaving the Triskelion. I repeat, all units converge on Hangars Alpha through Charlie — eliminate Captain America, and his allies, at all costs."

Together, the Asset and the girl left the command center, crossing along the helicarrier corridor. HYDRA agents rushed in and out on either side. The soldatka began turning towards the hangar bay doors. Above them, sirens were ringing everywhere — both the helicarriers preparing to launch, and an intruder alert sounding off. But the Asset grabbed her arm, pointed towards the way of the flight deck instead.

"What are we doing?" she asked, confused.

"Taking a short-cut."

It was the truth, in a way. The Winter Soldier knew where Captain America was headed. The helicarriers were his target. Project Inside was his target.

So they were going to beat him to it.

Bright blue sky shone down from above, the hangar doors creaking open. River water rained in, and a great roar filled the air — powerful, magnificent, nearly deafening, as a dozen engines came to life and began lifting the helicarriers into the air. The ascent seemed slow, but the power was immense; the force seemed to force them down, the floor rocked to and fro. But their pace was measured and even, not easy to unbalance.

They were ready when they stepped onto the flight deck, and saw the pilots running for their jets.

The few true SHIELD agents, the ones who never knew about HYDRA, who'd been emboldened by Captain America's speech, had risen to the challenge. Even aboard a ship where they were so greatly outnumbered, outmatched, they chose to fight anyways.

They didn't stand a chance.

It was, perhaps, cruelly amusing how easily the pilots and flight technicians were so easily taken care of. The Asset, armed with an RPG, took out one quinjet before a rebellious pilot team could hijack it. The soldatka, with a pistol and a grenade, shot one pilot who attempted to charge them; the grenade rolled under another quinjet and blew off one wing, and the man trying to direct it into take-off.

Behind the two came a small army of HYDRA soldiers and pilots. They rushed in to take command of the remaining quinjets still standing. More men and women fell, from both sides. But the Asset and the girl was quite untouchable.

As the Asset mowed down a small team of technicians with a machine pistol — with automatic fire and a large magazine, it managed to fire dozens of rounds in a short moment. At the same time, the soldatka stood at his back, shield up to defend against returning fire from the opposite
SHIELD pilots had been wise in arming themselves — but not wise enough to think past a vibranium shield. The Asset whirled around and fired upon them as well; he and the soldatka rotating positions, remaining back-to-back.

A technician scrambled for the open bay doors of a quinjet. The soldatka threw her shield; it bounced off the wing and struck the technician before he could lay a foot on the gangplank.

"IN-03 is down," the comms announced.

"Already?" a pilot demanded afterwards. Two more still left.

The Asset looked up — the helicarriers had now reached three thousand feet. Operational height. Until now, the Asset hadn't realized how high they had flown over Washington DC. The river remained below them; the helicarriers didn't have to go anywhere before they could start crossing people off the list.

The entire city and the great river stretched out below. The Atlantic lied beyond, a deep, glittering blue. The horizon was white and hazy, and the sun gleamed off every surface. Between the gunfire, the wind, and the sound of engines buzzing by, it was almost… serene. The smooth ascent of the helicarriers had given the sensation that they were slowly rising to heaven.

If only it wasn't the furthest from the truth.

The other two helicarriers were slightly below — from there, the Asset witnessed as other quinjets took off the other flight decks across helicarriers; some were SHIELD. Others were HYDRA. Right before them, an intense dogfight took place as identical ships went to battle. It was impossible to tell who was on whose side. Only the pilots themselves seemed to know, perhaps.

But it was a sign of one certain thing.

Captain America was indeed not alone.

One quinjet, shot down by another, went screaming past overhead. It smashed onto the deck, taking out another ship just as a team of HYDRA pilots had boarded.

As the Asset and the girl continued down the deck, clearing out SHIELD agents as fast as they could, another aircraft flew above. Only it wasn't an aircraft. It was a man with a set of wings.

"Incoming!" a voice yelled, right before the winged man took out a HYDRA quinjet with a pair of submachine guns. It seemed he could fly both with and without the use of his arms. The guns of the helicarrier turned on him, but the winged man was too agile — soaring up and away before any shot could hit him.

The Asset watched as the winged man dived out of sight, going below the helicarrier. That was going to be a problem.

"IN-01 is down," another announcement. The Asset cut a look at the girl. There was only one place left for Captain America to go.

The nearest quinjet was fifty feet away. Someone was already boarding it.

The soldatka entered from the rear. The Asset attacked from the front; without waiting, the Asset reached down, ripped off the side windshield, and yanked the pilot out from his seat. Sent him
flying across the flight deck.

The fact that it was a HYDRA pilot did not concern the Asset. The man should be thankful he was still alive.

His copilot wasn't so lucky. As the Asset slipped into the cockpit from its new, improvised entrance, he found the body of another pilot on the floor behind him. The soldatka, holstering her pistol and kicking the body aside. She grabbed the overhead railing as the Asset took reign and guided the quinjet up into the air.

Flying was one thing; dodging both enemy aircraft and friendly fire was another. The Asset banked hard to the left to avoid incoming fire from another jet, then rolled as IN-02 fired upon them. It seemed the helicarriers fired upon all the quinjets seemingly indiscriminately. Perhaps it didn't matter if they killed one of their own so long as they killed the enemy, too.

Unlike the pilot chatter on the comms, the Asset didn't panic; as cool and controlled as ever, he deftly maneuvered the quinjet through fierce and roiling air battle.

The quinjets went at each other and the helicarriers with an incredible passion. The flight decks of all three helicarriers were being torn to shreds by various aircraft as they each tried to defend their fellow men taking off and joining the battle.

It brought to him a strange… sensation of the familiar. That such a dogfight had been something he might've seen before. But the aircraft was wrong. The land, the people, the sounds… all wrong.

The Asset shook his head. It didn't matter.

He had no idea who was who, and fired back when another quinjet got in the way of his landing upon IN-02. It might've been HYDRA, but he didn't care.

All that mattered was the mission.

Fire from below. The Asset struggled to maintain control of the quinjet, and found the landing gears jammed when he tried to activate them. Crash landing it was.

"Hold tight," he ordered to the soldatka behind him, and slammed the yoke forward — driving the quinjet straight into the deck and taking out the three SHIELD soldiers firing upon them. He barely heard their screams over the screech of metal grinding and engines sputtering and dying.

The landing was, least to say, a little rough. Nevertheless, both of them were at the ready when they jumped out the rear. This flight deck was nearly a smoking ruin — but the helicarriers guns were all operational, which meant it was the last ship standing to initiate Project Insight. Captain America was bound to find his way aboard somehow —

A shriek overhead.

A pair of wings, an angel. Now carrying an extra passenger.

Captain America and his winged friend had just landed — the same winged one from the causeway, the Asset thought, then grew confused. What causeway?

It halted his line of thought momentarily. He nearly missed the opportune moment; but he was lucky. Captain America hadn't spotted either the Asset or the girl; at least, he didn't until the Asset charged out from past a stack of crates, tackled the super soldier, and sent him flying over the edge of the helicarriers.
"Hey!" the winged man shouted, turning to race after his fallen friend, about to take flight once more. But the soldatka was already on top of him.

Falcon, read the painted words on the suit as Amelia grabbed his arm, jerked him back and delivered a sharp punch to his sternum. The Falcon recoiled, coughing, and only barely managed to block the next strike with his forearm. The blow was punishingly strong and nearly knocked him onto his knees.

When he realized who it was that had attacked him, the Falcon groaned, "Oh, not again!"

The dread on his face grew tenfold when he saw the Winter Soldier turn towards him; apparently the weaker threat to be killed off quickly. Already thinking of a million curse words, the Falcon didn't have time to consider how screwed he was until the soldatka swung her shield. The impact knocked him backwards — and into thin air.

Which, luckily, was just where the Falcon wanted to be.

Wings expanded once again, he pulled out the automatic submachine guns again — fired upon both the Asset before he could chase after Captain America, who had just barely managed to catch the edge of the helicarrier's wing. As the super soldier recovered and started racing along a catwalk, the Asset ducked at bullets rained down — the soldatka diving in front of him with her shield, protecting him with covering fire.

The Falcon continued to fire until taking a sudden dive — an enemy quinjet had turned their attention on him and begun to fire.

The Asset looked out from behind the girl's shield as the winged man swooped and soared, performing an aerial dance as he played the bigger, slower aircraft like a fiddle.

An excellent distraction. And one less thing to worry about.

With a jerk of his head, the Asset signaled for the soldatka to follow. He knew where Captain America was going.

When Captain America dropped into the data post, the Asset was waiting for him.

Captain America came to an abrupt stop on the catwalk; there was only one way forward, and one way back. In order to reach the ship's data column, he'd have to get around the Asset somehow.

Or through him.

Instead, he spoke. "People are gonna die, Buck. I can't let that happen."

No reaction. No response to the name.

Just beyond the windows the air battle continued. The two men stood in the center of what appeared to be a giant glass bowl set at the base of the helicarriers. The quinjet dogfight continued with fury, although there were notably less of them now. It only made the Falcon's job harder, as he became much more noticeable with fewer combatants on the field. He did his best to be a distraction, and keep any HYDRA pilots from attacking the ship's hull — and Captain America —
A creak behind him. Captain America looked around, and shifted uncertainly when the *soldatka* appeared on the steps behind him. She showed no recognition, either, no hesitation. They had both been waiting.

Now he was trapped between them, on a catwalk with no other exit.

Captain America turned back to the man who, in another time, had been his friend. He wavered slightly, as the truth of the situation finally dawned upon him. He whispered, "Please don't make me do this."

The Asset didn't break his gaze.

So this was it.

For a long second, the two just stood and watched each other. Waiting for the other to make the first move.

In the end, it was the *soldatka* who attacked first.

Captain America didn't see her attack, but he heard her coming, and reacted instantly. Spun around and took the brunt of her attack on his shield. Metal clanged on metal like gongs, ringing amplified by the rounded glass surrounding them. Captain America retaliated by kicked her backwards, strong enough to send her flying back several feet — only to whip around *again* to throw his shield at the incoming Winter Soldier, who'd taken the distraction as an opportunity to charge.

The Asset raised his metal prosthetic and the shield glanced off it, leaving him unharmed. Captain America didn't notice the gun in his fist until after the shield had returned to his hands.

He lifted it just in time to deflect the incoming fire. At the same time, a blow from behind caught him by surprise. The *soldatka*, driving her foot into the back of his knee.

Captain America didn't drop completely, and raised his shield overhead to take the Asset's following slam. He spun to face the *soldatka*, grabbing her wrist before she could fire the pistol she'd just withdrawn. Her twisted her arm hard, harder, until bone cracked. Steve hated the sound of it, but couldn't let her fire. At last, he slammed her arm against the catwalk's railing — she cried out, and the gun fell from her hand.

In his attempt to disarm the girl, Captain America had opened himself to the Asset's attack; too focused on her, he didn't have his shield angled correctly, and gasped as a gunshot rang out, a sudden burning in his side. He'd been shot.

It was only a flesh wound, unfortunately, not penetrating. Captain America slammed his shield and sent the Asset flying back, crashing against the column — his goal.

The Captain tried to rush forward, but a hand grabbed his wrist and yanked backwards. Captain America stumbled only barely pulled back before the *soldatka* could strike his head with the edge of her shield. Sparks flew as she swiped again and he deflected it with his own vibranium. Giant metal disks, whistling in the air. By then, the Asset was back on his feet. He'd withdrawn a knife, and it might've struck its target — if two shields, locked together, hadn't suddenly gotten in the way.

It was a hectic to and fro as Captain America spun back and forth, fending off attacks from either side. A knife here, a strike there, a few close ones with a pistol. He gave as good as he got, and
ultimately had to take one blow in order to avoid a worse one from another.

They nearly had him pinned against the railing at one point, on his knees, before Captain America kicked out hard — and sent the soldatka flipping over the other end in a cry of surprise.

Captain America looked momentarily relieved when she was removed from the fight. That relief disappeared quickly when the Asset retaliated.

Both hands, strike of the knife. Would've ended up in his sternum had the Captain not lifted his shield. The knife bounced off once. The Asset followed up with a kick to the knee to prevent the other man from rising, but it didn't work. The Asset took a punch, then another, failed a third strike, then took the shield on the chin. The blow momentarily stunned him, sending the Asset flying onto his back, on the small circular catwalk around the main column.

By the time he'd recovered, Captain America was about to replace a computer chip in the data array.

The last one.

The Asset rose to his feet. The chip was inches away from insertion.

Neither of them noticed the flaming quinjet spiraling right for them.

The impact knocked both Captain America and the Asset off their feet. The chip went flying past the side, down into the floor below.

And then an explosion knocked both Captain America and the Asset to the ground. The chip went flying past the side, down into the floor below.

A scream rang out.

In a brief moment of mutual surprise, the two men exchanged a look. Neither of them had made that sound.

The Asset, closer to the edge, looked down.

Below them, the glass shield had cracked and open. Smoke and fire filled the room, metal bent and twisted, collapsed across the new hole below them. Cold wind rushed in, providing momentarily relief to the choking smoke filling the tight area. The quinjet had only glanced off the side of the glass before crashing into the river below, but that had been enough. It had smashed through the glass, the scaffolding, and part of the main support structure.

And beneath it all, the soldatka. She had been climbing up the column, attempting to rejoin the fight, when the quinjet hit. The impact had thrown her off again, and she'd rolled over just in time to avoid getting crushed by fallen support beams. Her shield had protected her from the worst of the impact, but it couldn't protect her from the smoke, or the glass cracking beneath her.

And only thirty feet away from her lied the computer chip. A miracle it, too, hadn't fallen out of the giant, jagged hole.

Without waiting, both the Asset and Captain America jumped over the railing, and dropped to the base of the data center below.

Glass cracked under the Asset's boots, but held.
But the soldatka was choking on the smoke. Although it was difficult to see, the crash had wounded her; blood leaked from a cut on her head, gushing down the side of her face. The girl was pinned, beneath a beam and a large plate of broken metal — a part of the quinjet's wing that had remained behind from impact. Though she struggled, girl couldn't lift it off.

She didn't call for help.

The Asset only threw a cursory glance at the chip — it'd be so easy to crush, shatter, and end the Captain's plot right then and there.

To kill him here and now.

To his right, the girl coughed. More broken glass fell into the river below. The wing began to slide down, towards the hole, dragging the soldatka with her.

To his left, Captain America slid across the glass floor and grabbed the chip.

The Asset ran.

One strong leap.

"What are you doing?" The soldatka cried out, as his hand wrapped around her wrist. "Leave me! You can't fail the mission! The Secretary's orders!"

Damn those orders. The Asset wanted to say, but he had to grit his teeth as he pried away a piece of metal. Instead, he grunted as he lifted it up: "No. I'm with you…"

"…To the end of the line." Another voice finished, and another hand, a different hand, reached down and grabbed the fallen support beam, and lifted.

With one final heave, two different sets of arms pulled the soldatka away from the burning mess of fire and metal. The Asset looked around, stunned to see none other than Captain America — his mission — dropping the support beam as soon as the girl was clear from danger. The Asset was so stunned, he didn't let go of her, even as she rose to her feet.

For some reason, the target had stopped in whatever objective he had to do this. Something compelled him so, something that the Asset could not even comprehend, much less understand. He knew Captain America was trying to sabotage Project Insight.

He was willing to die for it. And he did not have much time left.

So what would be so important as to stop him now?

"I'm not your enemy, Buck," Captain America said, holding out his hands — empty of weapons — and taking a step forward. Thick smoke wafted between them.

The Asset, with the girl in his grip, took a step back. Captain America came to an abrupt stop, his eyes flicking between the two. If and when the fight continued, she would not last long and the Asset couldn't afford to fail either her or the mission. The Captain had the advantage at this moment; the Asset caught off his guard, the soldatka badly injured.

But the expression in the Captain's eyes seemed fragile, almost… almost heartened. A small, odd little smile pulled at his lips and he let out a raspy chuckle. "I-I can't believe I never saw it before. She looks just like you."
The Asset blinked. A sign of surprise. He glanced at the girl, wondering if this was a trick. He didn't remember what he looked like; and yet still he searched.

And perhaps found more than he was expecting.

Captain America, perhaps intuiting the Asset's shock, confusion, indecision, added, "Yeah, buddy, she's yours. She's your kid." Again, that sad, wry smile. "Don't you want to know her name?"

*Her name.*

*She doesn't have one. You ripped it out of her three years ago.*

"Amelia," Captain America turned his attention now to the *soldatka*, who went very still. "I know you're still in there. And I just want you to know, I'm not angry at you. I'm sorry I ever dragged you into this. It's all my fault. But I know this man," He gave a pointed nod to the Asset. "Your father. He'd never hurt you."

*It's only instinct for a man to protect his daughter.*

The Asset felt something snap in his chest. Nothing physical, nothing *real*… but it hurt just as much. Left him breathless, panicking. His gaze snapped to the *soldatka*, who'd gone very pale. It might've been from his metal grip, which had tightened considerably on her shoulders with every word Captain America spoke.

Like he knew them.

Like he knew the truth.

Her wide eyes stared back at him. The grease had smeared, her face caked in ash and blood. Her face looked significantly paler now. There was a cut on her lip, a bruise on her cheek from the recent clash. Part of her gear had been damaged, sliced through on her right arm where part of the ceiling had come down on top of her.

*She's a distraction.*

She was alive. So was the mission. The Asset had failed his orders.

And she would suffer for it.

"He's lying, right?" The *soldatka* whispered, looking between him and Captain America with an increasingly strained expression. She fought against his grip, leaning to attack. But the Asset held her firm.

This wasn't her fight.

This man, this shield-bearer… he was right. The Asset would never hurt her. Would never let anything happen to her.

Would never let Pierce touch her again.

"No," was all the Asset could say, his voice low. Russian, so only she would understand him. The Asset straightened, forcing himself to look her in the eye. He glanced past her, as the sudden drop over the edge of the helicarrier. Then looked back at her. Gray on gray. *Daughter. Family.*

*Amelia.*
Find the will to do what he was about to do.

And hoped it worked.

"What?" the soldatka asked, brow furrowing as he suddenly began pushing her back. "What are you doing?"

"He isn't your mission." The Asset told her quietly, bowing his head.

Then, with one hand, he lifted the girl up.

And threw her off the helicarrier.

"No!"

The Asset was tackled from behind, but it was too late. The soldatka screamed once, then fell from sight.

Pierce was right. The girl was a distraction.

And now there was nothing left in the way of the Asset completing his mission.
Open, empty air.

*I'm with you... to the end of the line.*

Wind rushing past. Burning cheeks, whipping hair. Scream ripped from throat.

*He isn't your mission.*

Thrown off. Casted out. Unwanted.

Glittering blue river stretching out below. Plummeting, twisting, falling.

*Your father.*

Not true. Couldn't be true. Stomach turning, heart stopping. Couldn't think. Thoughts collided. Instincts at war. Voices in head, all screaming at once.

*Lies. Lies. All lies.*

Vision blurry. Tears whipped away.

A shadow passing overhead.

"I got you!"

Out of nowhere, a pair of strong arms wrapped around chest. Gasping as entire body lurched sickeningly upwards. Vertigo, whiplash, nausea hit all at once as the fall came to a sudden stop. Then soaring — *soaring* — across the water, waves flickering by like the frames in a camera reel.

Saved.

By the enemy.

"Hey, hey, take it easy!" man started, sounding more aggravated than afraid when I started to fight against him. *Eliminate Captain America and his allies.*

But the attempt was sluggish, half-hearted. Head felt foggy. Echoing with words I struggled to understand.

*Amelia. This isn't you.*

The world kept blinking in and out. For a moment, vision went black. When it returned, the air was suffocating.

The winged man still had a hold as he angled towards the Triskelion. *His name,* a thought echoed. *I know his name.*
What was his name?

A headache bloomed behind eyes. Didn't matter. Had to get out. Had to escape.

Must complete the mission at all costs.

"I swear, if you try to kill me after saving your life —" the winged man shouted, only to take a fist to the chin. His head snapped back and the two of us jerked in the air, but he didn't lose control. "Ow! What did I just say?"

Continued to writhe, trying to break free. Any consideration of wellbeing, or high we were above ground (or water) was completely irrelevant, unworthy of thought. It didn't matter. None of it mattered. Failure. Had to fix it. A distraction to the Winter Soldier. Mere collateral damage to Secretary Pierce. But I couldn't fail again.

I couldn't.

At the same time, an intense wave of guilt overwhelmed, and I tried to open my mouth to apologize — but nothing came out.

Instead, a hand reached for knife in belt.

My heart lurched, trying to fight it. Fight the instinct that wasn't mine.

Don't hurt him. Don't hurt Sam.

"This is gonna get rough —!" the man was cut off by a sudden whip of air.

Sam.

His left wing came apart as a quinjet rounded on us from behind. Its fire tore the wing to shreds. Sam cried out. He managed to roll out of the way, out of the line of fire. But it was too late. Both falling once more.

"Hang on!" Letting go of me with one arm, he pulled his ripcord; ejecting the wings, both broken and functional. They spun away like maple seeds in the wind.

Fwoosh!

A parachute unfurled from his backpack.

The force of its backwards pull was a saving grace — and pulled me out of Sam's remaining arm.

"Sam!" my voice, finally breaking free, uttered a single distressed call. The only one I could make. Ragged and broken and terrified.

"No!" Sam yelled, reaching out for me but it was too late. I was already plummeting back for the ground.

I didn't know what happened to him after that. All I knew was that if I hadn't been so busy fighting myself, fighting Sam, had tried to hang onto him instead as he'd asked, then maybe this wouldn't have happened.

But there was no time to dwell on regrets.

Twisting around, I faced my descent. Sam had guided us across the water and over the hangar bays.
He'd been trying to get us to shore. He'd gotten so close.

Now I was dropping back to where this all began.

Without the helicarriers in their bays, the three giant hangars were wide, empty basins several hundred feet deep. It delved far below the river's surface — and gave me enough time to whip out my shield for impact.

Curling up behind my shield, I closed my eyes against the incoming ground. If I was going to die, I didn't want to see it.

*Whoomph.*

The physics of vibranium was a funny thing. Taking bullets against it and one hardly felt a thing. Using it to shield a hundred-foot fall? … Not quite the same.

The impact hit my shoulder first, and my hip, braced against the inside of the shield. It reverberated through the rest of my body, and my head, as shield displaced the impact into the air around and below, escaping in a noise like a cannon shot. The following clang, crunch of metal against concrete, rattled me from head to foot.

But as I squinted one eye open, I was surprised to find myself still alive. And in one piece.

Recovering was a slow, painful progress. First an arm, then a foot. Slowly unfolding myself, wincing at every sore muscle, every injury pulled the wrong way. Warm blood seeped from a spot on my forehead. My left arm trembled underneath me as it supported my weight. Knees wobbled; legs uncertain as I climbed to my feet. My head was still swimming from that… whatever it was back on the helicarrier. The words Captain America said.

*Steve.*

My breath hitched, a sudden burning behind my eyes. Captain America's helmet had come off in the fight. The blond hair and blue eyes hit me with a sudden memory I didn't have before — arm around my shoulder. Laughing at something I said. The mental impact had me nearly doubled over, feeling like I'd been punched in the gut. Fighting back tears borne of an emotion I couldn't describe. Where did *that* come from?

I searched but the memory slipped away once more, a little fish through my fingers, fists tightening around nothing but emptiness. Who was Steve? How did I know him?

Wincing as I holstered my shield, I looked up at the sky. Saw, in growing bewilderment, as all three of the helicarriers turned their guns on each other. And started to fire.

Nothing made sense anymore.

Looking further up, behind me, I saw the white shroud of Sam's chute as he swooped over the bay doors and out of sight. Landing safely above ground, I assumed. *Good,* I thought to myself, although I didn't know why.

I couldn't remember who Sam was, either. I only knew his name. A memory, but not an image. Just a smell — rich and warm and savory. Was it… *pizza?*

I shook my head, casting it away. Another useless recollection.

Shifted attention back to the destruction of the helicarriers. There was something oddly beautiful in
watching each slowly careen downwards, erupting into fire and ash and metal. The gunfire and explosion were enormous from here, a massive roar that echoed across the sky. The only thing louder than that was the sirens ringing off in the hangar bay. The PA system rang out with an evacuation cue. There were people still around me, either watching the same sight as me, or making for an exit.

I just stood and watched, unhearing. The Winter Soldier, still up there somewhere. With Captain America. Dead or alive.

When the first helicarrier hit the river, I couldn't see the impact, but witnessed the ripple effect — literally. A wave crashed over the top edge of the hangar bay on the far end. From my position, the amount of water looked small, miniscule. It had dissipated into a mist by the time it reached the bottom of the hangar.

And then the second helicarrier hit.

I didn't see until too late how awfully close IN-02 had gotten. It had started drifting closer after the initial firing; One of its engines was completely destroyed, and its bow angled downwards at a forty-degree angle, tilted to the right. It hit the river, and then the side of the hangar wall.

And in rising horror, I watched as the wall collapsed, bringing the helicarrier — millions of tons of broken metal and fire — and the entire Potomac River with it.

A waterfall, cascading down in slow motion, filling the contained space with a massive, incredible roar unlike anything I'd seen before. A strong, cold gust hit me first — the initial impact of the water into the bottom of the metal basin. It nearly knocked me off my feet.


And it was coming straight for me.

Heart leaping into my throat, I turned. And ran.

All around me, people scrambled for any available exit, any escape from the oncoming tidal wave. They could've been SHIELD or HYDRA — right now they were one and the same. Terrified of the destruction raining down. Just wanting to survive. The hangars had become a deathtrap, a dam to be filled.

Their screams were all but drowned out by the rising roar of the incoming wave.

To my right, about a hundred meters away, I saw a dozen technicians banging on a door that had closed on them. Begging to be let in.

Ignored.

Or forgotten.

Around me, electricity failed. Ozone filled the air as the water swept up everything in its path. Vehicles, aircraft, people, structure — all swallowed up, swept away, devoured by ever-increasing black waves.

I didn't know where I was going; I had some insane notion that I could actually **outrun** this thing. But Mother Nature was not forgiving.

The rush of crashing waves suddenly became terrifying close. Loud, frightening, hungry. Not even
a super soldier was strong enough to fight against them. The only warning I had to what came next were water droplets on my heels.

Then two tons of water slammed into my back. The force of it shoved me forward; I threw my arms out to catch myself, but only hit water — and it sucked me back.

I didn't even think to take a breath before I was underwater.

The shock of impact had me inhaling in surprise. A mistake, as water suddenly went up my nose and down my throat. I tried coughing but that only made it worse. The world went entirely dark as the current tossed me this way and that. I struggled to fight against it, to find my way to the surface.

But even as a super soldier, I wasn't a strong swimmer. I had very no experience before the Crucible, to weak to learn effective swimming techniques, to sick to want to play with the other kids. The one time I'd been in the pool, five minutes of splashing around with wing floaties and a foam noodle for support, and I had already been rendered completely exhausted. I never found the joy in water as other kids did. Even the sensation of floating, as great as it was, wasn't enough to entice me back.

And I had no idea if the Crucible ever taught me to swim. I sure hoped they did.

The childhood memory brought with it a wave of nostalgia and homesickness I didn't know I had. Home. Where was home? Where was that pool?

A community center in Queens. Uncle Ben had taken Peter and I there once.

Uncle Ben.

Peter.

Words. Names. Faces, emerging from the shadows. I reached out to them, yearning. Desperate.

Then I was thrown sideways into a still-standing support beam, and the faces disappeared before I ever got to see them.

Although the pain was immense, I had enough wherewithal to try and cling to the beam, to anchor myself to anything stronger than the waves. Another memory came to me. A bridge. A wide river. The Winter Soldier's hand, reaching out for me.

He hadn't thrown me off, then. Not on purpose.

The memory came and went in a flash. My fingers had a vice grip around a metal edge, but the waves were too strong, yanking me away from the beam.

Somehow, I caught on top of the right current, and it pulled me to the surface.

As soon as my head broke into air, I gasped, nearly choking before my balance was taken from me and I bobbed back under again. My legs kicked but I had no control over what direction I was going in. My arms churned uselessly; I tried to remember how I survived falling into that river under the bridge — but nothing came to me. I couldn't even recall where that had happened, how I got there, or why.

There was an enormous pressure in my head, pounding, pulsing, building up, like the epicenter of an earthquake. I couldn't tell if it was from being underwater or the force of the waves, lack of
oxygen, or just the massive influx of new memories I was receiving. Possibly all of them at once.

My head broke surface again, and this time I managed to stay up, taking in lungfuls of air. I was all turned around, facing the wrong direction. I managed to spin myself around, just in time to see partially submerged catwalk coming right for me.

Metal slammed into my gut and once again I tried to hang on, but the waves pulled me under the walk, and I popped up again on the other side.

Moving so fast, I had no time to orient myself — just keep my head long enough to see the next obstacle.

But I never thought to look up.

Something crashed down right in front of me. Part of a catwalk, a machine, a quinjet in pierces. A wheel, a piece of engine, a cockpit. I tried to swim backwards to avoid the falling debris. I looked up just in time to see a wing coming down on me.

I thought I'd end up sliding under the metal after it landed on top of me, but instead I just… sunk with it, trapped underneath as the current pulled me along. It spun me in a circle, and my back hit the floor, bouncing once before I kicked myself off of the wing — the action felt slow and weighty. The water resisted no matter what direction I went in, but I managed to throw myself in the same direction of the current, and it shot me forward from underneath it.

After that, I had no more control. My back bounced off something solid, sending me into a tailspin. The world became a blur.

I couldn't tell where I was going. All I knew was that I was being tossed around like a ragdoll, with a head full of memories that hadn't been there before — and then the world went dark.

And the waves suddenly stopped.

I slammed into a wall in front of me — and stuck there. It knocked whatever air was left out of my lungs. But I was still underwater.

Squinting into the water, I looked around. The space was dark, dimly lit by a door to my left — I was no longer in the hangar. It seemed the wave had pushed me through an open doorway. A doorway now blocked by several tons of broken metal and debris. The tsunami had completely filled this room. The electricity had been cut out, probably by the same destruction that led me here. The room was a mess, desks and chairs gently floating in the water. A lamp, a gun, a shoe. All was still except for me. I saw no one else in here; maybe I was the only one that had made it. It was eerily calm and numbingly quiet. All I could hear was my pounding heartbeat and a ringing in my ears.

As I struggled to pull myself away from whatever I was stuck to, I realized that this wasn't over yet.

My arms reached over my head, behind my back, trying to figure out what the hell I'd gotten caught on. It wasn't my shield, but my jacket — caught on a hook, a sharp wedge of metal.

I choked, and a burst of air bubbles escaped my lips. I didn't have enough air and I was wasting oxygen just by struggling so hard. If I kept doing this, I was going to drown.

Lungs screaming at me, and starting to take in water through my nose, I scrambled for the last remaining combat knife in my belt. It came away easily and I reversed the grip, and slipped the
point under the hem of my collar. One jerk, then two — the knife ripped through the fabric and a rush of cold water hit my chest. Lungs convulsing, I finally yanked my arms out, leaving the jacket and shield behind as I swam upwards.

There was a small hole in the ceiling to my left, where a bit of light shown through. The ceiling tiles had broken, opening to a small air vent that hadn't been completely filled. My head burst through water and hit the metal roof. The pain didn't even register as I gasped and coughed, spitting out the water I had accidentally inhaled.

I remained there for a few minutes, getting my bearings. My head swam (ha), and my arms and legs felt like lead, dragging me down. Every kick, every sweep of my arm was a chore, just to keep my body afloat. It wasn't even that my gear was heavy. I was just exhausted.

But removing the jacket had helped. All I had underneath it was a black quarter-sleeved shirt. It was easier to breathe without the jacket constricting my chest. The cool water also helped clear my head.

And made it all the easier for more unwanted memories to return.


The Crucible.

Legs suddenly failing, I gasped as my head suddenly went underwater — a mistake, as I immediately inhaled water up my nose. Resurfaced. Sputtering and coughing again.

I grabbed the edge of the vent to steady myself, and give my body a break from moving. I needed to be calm, I needed to think. This was no time to get distracted. I still needed to get out of here.

The vent, while a helpful aid for air, was not big enough for me to fit in, and I couldn't tell if it could even lead me out of here. I took a lungful of air and stuck my head underwater, looking around. The way I had come in was blocked, and too much for me to handle. The other way seemed to be a single closed door, its glass window letting in the only light in the room. I couldn't tell if water had gotten on the other side, the place didn't look airtight, so I had to assume I had some more swimming left to go.

Great.

Back up for air. First step was to get that door open. Find a way out. Hope I could find more air pockets; I had confidence I could hold my breath for a long time, but that didn't matter if I was exerting a lot of energy, or couldn't find more air in time.

All at once, I felt terribly, undeniably *human*. Mortal. Being a super soldier wouldn't protect me from this. I could end up just like the other bodies in here.

Pushing aside that daunting thought, I took a few more deep breaths, trying to load my blood cells with as much oxygen as possible, before diving under once more.

I pushed off the ceiling, angling straight for the door. I tried the handle, but was dismayed to find it locked. I kicked it, shoved my shoulder against it, but the water prevented me from getting enough leverage or weight into it. I tested it, wiggling the door back and forth. It wasn't water pressure...
holding it in — I could tell by the way the water moved around me and the door that the room on
the other side had also been filled; otherwise, the difference in pressure would've kept me from
moving the door at all. No, something on the other side had wedged this door closed.

I needed something stronger to get it open. Basic science. Friction and efficiency. Eight grade
physics. A project on the six classical simple machines. Hand drawn images glued to a giant white

Lever. I twirled in the water, loose hair pulling around my face. Across the room, where I had left
my jacket. The harness and the shield still wrapped around it.

Kicking off the door (didn't open it, unfortunately), I shot towards my forlorn belongings. From
this angle, it was easy to pull the jacket off the jagged material I’d caught on earlier. It looked like
it used to be a desk before the water smashed it into an unrecognizable piece of twisted metal. I
didn't put it back on — I hated touching it all, fighting a revulsion that threatened to spew the air
out of my lungs.

I didn't know where it came from. This jacket — what it represented — was all I knew.

But it wasn't. HYDRA had lied to me.

The truth hit me like a punch to the gut, and I hung there in the water, at a loss. They had filled my
head with so many things. But what was real?

Shaking my head, I pulled the harness away from the jacket, letting the article drop as I slung the
shield back onto my back. Although not heavy for me, it displaced my weight and had me rolling
backwards before I threw out my arms and steadied myself. As I swam along, I realized it also
restricted the flexibility of my back. In order to look up or turn, I'd have to move my whole body,
and not just the upper half.

Which meant more energy spent, and less oxygen.

I went back to the air pocket, got another lungful of clean air for good measure, and went back to
the door.

Taking the shield off, I shoved one edge into the doorjamb. Angled myself on the other side,
pushing off the wall, into the shield — its edge dug into the metal door. I heard the grinding nose
as it resisted, the squeak of hinges turning, then —

Fwish.

The door broke open. A gentle current of warmer water washed over me, and I pushed the door
open so I could slip in.

A long hallway. Filled from top to bottom. My heart jolted at the sight of several bodies just…
floating along the corridor, still, wafting up and down. Unmoving. Dead. The flickering ceiling
lights did not help with the chilling effect.

If I didn't get out of here fast enough, I was going to end up like that.

Sliding the shield back onto my harness, I began my journey down the hall.

It was still just as silent as the room I left. As I passed by one of the bodies, I made the mistake of
looking at one as I passed — a man, hanging up side down, limbs akimbo. My gaze dropped down
to his face. His eyes, wide open, staring into mine.
I let out a breath in surprise, then slapped a hand over my mouth just as a burst of bubbles tickled past my fingers. *Shit.*

Kicking my legs, I kept going, clipping through the water as fast as I could. The pressure wasn't as bad as it was before, but the headache still pouted behind my eyes. There were a few double-wide doors on my left but they seemed to lead to dead-end rooms (from what I could make out from their dark windows). Also filled with water, and no reliable way out. The only Exit sign was above the doorway just ahead of me.

… Hum. Never thought how helpful those signs would be until I really needed them.

The other end of the corridor ended in an open doorway, a stairwell leading upwards. I was dismayed when looking up, and finding the path blocked several stories up by what appeared to be an entire cabin of a quinjet, sans wings. I didn't even want to know how it got here. Its nose was wedged right through the doorway, the glass of its cockpit reflecting the light down below. I looked around, trying to see if I could squeeze in around it, but none of the holes were large enough, and it was way too big to move.

The only way out was *through.*

Shield once more proving immeasurably valuable, I slammed it into the cockpit's windshield until it broke. Its dead pilot floated up and out, getting caught in the jagged hole. Grimacing, and growing increasingly aware that I was running out of oxygen, I grabbed the body by the straps of his vest and yanked him out. The crackle of breaking glass echoed underwater. Letting the body fall away, I quickly rammed my shield to break away a wider opening before slipping through.

The cockpit was cold and dark. I didn't even see the air bubble until my head broke water and I took a surprised gasp of air. I couldn't see a thing, but as I swam through the cockpit and into the open cabin, I heard a low groan.

Then the quinjet started to move.

I didn't notice it at first, just moving through water, not grounded to anything. But when I grabbed a pole to push myself forward, I felt the tremor, the shake. Then the irrevocable shriek of metal on metal as the quinjet started slipping down.

Heart racing, I dove my head back under and tried scrambling for the bay doors in the rear, the way up and out. But they were blocked.

And the ship was already falling.

Not holding onto anything, the quinjet moved downwards before I did. The rear wall struck me hard, and my body was thrown back — then struck again as the quinjet hit the side of the stairwell, screeched downwards, its back end flipping towards the other wall, water and air rushing up to greet me — before it crashed down.

My head struck the ceiling and I blacked out.

I came to shortly later, suddenly choking on water. I gasped, head spinning, a terrible pain in my left ear. It felt like something had snapped or popped but that wasn't the worst of it — I had lost my balance. My entire sense of direction. Gravity. Which way was up or down.

And there was no way out.

The front end of the plane had crunched to a mess of metal that I could no longer use as an exit.
Not that I could tell if I was up or down anyways, as I spun uselessly in a circle, feeling dizzy and nauseous and unable to ground myself. My shoulder hit a wall and it only confused me further. I didn't know what had happened — we'd dropped what might have been thirty feet. Maybe the pressure change, along with the blow to the head, had ruptured something in my ear.

My vision was a blur, not helped by my rapidly depleting oxygen. Panic set in fast when I couldn't catch my bearings, where I felt upside down no matter which way I was facing. I felt intense vertigo even when I wasn't moving, and it felt like the quinjet was still moving, even though deep down I knew it wasn't. But my senses were giving me completely different information. Hearing in my left ear was completely gone; it felt stuffed, like it was full of cotton, and aching in pain. The entire left side of my body felt out of sorts. Even my head started tilting to that side.

Every time I moved my head made it worse, but I couldn't stop, I had to figure this out. I needed air, I needed to get out of here.

Where the hell was I? Where was I going? Why didn't anything make sense? I felt like I was lost in zero gravity with no lifeline to pull me out. All I could hear was my increasing heartbeat and the strain in my throat as oxygen broke out in little bursts.

Then I looked down, and saw the compass strapped to my harness.

The words echoed in my head. A male voice — two male voices, but I didn't recognize them, couldn't tell them apart. Didn't matter. The words weren't important.

The compass — and its magnetism.

Quickly detaching it, I opened the lid and clutched the compass close to my face, trying to reach it underwater. At this point I was curled up in a fetal position, spinning slowly, unable to tell which way I was facing and too scared to waste any more energy trying to figure it out. As far as I knew, I might as well be on the International Space Station.

Light glinted off the glass surface. The needle wavered underneath. I sighed in relief; glad the water pressure hadn't broken it. Tough old thing.

North was behind me. But I wasn't looking at the needle anymore.

No. My eyes were focused on the little air bubble, pressing against the glass.

Pointing up.

I lifted my head, and carefully pulled myself towards the back end of the craft. Vision still swimming, still feeling such intense vertigo that a part of my brain said the compass must be broken, must be wrong — until my head hit air and I gasped, nearly crying as I took in oxygen, nearly hyperventilating.

Warm water streamed down my face. It confused me at first, until I realized I was crying. I pressed a hand to my left ear, pulled it away. Blood.

I wanted to throw up, but my stomach was empty. I wasn't sure how I knew that. I couldn't remember my last meal.
Resting my head against cool metal, I gave myself a minute to recuperate. There wasn't enough air in here to last me very long. I definitely couldn't wait around for a rescue. Would there even be anyone left to rescue me…?

My body shivered, and for the first time I realized just how cold I was. My fingers were completely numb as I clung to the door handle above me. My other hand, a fist around the compass, trembling to the point that it made little waves in the water around me. My core body temperature was dropping too fast. Lack of oxygen, blood loss, and draining energy wasn't helping. I knew deep down that I couldn't do this forever. My eyes were quick to close and slow to open. Sleep was tempting, even now as I floated in this forsaken place.

If I didn't find safety soon, I was going to pass out. And if that happened while I was still underwater, then I was going to die.

I closed my eyes, inhaled through my nose. The world still felt topsy-turvy. I didn't know how long it would take my inner ear to heal and fix itself, but I figured it wasn't going to happen before I got out of here. From now on, I couldn't rely on my vestibular system to get me out of here.

Also, the pressure in the quinjet wasn't the same as the pressure outside of it, thanks to the air pocket. The hatch's locking mechanism slid open easily enough, but I couldn't shove the door open. Pushing up felt impossible.

Sighing, I slumped against the slanted wall. All that work for nothing.

There had to be another way out, but when risking another dive, I found none. There were no side doors, and as I'd observed before in my delirium, the cockpit was smashed, driven straight into the ground.

Back to the air pocket. I looked up, studying the bay door, looking for weak points. I found that water was already seeping in from the cracks along the sides — not a lot, but noticeable. The integrity had been compromised; the door no longer airtight.

I paused to think over my options. In a sinking car, one could smash the windows while there was still air inside. Wait for the water to fill the car, then slip out. Another option was, again, just to wait for the car to fill up with water, then open the door and escape.

But I didn't have enough air — or time — in here to wait out the pressure change. Even in an air pocket, my breath was going to transfer the oxygen into carbon dioxide and I'd just suffocate that way instead. I had to get out now.

Good thing I had a vibranium shield.

The same trick as last time, only not at all. This time, motivated by panic, desperation, and a broken eardrum, I performed the ultra-delicate, sophisticated technique of slamming the shield into the door as hard as I could.

*Wham.* The metal dented, but did not give.

*Wham.* Another dent, slightly deeper.

*Wham.* A crater started to form. A few sparks lit up the dense little air pocket.

*Wham.* The dented metal deepened further, widening until it reached the closest seam. Water started to seep in a little faster.
Wham. Water hissing, pressure forcing it out like a out of a showerhead. It hit my face, making me wince, but I just closed my eyes and thrust my arm up again.

Wham. Water pouring, gushing. The metal started to groan. Despite the dented metal, the door started bending inward. Another rivet shot off, shooting into the water like a bullet. Startled, I jolted backwards, realizing the pressure overhead was pushing the doors down towards me.

Taking a deep breath, I squeezed my eyes shut and prepared for the final blow.

Wham. Metal split. A small crack, then tearing open like it was made of paper. I slipped under water just as the doors burst inwards, and my precious air pocket exploded into tiny bubbles, spinning upwards.

The force of the incoming water forced me down, but it was short-lived. The air pocket had been relatively narrow and was gone in an instant.

Once more I was floating senselessly, unable to straighten myself.

But light streamed in from above. Somewhere high up, I could make out a tiny square of bright blue.

The sky.

Hope bloomed in my chest, yearning, blissful and terrifying. I was there. I was almost there.

Steeling my nerves, I readied myself for the coming swim. I put away my shield and checked my compass again. I knew which way was up, even if my body didn't.

The ascent was slow. Painfully slow. Partly because my damaged ear made it difficult to focus on what I was doing, but also because my muscles were cramping up, actions growing sluggish. I wanted to sleep so bad.

But I couldn't. Not yet.

In the back of my mind, a distant memory reminded me that going up too fast underwater could make me sick, even kill me. But if I didn't keep going, I was going to die anyways. I'd have to risk getting the bends in order to survive.

Hell, maybe I already had it. According to my ear, I probably did.

Up and up and up. The spot of light made it easier to focus on. Complete darkness had been terrible when I had been disoriented, but this wasn't so bad. Sure, my headache was so powerful now that with each pound I felt myself physically falling forward, but still. Improvement.

I didn't know how long had passed since I left the quinjet. Looking down was a mistake. Vertigo hit me even worse than ever as the narrow stairwell seemed to stretch out before me in an awful tunnel. Choking, I twisted my head back up again, squeezing my eyes shut as the whole world spun around me with the head motion. God, I had to stop doing that.

So that didn't help. I couldn't tell how far I was going, how much progress I was making, if at all. The only thing I could be certain was the flights of stairs rotating around me, the occasional painted number on the walls indicating the floor number. S7... S5... S2...

In the meantime, more images flashed in my head. Because I didn't have enough problems already.
I knew that I had done something before this mission HYDRA had aboard the helicarriers. But for some reason I was having difficulty recalling the exact details. Pierce had been there — I could see his face clearly, smiling at me softly.

But it wasn't kind. It wasn't warm.

Over a plate of pasta. Over bodies.

Three bodies. Two men, and a boy.

I gasped suddenly as the realization hit me. Dmitri, no —

Water rushed into my mouth. I spat it out, but the pressure in my chest was too much. I had used up all the oxygen in my lungs and I couldn't hold it anymore. Heart skipping, I let it all out, a fountain of bubbles reaching up for the sky. I watched them go, fighting flashes of pain — a boy's face, so kind, so sweet, so afraid — higher and higher, so far up, I was never going to make it…

But I kicked my legs, reaching up with my arms and pushing them down again with cupped hands. A few meters at a time. I couldn't stop. I could never stop.

Dmitri. The name echoed in my head again. All I had was a face, the vague memory of a gun in my hand, a beautiful room with painted walls and coffered ceilings, a blinding white blizzard just outside the windows — and a boy on the floor, bleeding out onto a plush blue carpet, staining it black.

I'd hurt him. I'd hurt this boy I couldn't remember. And my heart broke.

What have I done?

Other faces appeared. A bald man in glasses right before he got a bullet between his eyes. A pilot right before he met a nasty end in the engine of his jet. A suited agent just trying to defend an unarmed technician scrambling over a console.

All dead.

By my hand.

How could I do that? At once, two answers occurred me. One, the obvious: because Pierce willed it. Because it was necessary. Because their lives were nothing in comparison to the HYDRA's grand design for the perfect future.

And at the same time, a small part of me knew it was not by choice. That I didn't want to. That I knew it was wrong. That had I been myself, I would've never done it.

But who was myself? I didn't have a self. I was nothing. I had no identity, no personhood under HYDRA. It was as they intended. I was made in their image, their perfect design.

Yet, I didn't feel perfect. Not with my wretched heart. Not with these broken thoughts.

Who was I, then? I didn't have a name. I had nothing with HYDRA.

But I couldn't go back to them, either. Not after my failure.

…The failure that I didn't feel so bad about, anymore.

As I swam, I tried to stuff that rebellious emotion away, but it kept resurfacing, a life preserver that
wrapped around me, buoying me upwards in a strange sense of energy and empowerment. I didn't want to push it away. Because it was me.

And as the water finally came apart in my hands, as my head finally breached the surface, I remembered.

_Ohana._

Sucking in air, I splashed around senselessly for a bit, my head feeling like a balloon about to pop. My eyes were fixed on the sky above. A giant hole had been ripped through the top of whatever structure I was in — the quinjet's rocky touchdown, apparently. I had finally reached the ground floor, the water leveling out right below the landing. I swam lopsided for the steps appearing out of the water.

They continued upwards for more floor until the ragged hole cut them off. I couldn't reach that far up. Not with the broken stairwell, not as I dragged myself up those steps, my legs suddenly heavy as I pulled out of the water. Without the buoyancy, my entire body felt like it weighed several tons, and I could barely pull myself onto the floor. I used the bars along the railing to help myself along, my arms too weak to support myself.

Finally, finally, solid ground beneath me. I dropped, limp and exhausted, and taking in deep breaths. Calming my racing heart. Trying to make sense of the word bouncing around my skull like a Windows screensaver.

_Ohana._ Not English. Not any language I was fluent in, anything that HYDRA had taught me. Automatically, that rendered the word unimportant, but I clung to it. I clung to the shape of it, each individual letter that ultimately made no sense to me, sounding it out quietly on my tongue.

It brought images of sandy beaches and beautiful green mountains. Plumeria trees and coconuts. Tropical birds and hibiscus. A crystalline ocean and beautiful waves.

And a little blue alien with big ears and black eyes.

One of these things was not like the other.

But it didn't feel wrong, either. Other images, faces again. Unlike before, these were warm, welcome.

The brown-eyed boy I'd recalled before. Late night movies and soft plush toys. Two left feet and hands that stuck to everything. The one that felt ever present, a rock in a storm, fire on a cold night. Laughter at a funeral.

_Peter._

A woman, older, with blonde hair and crow's feet just starting to appear at the corner of her eyes. Thin hands calloused with hard work. But gentle, never applying strength when she didn't need to. A guiding touch. An encouraging smile. The smell of beeswax, sunshine beaming in on a sick day. A yellow umbrella.

_Mom._

More faces. Two, this time. Another boy, and a girl who looked much like him. He had pale hair, and hers was very dark. The same eyes, sharp and piercing. Staring right into me. Knowing. Like electricity, too fast to perceive, too powerful to stop; coursing through my veins, reminding me who I was. Who I still wanted to be.
Another woman, with dark curly hair and a voice that could stop nations. Wine and funky dancing. The light kept on at night, hugs and whispers. Tears wiped away. Soothing water over a fresh burn.

May.

And that's when I understood. *Ohana.*

Family.

I realized my stomach was getting cold, and lifted my head to see that the water level had risen to creep along the ground landing. I jolted upwards. *Oh shit.* The water wasn't done

Another thought hit me at the same time, May's face still drifting in my head. *Oh my god, I'm in so much trouble. Aunt May is going to ground me for life.*

That one shook me as I tried to get up to my knees, so sudden that I almost fell down again. For a split second, the thought of *grounding* was more horrible than anything I'd already faced.

I'd trade anything to be grounded right now.

But I had to live through this first.

My legs shook beneath me, as I found the strength again to move. Clutching the railing for support, I tucked the compass back into my pocket and carefully guided myself along, one shaky step at a time. My upset balance had me swaying back and forth.

*Just like the time in Health class when they made us wear those Drunk Goggles. Walk around for a bit. Excited because it was the first time, the only time, I was ever going to have any idea on what it was like to be smashed. Wobbling back and forth along a line of tap. Kids laughing as the latest victim struggled along the invisible balance beam. Peter barely made it a few steps. I got half way down before dropping to my hands and knees, grinning so hard it hurt.*

I felt like doing the same right now, for entirely different reasons. My head rocked back and forth on my shoulders, feeling too heavy to life. The doorway, closed, was right in front of me. If I could just push through —

Practically throwing myself against them, I nearly collapsed before I grabbed the handle, jostled it a bit before the door gave way. I fell and hit the ground in a heap.

Around that point, I realized there was an alarm blaring. I only heard it in my right ear, which didn't help with the dizziness I was feeling. As I got back onto my knees, I started to dry heave. No food for days. Nothing came up but bile.

Looked ahead. Another long hallway. Completely empty. Papers scattered around, briefcases and files left behind in one great rush to escape.

Picking myself up, I stumbled forward, holding my arms out for balance. The evacuation alarm continued, as if there was anyone left besides me to hear it. I ended up trailing against one wall, leaning against it as I made my way down. The world swayed beneath my feet like I was on the deck of the ship, even though I was the only one that was moving.

On and on I went, in a seemingly endless maze of rooms and corridors. It felt like hours, but might've only been minutes. I tried to keep a quick pace. I couldn't stay here. Not alone, not while
the water level was still rising. Had to get out of the building. Had to find help.

At some point, I stumbled into a large atrium with a glass ceiling. It was after crossing a long catwalk over empty air, while outside. The view had been nice, but the return of vertigo had been not, and my entire body shook trying to cross it — even enclosed with windows and a ceiling, I felt like I was going to fall off at any moment.

Anyways, I was glad to finally have solid floor beneath me. A new sound of rushing water almost had me panicking, until I looked over and realized it was just a fountain, beneath some kind of memorial on the wall. My vision swam when I turned my head too fast to look.

Eyes refocused, on the painted gold star directly in front of me.

*The price of freedom is always high.*

A wall of names underneath. Fallen agents of SHIELD's past.

Visuals flashed in my head, painful bolts of blinding light. I winced, struggling to swim at the same time. Another wall, similar but not the same. Bigger. Outside. No names, but hundreds and hundreds of gold stars. Reading words carved into granite. A voice.

A tall blond man laughing as we raced along a sidewalk. Green leaves flashing overhead. Pounding footsteps and teasing calls. Captain America. Steve.

*Here we mark the price of freedom.*

I looked down, and saw a body. A SHIELD agent, still, his hand still around his firearm.

Shot through the back.

I stared at the body for a long moment, unable to tear my eyes away. Had I done this? Was I a part of this?

How could I fix this? Was it even possible at this point? A deep self-loathing filled my gut. Not after what I've done. To these people.

To Dmitri.

Maybe I didn't deserve a second chance.

A cry caught my attention. My head jerked upwards, and I nearly knocked myself off balance again. I fell against the wall, heart pounding as I realized there were people close by.

"— not another move, Agent Thirteen!"

And they didn't sound friendly.

Ahead of me, the wall ended about twenty feet ahead. The voices came from behind it, just out of sight. I crept along it, moving as quietly as I could when I had a hard time keeping myself on my feet. Pressing my back against the wall, I peered around the corner.

Three adults, two male, one female. The men were locked in a tussle, the taller, burlier one having the other in a type of headlock, with a gun at the smaller man's temple. The second man, unable to break free, trembled uncertainly, staring at the woman standing across from them, gun raised at the offender's chest.
The bigger man wore dark tactical gear, bloodied and torn from battle. STRIKE, I realized. An ally.

The other two were SHIELD. Both wearing suits, although their clothes were torn and dirty. The woman had a significant bruise on her forehead, both her forearms were scratched and bleeding from close combat. Loose blond hair hung in her face, but she didn't push it aside, cold brown eyes focused on her enemy. My enemy.

I winced, struggling against two different instincts. HYDRA must win. I had to help the STRIKE agent. Even if he shot the hostage, he would still die. The woman would shoot him first before he could kill her.

And that woman, she was dangerous. Something welled up in me, a dislike, a distrust. A SHIELD agent through and through, loyal to none but Nick Fury.

But the other man was utterly helpless, small and skinny, clearly not an agent of any type. Probably an analyst or a technician, judging by the headset still sitting on top of his dark curly hair. He wasn't an enemy. He'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Working for the wrong side. Never given a choice.

"Let him go, Clevinger," The woman, Agent Thirteen, said in a low voice. Hers was the only face I could see, but she was angled away. I was just out of her line of sight. "This is just between you and me."

None of them seemed to realize I was there. I looked down at the gun in my hand. I had to do something.

I glanced behind me. At the fallen agent's weapon.

"HYDRA could use you, Thirteen," Clevinger, the STRIKE agent, replied. "This one? He's a traitor. But you can be someone. HYDRA can help you achieve your full potential."

"Oh yeah? How 'bout you shove it up your ass."

Clevinger sneered. "You can drop that gun, Thirteen. We both know you're out."

Agent Thirteen hesitated, perhaps considering a bluff. But the chances of that succeeding were slim, she seemed to realize, and with a slight bow of her head, pulled her hands away from each other. The gun dropped to the floor.

A threat disarmed.

In a sudden move, Agent Thirteen, reached for her ankle, dropping to her knee. But the man was faster, switching his weapon from the analyst to her. "Ah-ah-ah! I wouldn't do it if I were you."

Agent Thirteen froze. The analyst struggled in Clevinger's grip, slightly emboldened now without a gun to his head. But Clevinger just threw him to the floor. The technician landed with a yelp, covering his head when the STRIKE agent turned his gun on him. Finger on the trigger.

"No!" Agent Thirteen lunged.

The gun went off.

She dived over the technician, only a second late. She didn't move afterwards, frozen as she kneeled over him, staring down at the analyst she tried to save.
The technician blinking back up at her.

And Clevinger, standing over them, swaying on his feet. The gun falling from his grip. Agent Thirteen catching it, just as Clevinger buckled at the knees and hit the floor, revealing the bullet wound in his back.

Agent Thirteen and the technician whirled around, staring at the direction of the shooter. Eyes widening when they saw me, a look of mutual shock. Thirteen, already rising to her feet, holstering her new weapon. A hand up, then the other. Peering at me, evaluating a threat. Almost like she recognized me. "Mia?"

*Mia? Who's Mia?* I didn't have the energy left to ask.

I slumped against the wall, breathing hard, smoking gun in hand. Dropping it, as my knees gave out under me. It had taken all that I had left to keep a steady aim, and hit my target.

"Whoa, easy there," Agent Thirteen said, rushing over and catching me right before I hit the ground. Calling over her shoulder, she addressed the technician, "Hey, Klein, need some help over here! She's hurt pretty bad." Then back to me, a softer voice. "Just take it easy. That was a good shot, kid."

My head sagged against her shoulder, my entire body going limp. I went to catch myself against her, tried to lift my arm around her shoulder, but I couldn't move it. Couldn't move anything. The edge of unconsciousness was creeping up on me, exhaustion pulling a dark blanket around my mind. My reply was slurred, a hoarse whisper. 

"...was aiming for his head...

She cast me a wan smile, a drained laugh. "Maybe we can call it even, now. What the hell are you even doing here?"

"I-I don't..." I was struck with the notion that Thirteen was familiar, that I'd met her before. Something about a salad... "Y-you're still SHIELD, right?"

"Always." Thirteen smirked. "You?"

I blinked, and found it difficult to open my eyes again. Something draped over my shoulders, warm and soft. I opened my eyes again and saw the technician, Klein, hovering behind Thirteen, having just put a jacket over me. My eyes drifted between the two of them, slow, sleepy. "Yeah. I think so."

Although I didn't know either of them, I felt a strange sense of relief washing over me. We were on the same side. They weren't HYDRA. They weren't going to hurt me.

Safe. I was finally safe.

"Mia?" Agent Thirteen's voice sounded far away. The further it got, the more urgent it sounded. Something patted my cheek, but it felt so soft, barely even there. "Hey, Mia, stay with me! Don't fall asleep now, okay? Klein, help me pick her up, we need to get —"

I never heard the rest of it. I closed my eyes and fell once more, into darkness.

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