Introducing the most dysfunctional group of people Melody Stark has ever met...and that includes herself.

Notes

I own nothing except my 50000 marvel ocs.

See the end of the work for more notes.
prologue

“What’s this?”

“A prototype for Uncle Cap’s shield”.

“What about this?”

“A couple souvenirs left over from our trip to space”.

“What’s that?”

“Something you aren’t allowed to touch”.

Tony Stark reached down to gently untangle the death grip his daughter had on his dress pants; crouching so he was eye-level with the brunette. “Listen, Melody, this lab has a lot of dangerous stuff in it. Your mom and I won’t be happy if something happens to you, so I’m gonna need you to stay right here, while I go talk to Uncle Bruce for a minute”. He stuck out a hand. “Deal?”

Seven-year-old Melody Maria Stark reached out and shook; a wide grin overtaking her face.

“So, you can kiss up to the guys in suits?” She asked innocently, peering around her father to look at the government officials.

They’d gathered around another item, a Chitauri spear, and were oohing, and aahing.

Tony smirked, pecking her on the forehead before going to join them. “Exactly”.

Melody kept on smiling until he was gone, and then she allowed her face to fall.

Her mother, Pepper, had fought tooth and nail not to let her come with, but her birthday was
coming up soon. The memory of her mom caving under the weight of puppy eyes made her a little happier, but she was still upset at being told to stay put.

Melody pushed a few strands of wavy locks off her forehead; tucking them into her father’s baseball cap. Luckily, she hadn’t had to put on anything fancy for the “lab”.

She clasped her hands together and looked around with wide blue eyes, examining all the stuff that’d already been pointed out with no small amount of curiosity. The thing Tony had told her not to touch was a big metal canister, with a clear side so you could see in- the contents looked kind of like Aunt Wanda’s red powers, except maybe less cool.

Melody glanced behind her to make sure her dad was still preoccupied, before inching forward slightly, stopping at the guard rail.

It would be too easy to duck under and get a closer look. Melody was tiny for her age, and besides, it didn’t look dangerous. That had to be good sign, right?

“What are you doing?” A quiet voice whispered, and she jumped in surprise.

Brian Banner, Uncle Bruce’s son, was standing behind her with his arms crossed. With a mop of black hair, scrawny body, and brown eyes framed with thick glasses, he looked even younger than she did- and they were the same age.

Aunt Betty hadn’t wanted Brian to come either, but Tony had insisted they could keep the rascals under control, and with some hesitation, Bruce had agreed.

Melody hadn’t realized Brian had followed her. Maybe her dad had asked him to watch her, since he was largely more responsible and less apt to get into trouble.

She pouted. “I just wanted a closer look at whatever…that is!”

Brian frowned. His nose wrinkled. “Daddy said that stuff is cosmic rad- radi”, the scowl deepened even more, “Rad-i-a-tion”, he finished, proudly.
Difficulty trying to pronounce the word aside, it made Melody perk up.

“Really?” She asked. “Isn’t that bad?”

“Yeah, that’s why Uncle Tony said to come get you”, he huffed. “Were you gonna sneak underneath the guard rail?”

“No!” A pause. “Maybe…”

Brian made an affronted noise between a shriek and gasp. “What? That’s probably, like, illegal! Do you want to go to jail?” He spun around with a, “I’m telling!”

Melody cried out as he went to march to the adults, and before she could tell herself it was a bad idea, she stuck out her tongue and ducked under the rail.

“Mel!”

She was within a foot of the canister when Brian latched onto her arm to pull her back (evidently, retrieving her was now more important than tattling).

“We need to go back!” He whined, glancing behind them frantically. “We’re gonna get yelled at and it’s gonna be your fault!”

Melody shushed him quickly and waved a hand in front of the plexiglass cover. The red stuff inside gravitated towards the movement, and Brian stopped rambling to stare.

“Awesome”, she said, in an awed whisper, a grin creeping onto her face. “I think it likes me!”

“It’s energy, it can’t like anyone”, Brian grumbled, but she could tell by the look in his eyes he thought it was amazing too. “C’mon, we gotta go”. He pulled on her sleeve.

Melody groaned but turned around anyway, just as a shout drew their attention.
There was a man standing in front of the door, and there was a black box covered in wires and gas pipes strapped to his chest. A cord connecting to a trigger was in his hand. The SHIELD agents were lying on the ground at his feet, unmoving.

There was blood pooling beneath their heads. Melody’s stomach lurched, violently.

“Melody! Brian!”

Tony emerged from the cowering crowd of adults and ran towards them; Iron Man suit in the process of crawling up his arm. Before the helmet covered his face, Melody caught a glimpse of his expression, and she’d never seen her father look so afraid.

“Get down!” Uncle Bruce was yelling, his skin turning green, and he moved as well just as the bomber pressed down on the button.

The explosion rocked the building and everyone in the room flew back in different directions, slamming into projects and prototypes alike.

Melody’s back hit the canister hard (something cracked, and she screamed).

Flames licked at her skin, and just out of the corner of her eye Brian was writhing on the ground. His glasses were melting on the floor beside him, broken in two.

The last thing she saw before her vision went dark was a crack in the radiation container- it shattered completely not a second after, and the red rose and up and over to greet her.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Basically an introductory chapter, but still important.

*I've made a lot of changes to some of the characters, and if anyone spots something that doesn't correlate, I'd appreciate it if you could let me know so I can fix it!* Thank you :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NINE YEARS LATER

On the night of Melody Stark’s sixteenth birthday, the world almost ended.

Then again, the world almost ended every other day, so she wasn’t exactly surprised- personally, she just thought it was a little crappy of the universe not to make an exception.

“C’mon Mel, we’ll be back before you know it”, her father said: Tony Stark, better known as Iron Man, The Iron Man, or Genius/Billionaire/Philanthropist (he hadn’t been a playboy since marrying Pepper). “Plus, there’s cake. Strawberry’s still your favorite, right?”

Melody rolled her eyes, accepted the kiss on the cheek, and said, “Go, Dad. Kick some robot ass and hope I don’t eat all of the red frosting before you get back”.

Tony grinned. “Language. There’s my girl”.

She watched the jet fly away with her arms crossed, and silently hoping she didn’t look like a pouty teen. Her Captain America slippers, bought as a joke for Christmas years ago, dragged on the ground as she went back inside the Compound.

Pepper was there to greet her, and Melody allowed her mother to pull her into a one-armed hug with minimal amounts of complaining.

“I’m sorry, honey”, she said. “Maybe next year?”
Tony promised every time they had to leave on a birthday that they’d be back in time to cut the
cake. It’d become an unspoken thing in between his wife and daughter to acknowledge the fact that
probably wasn’t true. Return time was usually tomorrow, at the latest.

“It’s fine, Mom”, Melody sighed. “I’ll just eat all the red frosting anyway. See how he likes it”.

Pepper smiled, kissed her forehead, and withdrew towards the steps. “Well, it’s getting late. I’m
going to bed, unless you want to…” She hesitated, waiting.

Melody felt the urge to sigh again, perhaps louder. “Mom, really, I’m okay”.

“Well, if you’re sure…” She hovered on the first step and the teenager huffed.

“Mom”, she insisted, and Pepper finally retreated with her hands up in mock-surrender.

Melody dragged a hand over her face when she was gone, hopped onto the counter, and kicked her
legs out like a little kid. She thought about going to bed too, but knowing her family was in danger
was too unsettling.

Pepper was worried, as well.

Going to bed, was probably code for, Pace around the bedroom until they get back, which was a
proven fact in Melody’s book.

“Hey”. Jessie’s voice interrupted her train of thought- the blonde had entered silently, holding
Melody’s birthday cake with both hands. “You okay?”

She made a keening sound that probably backfired horribly. “Why does everyone keep asking
that?” She protested, sliding off the counter. “I’m great! Dandy, even!”

Jessie arched an eyebrow, blue eyes the same color as her dad’s dancing in the lighting.
“Mel, my Dad’s from the forties”, she said, “And even I know no one says dandy, anymore”.

Melody waved a hand. “Details, details. Where’s your mom?”

She shrugged. “She went to bed, along with Aunt Mira, Aunt Nadia, Aunt Katya, and Aunt Viveca”.

Jessie’s mother, Lizzie James, was a SHIELD agent and an old friend of Uncle Phil- better known as Agent Coulson, or sometimes “Uncle Agent”. Steve claimed he’d liked her because of her initiative, but Melody just thought he liked women who could punch him in the face.

Aunt Mira was married to Uncle Sam, and they had a son named Riley. They’d supposedly met during a protest of some kind, and she was some kind of fancy engineer.

Aunt Nadia was Uncle Pietro’s wife, and the mother of Christa Maximoff. They’d met on another mission, not that anyone would tell them what it was, and Nadia had powers too.

Aunt Katya was Uncle Bucky’s partner. They’d met in a bakery, although Melody seriously doubted that was the full truth. They had an adopted daughter named Izabela, who oddly enough had the same dark brown hair and eyes as her mom.

Aunt Viveca was Uncle Thor’s wife. Allegedly, she was an illegitimate heir to the throne of Vanaheim, and technically should be a queen.

Melody nodded. “So, in other words, the night is ours?”

Jessie rolled her eyes as she put the cake in the fridge. “There’s, like, thirteen of us Mel. What are we going to do, sneak out for a night on the town? FRIDAY will rat us out”.

“Oh, please”, she scoffed, sidling past her into the living room where the others were. “The AI and I are tight; I can get us out of here without so much as a hitch”.

Jessie followed with her arms crossed and frowning. Uh huh”, she replied, unconvinced.
Brian was the only one who lifted his head when they came in, a physics book in his lap. His dark hair was shaggier than ever, and when he reached up to push it back Melody was suddenly face to face with inky black eyes.

She looked away from him quickly, suddenly feeling sick.

Tem Romanoff, Aunt Nat’s daughter, was curled up sitting on her feet beside him. She grinned at her through a frame of blood red curls.

Jessie sat down on their blue-eyed cousin’s left with a long-suffering exhale. She whispered something into Tem’s ear, who in turn did the same to Brian.

Melody ignored them and stood in the center of the room, scrambling onto the coffee table.

Izabela glanced up at her and the corners of her lips turned down.

She was sharing the armchair with Riley and Christa, who were now also staring at her. Christa’s cousin Marya, the mysterious child of Aunt Wanda and Uncle Vision, sat on the floor by their feet. She kept pushing their legs out of her face when their socks got a little too close to her auburn hair.

Melody winked at them and snickered when she heard Riley muffle a groan.

Joven, Uncle Scott and Aunt Hope’s kid, was over by the artificial fireplace. He was in the middle of talking to Khari and A’yana on vidcall. He paused when he noticed her, and glanced at the screen of his phone apprehensively; before bidding the heirs to the Wakandan throne farewell.

Penny, an intern at Stark Industries and the closest thing Uncle Peter had to a daughter, was sitting next to him with her knees pulled up to her chest. The black-haired girl looked on warily, and mumbled something into her thigh. Tasha Barton seemed to be the only one who heard her, and snorted at whatever she said.

The last that remained of her birthday party were Jace (Uncle Thor and Aunt Viveca’s prodigal son) and Aiden Barton (Tasha’s intolerable twin brother) who were lying on their backs on the carpet together- golden hair next to brown hair, and both of them suspicious.
Aiden’s middle name was *Anthony*, and he was not to be mistaken with Melody’s father, although Tony *did* often joke that Uncle Clint had named his son after him.

Melody’s eyes narrowed, and he narrowed his blue ones right back. Long story short, they weren’t fond of each other, but since he was family he’d come to the party.

Everyone in the room was the same age as Mel, with the exception of Penny, Joven, Marya, and Christa, who were fifteen. Penny and Joven were sticking to each other like glue. Melody whistled to get their attention, and smiled when all eyes were on her.

“Perfect”, she said, cheerfully. “Thanks to the universe screwing up my birthday, I suggest we all sneak out and have a night on the town”.

“No”, said Jessie, without preamble or hesitation.

Melody pouted. “But *whyyyyy?*

Tem snorted derisively. “Because we’ll get in huge trouble? Your mom and dad have been helicopter parents ever since…”

She hesitated, but they all knew what she was going to say.

*Since the explosion.*

Melody made the executive decision to ignore all of the bad memories that came rushing up like a tidal wave. “That was *nine years* ago! I’m able to get a learners permit now, and I’m in perfect health! They have nothing to worry about. They just like being difficult”.

“Uh huh”, muttered Jessie, before, “What would we even do? The shawarma joint isn’t open this late, and besides, at some point Penny and Joven have to go home”.

Penny went rigid in her spot, almost as if she was surprised at being mentioned.
“Well”, she said hesitantly, “I could always text my mom and tell her I’m staying the night. I’ve done it before and it’s been no big deal. Joven could do the same”.

(Joven squeaked. Everyone ignored this).

Melody made a wide, slightly frantic gesture. “See!? And do I need to remind you that no one got me a birthday present? Think of it as a gift!”

“We all pitched in to get you that sign for your workshop!”

“No one asked you, Aiden!”

Marya rubbed her temples and exchanged a look with Christa, who smirked.

“I think it sounds fun”, she said, unwillingly, and Melody practically preened.

Jessie made a face. “I’ll go if you all go, and only to make sure none of you get into trouble. Which will undoubtedly happen, wherever we are concerned”.

Mel hummed considerately. “Alright. All those who want to sneak out, raise your hand”.

Everybody raised their hand (Joven didn’t, until Penny elbowed him hard in the side. His arm shot up so fast she briefly wondered if he’d dislocated it from the socket).

Melody grinned triumphantly. “Ha! This is gonna be awesome!”

“This is significantly not awesome”, Aiden repeated, for the millionth time. “Where are we?”

Penny used her hand as a visor even though it was night, and squinted at a corner sign.
“I don’t know”, she admitted, and Jessie groaned.

“I knew this would happen”, she said. “We’re lost. I’m calling Mom to come get us”.

Melody plucked the device from her hands, eliciting a surprised yelp. “No way! Live a little, guys!”

“I’m going to be murdered in a back-alley Slasher-film style on Melody Stark’s sixteenth birthday”, mumbled a distressed Joven. “I knew this day would come”.

“Well, I’m going to murder Melody Stark Slasher-film style in a back alley on her sixteenth birthday”, Aiden said, with faux-cheerfulness. “Especially if she doesn’t get us out of here”.

Marya made a noise of protest but didn’t say anything about stopping him. Christa slung an arm around her shoulders and whispered something in her ear. They giggled.

Melody looked at them suspiciously. “They’re conspiring against me, Izzy”.

Izabela’s return glare said she knew, and didn’t care.

“Really, though”, Jessie grabbed her phone back and held it out of reach when another attempt was made to snatch it. “We should call someone”.

“But we’ll be yelled at for leaving the Compound so late!”

“And who’s fault is that?” Aiden griped, and Riley scowled.

“Look”, he said, running a hand through his hair, “I don’t think Uncle Wade’s apartment is too far from here. We can just crash there for the night and then find our way home in the morning. If anyone asks, we left the house early”.
Jessie brightened at the idea, before frowning. She tugged on the sleeves of her sweater anxiously. “Uncle Wade’s apartment isn’t close, though”.

“Well, not the one he lives in with his family”, Penny admitted, quietly. “It turns out I kind of know where I am. Wanda told me her dad has another place where he keeps all of his weapons, and stuff. I sorta guessed the address, and lo and behold…”

Ah, Wanda Wilson, otherwise known as Penny’s best friend since age seven and her polar opposite. Melody wasn’t surprised she’d told her that.

“You want to stay where Deadpool keeps his bazookas!?” Joven interrupted, sounding horrified (“Awesome”, Christa exclaimed, prompting Marya to smack her shoulder).

Penny cringed. “No one’s touching any bazookas! And besides, do any of you have a better idea? I’m open to other options”.

No one said anything. Tasha coughed uncomfortably.

Jessie made an unhappy; strangled sound in the back of her throat, but didn’t protest further. “Well. You guys go on ahead, I’ll stay with Melody”.

“Why did you assume I wasn’t coming with you?”

“Are you?”

“…No. You know me too well, Rogers”.

Jace had his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his sweatshirt, but he took one out to gesture with. “I’ll stay too. I don’t really feel like watching Maximoff handle one of Uncle Wade’s bazookas”. He hesitated. “Does he really have one of those?”

“Probably”, Penny said lamely, the same time Christa said, “I hope so”. 
Jessie shot the girl a look, and she turned red right down to the silver tips in her hair before promising not to use any explosives.

“Okay, look, if there’s a bazooka anywhere in that apartment- \textit{do not} touch it. In fact, don’t touch anything. I still don’t want to get in any trouble here. Park, text Wanda and make sure she knows we’re going to be there. I don’t want Deadpool to find us”.

“\textit{Wait}”, Aiden said, suddenly. “Why don’t we just ask her for \textit{directions}? If she knows where the apartment is she knows the general area, right?”

“Yeah, and probably a couple of good restaurants”, Penny agreed, perking up at the thought. “I’ll ask, and hopefully we can get some food before we head back. We should’ve eaten that birthday cake, I’m starving”.

Jessie’s shoulders relaxed (probably because this way she wouldn’t be sleeping next to any sort of weaponry). “Good”.

Melody’s mouth watered at the thought of food, and she backed away from the group a little to lean against the dim lamppost they were huddled underneath.

The corner they’d gotten lost on was definitely an undesirable part of town, and it was creepy. Not quiet, of course, since it was New York, but- \textit{creepy}.

There were a couple closed stores lining the sidewalk on their side of the street, and across from them was a seemingly empty 24-hour bank, with an ATM.

“\textit{Hey}”. She nudged Tem in the side. “I’m gonna go get some money for dinner. Unless anyone brought their wallets?”

Tem looked back towards the others, who all shook their heads, and then went back to arguing over which places to go to (Wanda had apparently sent a list. Penny was scrolling through it with her tongue sticking out in concentration).

“Good idea”, she said, kicking a discarded water bottle with her booted foot. “I’ll come with. It’s probably best to use the buddy system in this part of the city”.

“It’s probably best to use the buddy system in every part of the city”. Brian grumbled, throwing an arm around her shoulders. “I’m coming too”.

“Awww”, Melody cooed, “Is big bad Brian gonna protect us?”

“No, I’m bored as hell”.

“You’re no fun, I hope you know that”.

Tem snorted, and leaned over to pull on the hood of Aiden’s jacket. “Yo, archer, what about you? We’re going across the street to get ATM money”.

He arched an eyebrow and pulled a sour expression when he saw Mel next to them.

“Sure”, he said, “I’ve got nothing better to do”.

“You’re having a conversation with me”, Jace cut in, sounding kind of hurt.

Aiden rolled his eyes. “Then you can come too, if talking about how you can recite the entire Bee Movie script from memory is truly a wonderful topic”.

“Um”, the mention of the film they’d all hated as kids and grudgingly tolerated as teens finally drew the attention of Jessie. “What are you guys doing?”

“Crossing the street to get cash out”, Aiden said, the same Melody went, “Reciting the entire Bee Movie script from memory”.

Jessie glanced at Marya, who flashed her a thumbs up. “I’ll tag along, if you don’t mind. No one seems to want to do anything particularly dangerous over here, so…”

The six set off with a comment on how she was too polite, as Jace laughed. “Do you really think
you’re 85% of our impulse control?”

“It’s called being self-aware, Jace”, she said, tiredly. Melody guffawed.

The bank was indeed empty, and the bell tied to the door rung when they went in.

“Great”, Aiden complained as he held it open for the others, entering just in time to let Mel almost catch it with her face. “This place is eerie at night”.

Melody made sure to step on his toes (lucky for him, he’d worn sneakers instead of flip-flops) as she pranced over to the machine, and snorted. “Scared?”

“Of course, not”, he snapped. “I just don’t have time for your idiocy”.

“And I don’t have time for fragile masculinity or arguing”, Tem said, in a bored voice. “So, please, be civil. It is her birthday”.

Aiden glanced at his watch and crowed triumphantly. “Not in…twelve minutes!”

“Well in that case, for those twelve minutes, be silent. I’m counting”.

Mel huffed under her breath but ignored the two as they started to bicker (they’d been thick as thieves ever since Tem’s adoption as a preteen, and whenever they argued the only child was reminded of Aiden with his sister).

Brian stood tensely in the corner, like something was bothering him. He had a pained look on his face, and Melody frowned.

“You alright?” She called, and he scowled when he saw her staring.

“Fine”, he said, unwillingly, and Jace glided over to talk to him quietly.
Melody made a note to confront him later and turned back to the transaction.

When she heard the doorbell ring again, she thought either someone had left or one of their friends had come in to check on them.

She was not expecting Jessie’s intake of breath, and the telltale sound of a gun cocking.

Melody whipped around only to come face to face with a group of guys wearing ski masks. Two in the back had metal baseball bats, one had a sledgehammer, and another had a serrated knife that appeared expensive.

The leader in front had an automatic pistol encrusted with what appeared to be actual diamonds, and it was pointed directly at Mel’s face.

Chapter End Notes

Be kind to my dumb original characters pls.
I'm vomiting clichés everywhere folks.

“W-Whoa there, fellas”. Melody’s tongue felt stuck to the roof of her mouth. “I thought this town was big enough for the both of us”.

“Mel”, Jessie hissed, obviously frightened, “Shut up”.

The robber with the gun ignored her, and gestured with it to the ATM.

“Get the money out of there, or I shoot”. The command was muffled by his mask, but still understandable. It left no room for refusal.

“Gotta tell ya”, Melody turned and started punching in numbers, the hairs on the back of her neck standing up straight. “You give good arguments”.

“Quit running your mouth, while you’re at it”.

She swallowed and wet her lips, trying to ignore her shaking hands.

A rather insane part of her wished one of their parents would come flying through the door. Uncle Peter, for instance, was stunningly good at stopping crimes like this.

But Spider-Man was an Avenger. He and the rest of the big-name superheroes were currently dealing with an army of robots off the coast, which left no one to rescue them.

_C’mon, think!_ Melody thought, angrily. _You’re the daughter of a genius! There has to be a way out of this that doesn’t involve getting your brains blown out!_
She peered discreetly out of the corner of her eye to see what the others were doing- Brian was still in the corner; his entire body quivering subtly. His hands were clenched into fists, and Melody could count the tendons.

It looked like he was restraining something, but she had to be imagining the red glint in his eyes. She hadn’t seen a color like that since she was seven-years-old.

Melody shook off the chill running down her spine. Whatever Brian was dealing with could wait, especially until they were out of danger.

Aiden had his back pressed against the floor-to-ceiling windows in the front of the bank, and he looked terrified. He was also the closest to the door, but there was no way he could escape out without being seen (one of the men with baseball bats was a foot away).

Jace appeared to be shielding Jessie like the gentleman he was, and despite the fact he was at least as big as some of the robbers he wasn’t armed with anything except pocket lint.

Jessie, while she was behind the taller blonde, was far from cowering. Instead she met Melody’s eyes as if to say, I told you we should’ve called my mom.

Granted, that probably wasn’t what she was really thinking, but the point remained.

Tem was diagonal of the man with the sledgehammer and her calculating gaze flickered around the room like she was looking for something to use as a weapon.

“Faster”, the leader’s breath brushed against her ear, and Melody flinched so hard she pressed the wrong button and had to start over.

Don’t panic, don’t panic, don’t panic.

He’d probably come up right behind her to act as a menacing shadow, in the hopes of speeding up the process. Instead, all it did was screw up her concentration.
She hoped Penny’s spidey senses had gone off outside, or that one of them had seen, so the police had been called. This couldn’t be an inconspicuous heist.

“I’m going, I’m going”, Melody resisted the urge to snap.

Before a reply could be said, Jace made his move.

He darted forward and landed a right hook to Baseball Bat #2’s jaw, and he went down like a sack of bricks. Even a bunch of lowlifes were no match for the element of surprise and good old-fashioned godly strength.

Not for the first time, or the last, Melody was thankful that Uncle Thor was shredded.

The other four cried out in shock and anger, and the leader wheeled away from her.

“Grab him and the others!” He shouted, and the lackeys scattered.

Sledgehammer Man tackled Jace to the ground, and Jessie’s proximity to the two caused her to be knocked to the floor.

Aiden yelled as he was yanked away from the windows, and the strangled sound that forced its way out of Brian’s throat sounded suspiciously like a snarl.

Melody backed into the ATM with her heart in her throat and unsure of what to do, just as a robber made the mistake of going after Tem.

Tem, who was Natasha Romanoff’s daughter in every way but blood, and could snap a man’s neck with her thighs and throw him out of a car windshield.

He wrapped a hand around her arm and she grabbed his shoulder, pulling him forward for the sole purpose of smashing her knee against his groin. The guy doubled over, and she kicked him in the face on the way down, sending him sprawling to the floor.
The crack of his nose (and maybe his jaw) breaking sounded almost as loud of firecrackers in the moment.

The entire bank exploded into chaos, ten-fold.

Jace threw Sledgehammer Man off and Tem intercepted, landing a punch that had Melody wincing in sympathy despite her hatred for the assholes.

Aiden planted his elbow in the stomach of Baseball Bat #1, and then proceeded to wrestle the guy for his weapon. He ripped it out of his grasp and tossed it to Jessie, who bent it over her knee with all the super soldier strength she possessed.

Brian darted forward and cuffed the original owner upside the head, and he landed with a wet smack, and didn’t get back up.

Jessie looked towards The Leader, and her eyes bulged. “Melody!”

She swiveled just as the gun went off; the barrel aimed right for the center of her forehead.

_Melody Maria Stark was eight and a half years old, and fresh out of a six-month coma._

_Her memory of the explosion was fuzzy at best, and only a few details stood out- the sound of her back breaking, the felling of skin burning, watching Brian convulse, and the cosmic energy from the container clouding her vision._

_After that, there was only pain, and then darkness._

_She’d overheard the doctors telling her parents that she was probably lucky she didn’t remember more. Stuff like that was the stuff of nightmares, after all._

_Melody has asked if Brian was okay, and the look on her mother’s face caused her heart monitor to spike. She could tell Pepper was lying through her teeth when she said that Brian was fine, but no_
one was allowed to see him yet.

Jace, Aiden, and Jessie had come to visit a week within her waking up.

“I’m bored”, she griped, as the trio lounged on the end of her hospital bed. “All they do is run tests, and more tests. I think they’re lying to me”.

Of course, they’re lying to you.

“You don’t have to be so rude about it”, Melody hissed, and Aiden’s eyes widened.

“I didn’t say anything”, he said, confusedly.

“Yes, you did!”

“No, he didn’t”, Jessie agreed, with a frown. “Why? Did you hear something?”

Maybe the radiation made her crazy.

“Hey!” Melody balled the sheets up in her fists and scowled. “Now you guys are just being mean! I’m not crazy!”

Jace sat up and looked away from the book he was reading. “No one called you crazy, Mellie”, he said slowly, and straightened. “Are you hearing voices?”

Jessie slid off with the mattress with a resolute, “I’m getting Daddy”.

Aiden made a face. “What’s Uncle Steve gonna do?”

“He can get a doctor to fix Melody’s head!”
What if she’s gonna die?

“I’M NOT GONNA DIE!” Melody howled, “AND THERE’S NOTHING WRONG WITH MY HEAD!”

The blonde blanched before she even reached the door. They all stared at her with identical looks of shock, and maybe a little bit of fear.

“No one’s saying that!” Jace held his hands palm-up, like he was trying to be placating.

She resisted the urge to throw her pillow at his stupid head.

“Yeah, you did! Jessie thinks I’m gonna die, Aiden thinks I’m crazy, and he thinks Mom and Dad are lying to me! I heard it, I know it, you’re just trying to freak me out!”

Aiden was gaping at her. “I was only thinking those things!” He cried, scrambling backwards and nearly falling onto the floor. “Y-You read my mind!”

Jessie grabbed her pigtails and yanked on them. “T-That’s not possible!”

What if it is?

“You think it is”, Melody said, matter-of-factly. She winced and rubbed her temples, surprised at the sharp pain behind her eyes. “My head hurts”.

“What is it? What happened?” Tony Stark practically skidded through the door, sunglasses and tie askew as he took in the sight before him. “A nurse said they heard shouting”.

Jessie looked thoroughly distraught, and she latched onto his coat. “Melody’s hearing voices and can read minds!” She practically wailed, and his eyes widened.
“Is that true?” He asked, and Melody bobbed her head.

“I don’t like it”, she admitted, unhappily. “It hurts”.

“It hurts?” Tony sounded alarmed. “Are you sure?” He crossed the room and sat down on the side of the bed; his arm going around her shoulders. “What am I thinking right now?”

His tone sounded urgent, and Melody almost shrunk back at the severity.

Nevertheless, she squinted really hard and her eyebrows pinched, until she huffed a sigh.

“I dunno”, she said. “Are you thinking about Mommy?”

Tony’s shoulders visibly relaxed, and he drew her into a quick hug (she didn’t get what all the fuss was about). “No, I’m not, I’m thinking about the heart attack that almost gave me. Listen Melody, if anything ever happens like that I want you to come straight to me. That radiation isn’t a toy. Anything you may or not be able to do because of it isn’t a good thing, and we have to know so we can fix it. Do you understand- that goes for the rest of you, too”.

Melody fidgeted uncomfortably. “But what if it gave me superpowers like Uncle Bruce? Or Uncle Peter?”

He cringed. “That’s very different, Mel. Leave all the hero-ing to us, alright?”

She exchanged a glance with Jessie, Jace, and Aiden, who all looked unhappy.

With a grumble, she deflated like a balloon. “Alright”.

Tony breathed out and ruffled her hair, before standing up. “Good. I need to go talk to the doctors. And Jessie, Lizzie’s on her way here to take you home”.

Jessie swallowed and shifted. “Okay”.
He left, and when he was gone, the foursome looked at each other.

“Could you really not read his mind?” Jace asked, curiously.

Melody shrugged. “I could. That’s why I didn’t say anything”.

“What?” Jessie gasped, horrified. “But he said it was bad!”

“I don’t think it is!”

“So, what, you’re going to lie?”

“C’mon, it won’t be that bad”. Melody rolled her eyes and rocked back and forth slightly. “The explosion messed everything up, and powers could be the only good thing that comes out of it! I spent six months in a coma. I missed my eighth birthday, and worried everyone, and if I hadn’t gotten so close to that canister Brian would be here!” She looked down at her hands and folded her fingers over her palms. “It’s all my fault”.

Jessie hurried over to wrap her in a hug. “No, it isn’t!” She insisted, and Jace (and an unwilling Aiden) circled around to join the embrace. “You don’t have to prove anything”.

“But I have to fix it”, she said, annoyed. “I need to! Maybe the powers can help! I read Dad’s mind, and he...he was so mad at me! I just want to make it better”.

Around the end of the rant, she trailed off into sorrowful silence, and even Aiden looked sad.

“Okay”, Jessie mumbled, tightening her grip momentarily. “If it’s for that, we’ll help. Maybe we can be a team, and we can help people too, and Uncle Tony won’t be angry anymore!”

“Yeah”, Melody agreed, gratefully. “That would make him proud, right?”
The shields came later. The older she got the more her powers developed- and, unfortunately, the more difficult they became to keep under wraps.

Melody had just turned nine, and gotten into another squabble with Aiden.

Their parents were out, and Pietro (the designated babysitter, somehow) was upstairs.

“Give it back!” The Barton twin whined, trying to pry his archery book out of her hands.

“Not until you apologize for calling me an idiot!” She snapped back, holding the novel up higher (Aiden hadn’t hit his big growth spurt until thirteen, and before that Melody had been taller by a good few inches. Tall enough to hold something over his head, and out of reach).

Aiden’s face was scarlet. “I didn’t say it, I thought it!”

“Same thing!”

Jessie, who was curled up on the couch with the flu, glared at them around the corner of her blanket. “Be quiet”, she complained, “Uncle Pietro’s going to hear you!”

Melody hissed and backed into the coffee table, ignoring the blonde entirely as Aiden darted for her unprotected side. He was probably planning on tickling her, a weakness that the others loved to exploit whenever they fought.

She yelped and leaned back quickly, as her gut wrenched painfully. With a sharp bang and a flash her cousin flew into the adjacent armchair, having been thrown backwards.

In front of her was a wall of red energy, and Melody’s mouth hung open in surprise.

Jessie bolted upright despite her illness. “Mel!”
Aiden, who thankfully wasn’t hurt, looked stunned. “H-Hey! That’s cheating!”

She blinked, and the shield flickered out of existence, like it’d never been there in the first place.

“Whoa”, Melody said, in awe. “That was so cool!”

Jessie shook her head and coughed into her sleeve. “I thought you could just read minds!”

Aiden huffed and crossed his arms over his chest, petulantly. He seemed almost jealous of her abilities. “I guess not. Can I have my archery book back, now? You force-threw me!”

Reluctantly, Melody figured he had a point. She gave him back his book.

“I wonder what else I can do”, she said, flopping onto the couch space that her cousin wasn’t occupying. “Do you think I could learn to use it?”

Jessie shrugged. “If Uncle Bruce can with Hulk, I bet it’s possible. Maybe we should tell Brian and ask if the radiation did stuff like this to him too”.

“Are you sure he won’t tell?”

“I don’t think so”.

Melody thought about it for a second, and nodded. “Okay”.

Before anyone could reply, Uncle Pietro zoomed down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Jessie frowned after him and Melody hopped to her feet to follow.

She found the Avenger scrubbing at something red on his hands, in the sink. More of the stuff splattered the front of his shirt, and she froze in shock.
Pietro looked stricken, and when he saw her his eyes widened. “Melody, go back to the living room”.

“Is that blood?”

“Melody”.

“Is Brian okay?”

A moment of silence.

Melody could tell without reading his mind that Brian was far from okay.

“Brian is fine”, Pietro said, finally. “He’s just not feeling well. Go back into the living room, alright? And don’t come upstairs. He could be contagious”.

Melody nodded, watched him race away for the second time, and wondered recently why half of the things adults said to her were lies.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger???
Chapter 4

The bullet clattered harmlessly to the linoleum, blocked by an energy shield.

Melody’s little secret had since grown out of the bubble that only consisted of her, Jessie, Aiden, Jace, and Brian. Tem had found out once she’d come to live with them, as had the Maximoffs, Izzy, Riley, and basically all of the other kids except for a select few. Melody was actually surprised everyone had agreed to keep it on the down low.

She’d spent those years attempting to hone her powers without her mother or father’s knowledge, and there had been plenty of close-calls. Almost too many to count.

However, she’d never ever used them outside of home. Not until now.

The Leader’s face was nothing less than stunned, but unluckily for them, he recovered quickly. He spun and fired another round into Brian’s leg, before anyone could react.

“Brian!” Jessie ran forward to catch him as he cried out in pain; and Jace helped her lower him to the ground. Blood poured from the hole and stained his jeans.

Melody screamed in outrage and The Leader went flying through the windows, rolling across the asphalt before skidding to a halt.

The gun went flying into the parked cars along the sidewalk, and Tem sprinted after it.

Melody dropped her hands and fell to her knees. “Ohmygod”.

Jessie was starting to shrug off her sweater, already trying to regain control of the situation. “Okay”, she said, unsteadily, “Okay, we just need to put pressure on it and it’ll be fine, w-we’ll get you to a hospital. Can someone call 911?”

“Wait”, Brian interrupted, oddly hoarse. His hands covered the wound, and his face was pinched, but the look in his eyes was more confused.
Aiden scowled and knelt beside him. “What do you mean wait?”

“You don’t normally say that after getting shot”, Melody admitted, inching forward to assist. She was relieved to find her voice hadn’t shook.

Jace glanced at her worriedly, despite his concern for Brian as well. “Using your powers was a terrible idea, especially with the security cameras”.

Tem emerged from outside; her boots crunching on broken glass, and Melody gave a start when she realized she was holding the pistol.

“That’s why we do this”, she said, and then shot out the camera on the ceiling.

Heedless of the startled shouts of her friends, she started erasing her fingerprints.

Jessie was covering her mouth. “T-Tem!”

“What? Do you want the whole world to know Mel can do that!? We have to get an ambulance for Brian, and the police are going to ask what happened”.

Brian made the same growling noise as before, during the immediate danger, except it was significantly distressed.

“Guys”, he said, “I’m fine”.

“Alright”, Jace declared. “You’ve lost too much blood”.

“No- I mean, look-” He rolled up his pants leg, and the skin there was smooth.

They all watched as the last of pink scar tissue (what should’ve been there after months of healing), vanished completely. It was as if there was no injury in the first place.
Melody looked at the unmoving would-be robber lying on the pavement, and felt sick.

*I know what the explosion did to me, but what did it do to you?*

The six of them ended up hightailing it out of there a few minutes later, when they heard sirens. Jessie let Tem wipe the place of their presence with minimal complaining.

(“It’s not like we’re criminals”, she’d grumbled, “We didn’t do anything wrong”.

“Yeah”, the redhead had agreed, “But we’ll still be grounded for life”).

It turned out, after they met back up with the others a few blocks away, Riley had called the police while Izzy ushered the rest to a safer location.

“They’re the smart ones”, Jessie said ruefully, during the trudge home. The idea of food had been abandoned, and Wanda had finally given Penny directions.

She examined Jace with a weary grin. “That was some right hook, Chuck Norris”.

He smiled sheepishly and rubbed the back of his neck. “My knuckles aren’t even bruised. And you’re one to talk, miss bends-a-metal-baseball-bat-like-it’s-nothing. That was awesome”.

Christa shoved her way in between them and slung her arms around their shoulders.

“I can’t believe you all are joking about this. It happened five minutes ago”, she said. “Did you know I almost ran to Uncle Wade’s secret apartment and stole a bazooka to help?”

“What did I say about the bazooka?” Jessie asked, the same time Jace said, “Just because you have super speed doesn’t mean you should use it like that”.

Melody sighed, at the front of the crowd. “We did good”.
Tem cut her a sideways glance and made a face. “Are you okay?” She whispered, out of the corner of her mouth. “You’ve never used your shield outside the Compound”.

“Yeah, well, my parents don’t even know about it. I suppose I should thank you for damaging that evidence, although it still scared the crap out of me. Where’d you learn to shoot? I knew you could fight, girl, but damn”.

Tem didn’t looked concerned. In fact, she looked a little bored. “Mom taught me how”.

She got the feeling she wasn’t talking about Natasha. “Seriously?”

“Why is it so far-fetched? Jess’s mom taught her how to break a man’s femur!”

“That’s not the same thing and you know it, but I’m too tired to argue over your blatant lies”. Melody smirked when Tem snorted, feeling slightly accomplished.

Her cousin’s entire adoption was shrouded in mystery- she’d come into the family when they were twelve, after Natasha and Bucky had gone on a joint-mission for SHIELD.

Supposedly (and Melody had needed to poke around a few minds in order to get even this much info), they’d been investigating a Russian family. The man and woman had been brought into custody and sentenced to life in prison, while the couple’s five daughters had been sent off to live with different agents.

Natasha and Bucky adopted two of them, aka, Tem and Izzy, who had come into the Compound as a pair of quiet kids who rarely left each other’s sides.

The two didn’t speak of their original family often, or at all, really. Melody remembered them as having a sense of discipline that reminded her of soldiers in the military, and the adults had warned her and the others not to ask about where they came from.

As far as she knew, they still kept in touch with the three siblings who didn’t live with them (their names were Irina, Anastasia, and Elisabet, according to Tem).
Melody’s cognitive powers were weak, at best. She never did find out what their parents had been locked away for.

Tem turned to Brian and glanced down at his pants leg nervously.

“You have blood all over your jeans”, she informed, with a sigh. “Our parents aren’t going to like that”.

He looked down at the stain with a grimace. “Well, the plan is to sneak in like we snuck out, so hopefully no one will have to see”.

“Ah, yes”, Aiden appeared about ten years older, “Unfortunately, it will be forever ingrained in my memory. This night was a bust”.

“Yeah”, Melody agreed, resignedly. “It’s my freaking birthday, and not only did my parents have to duck out, I also almost died within a span of a few hours afterwards”.

*The universe must be trying to kill her.*

“She snapped, and Aiden gritted his teeth.

“Stupid telepathy”, he grumbled, and Tem laughed at the look on his face.

Melody woke up the next morning feeling particularly well-rested, until the events of the night before came rushing back to haunt her.

She rolled over in her queen-sized bed and groaned into the pillow. “Fuck”.

“Would you like me to add a dollar to the swear jar?”
She flinched at the sudden interruption of FRIDAY, and glared up at the ceiling like it was the equivalent of staring down the AI. “No one asked you”.

“Mr. Stark was very specific. One swear= one dollar”.

The swear jar had been in effect ever since the double-digit years rolled around, and the cuss words had poured in like an avalanche accompanied by pre-pubescent angst.

Melody pulled the covers over her face and muttered, “That swear jar is shit”.

“Two dollars”.

She bit back another curse and sensed the computer was teasing her. “Fine. Just…take it out of my allowance. And Aiden’s”.

“I cannot take a dollar out of Aiden’s allowance if he is not the one swearing”.

She groaned and made a face as she climbed out of bed, raking her hands through her knotted hair to try and tame it. “It was worth a shot”. Melody spared a moment to look at the digital clock on the nightstand (8:45am) before grabbing a towel and sprinting to the shower. Hot water wouldn’t wake her up, but at least it was better than arguing with a creation of her father’s that’d been around since she was a baby.

When she emerged dressed in a fresh Nirvana t-shirt and shorts, she opened her bedroom door only to find Jessie poised to knock.

The blonde looked ready to go out- she was wearing a flowery summer dress and sandals, and her hair was perfectly styled in its usual forties curls. She blinked in surprise.

“Oh”, she said. “Morning, Mel. Mom sent me to tell you that breakfast is ready”.

“Mph”, Melody grunted, not really caring if that sounded like English or not. She followed Jessie down the hallway towards the kitchen; hands stuffed in her pockets.
“Are the others back yet?” She asked, stifling a yawn. She skirted around thoughts of last night like they were the plague.

Jessie glanced over her shoulder and shook her head. “No. Your dad did call Aunt Pepper, though, sometime earlier. They’ll be back soon”.

“Any injuries?”

“Nothing serious”. She smiled, crookedly. “Not that they ever tell us those things”.

Melody snorted and nodded (for the children of superheroes, they were well guarded against anything graphic that came with their parents’ job description. One-time Steve’s heart had stopped after being shot, and they hadn’t found out about it until he came home, and she heard his thoughts). “True. No one knows about our little adventure?”

“Oh, absolutely not. I’m pretty sure Brian burnt that pair of jeans to destroy the evidence”.

As far as Mel was concerned, destroying an article of clothing like that wouldn’t be at the top of the list of weird things he’d done over the years. He’d built a mini nuclear powerplant in the basement before, after watching The Big Bang Theory.

“I wonder what the employees thought when they returned from whatever break they were having”, she chuckled, to herself. “I would’ve been like- what the fuck? Honestly, I hope no one got traumatized”.

“Three dollars”.

“Darn it, FRIDAY!”

Jessie’s cackle was astonishingly demonic as they entered the kitchen, and Aunt Lizzie arched an eyebrow from where she was cooking something on a pan.
“I made pancakes”, she said, with a breezy smile.

She looked like she’d gotten back from a jog- her earbuds dangled around her neck, her hair was pulled back, and a shin sheen of sweat gave off the impression she was glowing.

Melody cheered and bounded over to the island, briefly considering stealing Aiden’s plate before Tem shot her the look of death.

“Thanks, Aunt Liz”, she chirped, as Jace handed her the syrup and she proceeded to dump half of the bottle onto the food. “These look great”.

“After so many years of eating SHIELD cafeteria food, I decided I should learn to cook properly”. Aunt Lizzie rolled her eyes, taking the pan of eggs and dumping them in a bowl. Izzy pounced on it instantly, like a cat would pounce on prey.

Jessie perked up at the mention of SHIELD, like she always did. It’d been her dream ever since she was little to be like her parents and help people, even if joining the top-secret organization was basically out of the question.

In hindsight, that was probably a reason why she’d agreed to eight-and-a-half-year-old Melody’s plans to master her powers in secret and make her father proud.

They all had someone they wanted to impress.

“You’re drooling”, Jace informed her quietly.

Jessie’s face flushed, and she accepted an apple from Christa, who was valiantly not making a joke at her expense. She bit into it to avoid talking and chewed loudly before swallowing.

“Maybe be a little more inconspicuous”, Marya mumbled, glaring at the salt and pepper shakers. With a wave of her hand and a hint of light, they floated off the table, which was extremely contradictory to her previous statement.

Aunt Lizzie grabbed them out of the air and shot the teenager a stern look. “You know the rules
about using your powers at the table”, she said.

**I can’t believe I live in a house where that’s a thing,** she thought.

Melody smirked and smothered the expression by shoving pancake into her mouth. Most of the time the mind-reading was an accident, and she picked up on stuff without trying, since it took a lot more effort to dig. However, occasionally what came on the radar was gold.

For example, Marya had picked up a bit of her mother’s quote-on-quote “freaky” mind abilities, but instead of her mother’s red manifestation, hers was blue. She wasn’t well practiced with the powers, and often got scolded for using them in places she shouldn’t, and the adults’ inner thoughts on the matter were usually hilarious.

“Oh, Melody”, Aunt Lizzie opened the fridge and retrieved her birthday cake, something she’d forgotten about already. “Your dad will be back soon, so feel free to eat all of that red icing before he gets here”.

Tem snickered into her glass of orange juice (she wore the same thing every day- generic jeans, combat boots, and a purple tank top underneath a black leather jacket. Today was no exception), and spluttered into the cup when somebody kicked her in the shin.

It was probably Brian, if his expression was anything to go by.

Aunt Lizzie frowned. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“No, Mom”, Jessie said dutifully, and kept eating. “She’s laughing at Mel eating all of the icing as petty revenge”.

“I can’t very well lead a full-frontal attack on skipping out on birthday parties”, the consumer of red icing complained, “Leave my petty revenge alone”.

“’Petty’ pretty much describes your whole personality”, Aiden said dryly, and gave a little shriek when Aunt Lizzie leaned over to slap him upside the head.
“Don’t be rude”, she chastised, “I’m sick of you two fighting all the time”.

“We all are”, Brian whispered.

He was the only one in the kitchen without a plate, and Melody wasn’t sure if it was because he’d eaten already, or if he wasn’t planning on eating at all. Judging by how skinny he was, option two seemed more likely.

“Attention, Miss Elizabeth, I’m sorry to interrupt”, FRIDAY’s voice cut through the sudden bout of silence, and most of the occupiers jumped. “The Quinjet has just landed”.

Aunt Lizzie paused, in the middle of checking the Fitbit around her wrist (Jessie had gotten her that as a present one summer).

The kids all exchanged identical looks of shock, and then grinned.

“Last one to the runway is a rotten egg!” Melody cried childishly, leaping to her feet and sprinting out the door.

Everyone else bolted after her; a cacophony of shouts and whistling, and Aunt Lizzie passed her easily considering the older woman worked out and she never had.

Sure enough, the Quinjet was outside, and the Avengers were filing out one by one.

Melody could see a few bruises and scrapes, and Clint may have been holding his right arm funny, but other than that there were no major injuries despite the fact a lot of showers were in order, along with some TLC.

Tony’s Iron Man suit looked a little worse for wear, and the helmet came up to reveal a grimy, tired face. His eyes widened in shock when he suddenly found himself with an armful of Melody, and he patted her back.

“Hey, Mel”, he said, cheerfully, and then, “Sorry about your birthday kiddo”.

Melody pulled away and waved off the apology. “Oh, please. If you didn’t save the world I wouldn’t have a birthday ever again, and then where would we be?”

“Ugh”, said Aiden, over by where he was embracing his father. “Conceited, much?”

She stuck out her tongue just as the rest of the Compound family came pouring out, and all thoughts of verbally punting him into the sun were pushed to back of her mind.

Izzy embraced Bucky somewhat awkwardly, and Katya came up to kiss him on the mouth. Somebody gagged loudly, completely ignoring the fact that Pepper and Tony were now full-on making out.

“Oh, god”, Melody complained, covering her eyes with her hands. “Make it stop”.

“Cute”, Aunt Lizzie said, from where she was standing with Uncle Steve, an arm slung through his and the other around their daughter. “Break it up, break it up”.

**You’ll scar the children, Jesus.**

Thankfully, nobody noticed when Melody choked on her own spit.

Later that afternoon, Christa barreled into her workshop at supersonic speed, and almost crashed into a table.

It’d happened before. Neither were willing to repeat the experience.

Melody’s workshop was a tiny add-on to the Compound, built as a present when she was thirteen. It was spacious enough for her to store all sorts of parts in the shelves covering the walls, and the long desks lined up in rows on the floor were overflowing with unfinished projects.

The sign above the door read, *Melody’s Lair*, because the word “lair” sounded a lot cooler than the
word “work shop”, and no one could tell her otherwise.

Melody turned off the blowtorch and pushed up her goggles. “What?” She asked, not trying to sound unannoyed. She liked her space where she could get it.

Christa was breathing hard, and she latched onto her shoulders (nearly tripping over her own two feet to do so). “It’s on the news!”

Melody pried her hands away and held them at arms-length. “Um…what?”

“The attempted robbery!” The silver-haired girl crowed, “It’s on the news!”

It took a minute for her to register what she was talking about, and then they were both bolting out of the workshop and into the living room, thankfully at normal speed.

Sure enough, a news anchor on TV was droning on about it, accompanied by a small image of the damaged bank in the corner by her head.

Melody was too stunned to pay complete attention, but she caught things like, “possible super-powered vigilantes?” “damaged footage”, and “drug dealers”, before Tony, who was sitting on the couch with the remote, turned it off with a frown.

Melody glanced at Christa, who was grinning and shooting her a thumbs up.

Tem, Jace, Aiden, Brian, and Jessie were in the room too, so she must’ve gotten them all to come and see. Their faces ranged from awed to neutral.

The brunette smiled back and looked down at her dad, who still seemed unhappy.

“Something wrong?” She asked, tone not betraying her nervousness. “They mentioned security camera footage”.

*Uh oh.*
He blinked, as if he hadn’t noticed she was there. “Oh, yeah. SHIELD sent us a copy of the tape, but it’s so grainy you can’t tell who anyone is—” (there was a collective sigh of relief at that) “—and Director Fury asked us to hunt down the guys responsible”.

The sigh of relief turned into a ball of dread. “What? Why?”

“SHIELD has been looking for new mutants or otherwise, to form the next Avengers. Something about securing a legacy, even after we’ve retired, blah, blah, blah…” Tony sighed. “Whoever they were, they took out a pretty powerful drug lord”.

“A drug lord?” Melody hadn’t realized that. She’d sort of thought they were common criminals looking for some cash.

“Yeah. One of the guys got thrown out a window—he’s in the hospital with a concussion, but he’ll be fine—and it turns out he’s been in charge of a lot of underground meth labs. The cops found a diamond-encrusted pistol at the scene. The weapon was wiped clean, but it was definitely his gun”.

Tem looked vaguely ill, possibly remembering the meticulous way she’d scrubbed the weapon of any and all traces of her use. “Really?”

“Really”. Tony stood and picked up his glass of liquor. “They’d be good candidates for the program, not that I agree with teaching a bunch of children to be soldiers”.

He took a swig and walked away, leaving the teens alone in the room.

Melody stood there for a minute, processing the new information gradually.

*We were on the news. We stopped a drug lord.*

*SHIELD is looking for new Avengers?* She turned to the others with a broad grin, something like excitement and hope brewing in her stomach.
“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”
Almost six weeks passed since the attempted robbery, and the discovery of Mel’s big chance to restore her family’s faith in her.

“You know”, Jessie drew a few lines in her sketchbook, eyebrows furrowed in half-concentration, “When you said, hey, we should approach our parents about being the next Avengers, I thought you would…you know, approach them about being the next Avengers”.

Melody let loose a colossal groan and flopped onto the blonde’s blue bedspread. “I know, I know”, she whined. “I’ve been trying to figure out a way to break it to my Dad without him going all ballistic”.

“Oh, Mellie, he’s going to go all ballistic either way”. Her tone was sweet and not unkind, which made it all the more awful to listen to.

“Don’t call me Mellie”, she hissed, in lieu of agreement. “No one’s called me that since I turned ten, and I like it that way”.

Jessie rolled her eyes, which was becoming rather common. “Did you come in hoping I could help, or are you just going to lie there and moan until dinner?”

Lying there and moaning until dinner sounded like the best idea ever, but Melody knew that in order to fix what she’d broken at seven-years-old, she needed to confront her dad about the program. That, unfortunately, involved asking for assistance.

“No”, she relented unwillingly. “Help me, ‘O wise one”.

“Well, how about you start by dropping hints? When’s the last time you had a real conversation with either of your parents?”

She paused, to think. “Um. Never?”

Jessie’s lips turned down at the corners, which was probably not a good sign. “Never? I talk with my Mom and Dad all the time!”
Melody glared at her. “Not everyone can have perfect relationships such as yours. Continue before I get bored and focus on something else”.

That earned a derisive snort, but she kept going nonetheless.

“Okay. So, ask your dad how life has been, or something similar. Then, subtly inquire how SHIELD finding new Avengers is going. There’s your opening. What’s left to do is convince him it’s a good idea”.

“Which it is”.

Jessie grinned, wryly. “The jury’s still out on that one”.

“Oh, come on. Don’t tell me you’ve never wanted to do it before”.

“Of course, I have. But…I dunno. What if we go through all this trouble to prove that we can do it, and we can’t? I’d hate to be wrong about something this important”.

Melody leaned over to smack her thigh, ignoring the indignant yelp of protest.

“That’s called overthinking it, my friend”, she scolded, and rolled away before Jessie could retaliate. “Thanks for the advice, though. I’m going to go test it out”.

“You do that- oh, Mel?”

Melody paused in the doorway, one eyebrow raised. “Yeah?”

Jessie’s smile was more genuine this time. “Good luck”.

“Whoa, thanks-” a pillow hit her square in the face. “HEY!”
“That’s for smacking me”.

Melody found her father at the bar, pouring himself a drink.

She jumped neatly onto one of the stools and gave him her best puppy eyes. “Hit me up”.

Tony snorted, but like he was restraining a chuckle. “Sorry Mel, you turned sixteen, not twenty-one. Besides, this is the last good brandy we have in the Compound. You better believe I’m keeping it to myself”.

She rolled her eyes and stretched out like a cat. “So…How’s life?”

His eyes narrowed. “What did you break?” He asked, skeptically.

“Nothing, nothing! I was just asking”.

“That is precisely why I am suspicious”. Tony took a sip of the alcohol and scrutinized her expression. “If you didn’t break anything, then what do you want? If this is about that car I joked about getting you when you were eleven, I really was kidding about that”.

Melody scowled and crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t want a car dad- well, actually, I do. But that’s an argument for another time. I was…just wondering about that whole SHIELD finding replacements thing”.

“They’re not replacements”.

“Dad, I love you, but they totally are”.

Tony made a face. “Who raised you to talk back so much?”
“You did, remember?” Melody bat her eyelashes a few times and a real laugh escaped. He leaned against the counter with a considerate, “I did do that, didn’t I?”

There was a moment of silence. She swallowed.

“How is that going? The first time you mentioned it, it didn’t seem like it was moving in any direction. Is Fury on you all the time?”

Tony waved a hand dismissively. “Actually, SHIELD’s Avengers- that’s what they’re calling it, can you believe that? -Have already been taken care of”.

Melody’s stomach dropped into her shoes, and she struggled not to let the disappointment show on her face. “Really?” She squeaked.

If Tony noticed how red she was, he didn’t comment on it. “Yeah. You know Rhodey’s daughter, Lily? God knows how, but she got accepted”.

“Uncle Rhodey’s okay with that?”

“Not by a long shot, but at least this way he can keep an eye on her if she wants to do something stupid”. Tony paused, his lips turning down at the corners. “You look upset”.

“No, no, I- um. Why weren’t we considered?”

“Why weren’t you considered?”

Melody mentally gave herself a pep talk before forging ahead. “I mean, yeah. If SHIELD was looking for the next generation of Avengers, why didn’t they ask the actual next generation of Avengers? Not that I want to do it, I just want to know”.

Tony didn’t look convinced in the slightest. “Uh huh. You want me to sugarcoat it?”

“No, thanks. I’m good”. 
“Then, they didn’t consider you and the others because they didn’t think you were capable”.

Melody, admittedly, felt like someone had shoved a particularly large object down her throat. She hoped that wasn’t discernable. “Oh…” she trailed off and wished she’d never left Jessie’s room. “What time’s your meeting tonight?”

The sudden change in direction had her father looking both a little surprised, and little suspicious, but he answered the question anyway.

“Six o’clock this afternoon. You know the drill- all of you stay in your rooms. If we catch any of you eavesdropping, you’re grounded”.

Melody nodded and jumped to her feet with a salute. “Yes, sir!” She turned on her heel and marched away, ignoring the simmering anger in her gut.

Brian was waiting for her in her workshop, and his eyebrows shot up to his hairline when he saw that she was obviously pissed off.

“Yikes”, he said. “Did it go that badly? Are you in trouble? How much trouble are we talking about, on a scale of one to ten? Please tell me I don’t need to get Jess”.

Melody gave him her best death stare. “I’m not in trouble. However, SHIELD has already found its new Avengers. We missed our golden opportunity”.

Brian straightened, almost alarmed. “Seriously?”

“Yeah- and get this, we weren’t even considered for it”.

“But…aren’t we the actual descendants of the Avengers?”

“That’s why it doesn’t make any sense!” Melody cringed when her voice got too loud, and she
resisted the urge to take apart one of her projects (there was something about fiddling with machines that helped her calm down when she was worked up like this).

Brian was frowning now, his forehead creasing. He was starting to fiddle with the cuffs of his battered leather jacket. “What if he was lying?”

She stopped pacing so quickly that her sneakers probably left skid marks on the nice, expensive floors. “What? Why would he lie?”

“Uncle Tony knows you really well, doesn’t he?”

Melody resisted the urge to say, “not as well as he used to”, but nodded nevertheless. “I guess so. What does that have to do with this?”

Brian nodded and reclined on the stool he was perched on. “He probably knew what you were getting at when you asked about it, and in order to throw you off, he lied”.

“You really think so?”

“Would you put it past him?”

A moment of silence, and Melody thought, no, I can’t put it past him. He hasn’t really trusted me since I was seven-years-old.

“Okay”, she conceded, crossing her arms over her chest and flipping her hair over one shoulder. “How do we figure out the truth?”

A sly grin tugged on the corner of Brian’s lips (for a second, she was reminded of a younger, less moody Brian, who didn’t growl like an animal and have dark bags under his eyes the size of Kansas). “They’re having that meeting today, right?” He asked.

Melody’s eyes widened. “You’re thinking what I’m thinking?”
“Oh, yeah. We’re gonna have to break the rule about those”.

“This is a terrible idea and we’re going to be in so much trouble”, Jessie repeated for the dozenth time, only to be shoved by Christa and shushed by Tem.

Jace hissed at them to be quiet and glanced at Melody, who was pressed against the door. FRIDAY had almost told on them, but luckily the brunette had a few tricks up her sleeve. The AI wasn’t going to tattle anytime soon.

“She’s not going to tattle anytime soon”, she mouthed, and Aiden made an affronted grunting sound.

Brian covered the other boy’s mouth with his hand and promptly jerked it away, probably because he’d been licked or bitten. Penny was obviously choking back a giggle.

Marya finally silenced them all and motioned for everyone to listen carefully, so they could pick up on what their parents were saying.

“…still think you should’ve told her the truth, Tony”. That was Steve’s voice, in all his disappointed, oddly-parental-even-when-talking-to-his-teammates glory. “They’ll find out about it eventually, and then it’ll be blown way out of proportion”.

“What, you think I should’ve told her the truth, and let her think there was even a possibility I was going to let her step foot on that Helicarrier?” That was Tony speaking now, and he sounded tired and annoyed. “It would’ve gotten her hopes up. And need I remind you that none of you said a word to the other kids, too?”

Melody’s blood was beginning to boil, because of course, all of the adults knew about it too.

“I hate it when you’re right”, she mumbled, though Brian looked about the farthest thing from smug. He looked more deeply disturbed than anything else.

Aunt Natasha sighed from the other room. “We did the right thing, not letting them do it. But not telling them may have been a bad idea”.
Uncle Clint sounded gruff, and angry. “SHIELD seems to agree”.

“They were their first choice”, Uncle Bruce interjected, and he sounded particularly strained. “Of course, they agree”.

“Holy shit”, Jessie was beginning to chant under her breath, “Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit”.

“We were their first choice”. Joven sat back against the wall like he needed to catch his breath, and Riley leaned over to pat his back. “We could’ve been the next Avengers”.

Melody’s hands were balled into fists. “We could’ve been the next Avengers”.

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. She’d watched her father look her dead in the eyes and say that SHIELD hadn’t considered them because they thought they weren’t capable. Those must’ve been his words all along, not theirs.

It hurt. On some fundamental level, it hurt.

“He doesn’t think I can do it”, she said, almost incoherently. “He doesn’t think I can do it”.

Tem’s face was the color of ash, and she put a hand on the brunette’s shoulder.

“Mel”, she whispered, steadily. “Please don’t do anything you would do”.

Melody shook her off and hushed the others’ as they continued to gossip to themselves and the people around them, and they fell into a tense silence once more.

“Fury should’ve known we’d never agree to it”, Uncle Sam was in the middle of saying. “Did he really think we would subject our kids to all of the near-death experiences we go through every day?”

There was a lapse in conversation, until Aunt Wanda spoke quietly and resignedly: “We can’t keep them safe forever”.
“It’s true”, Uncle Vision continued, although he didn’t seem happy about it. “We can protect them for the rest of our indefinite lifespans, but after is a different story. And, not to mention, Mr. Stark, the other thing you haven’t told Melody has not yet been dealt with”.

Melody felt dread start to build in her chest and throat, threatening to choke her.

Tony didn’t answer for a long time. “I didn’t want to spring it on her so close to her birthday. And now…it never seems like a good time”.

“She would want to know”.

“I know that, Vision”, he snapped. “I just…she’s not ready”.

“With all due respect, Tony”, Uncle Peter piped up, sounding oddly knowing despite being a younger adult, “Are you sure she’s the one not ready?”

Jace’s shoulder bumped against Melody’s, his stormy blue eyes filled with concern.

“Mel, you’re shaking”, he said. “Are you okay?”

“Well”, she stared very hard at the floor, “I just found out my dad’s been keeping not one, but two things from me. So, yeah, I’m great”.

Izzy waved a hand and whisper-shouted, “Stop talking!”

Their mouths snapped shut just in time for them to hear Tony say, “These people are the reason she found out what a bombing was like at seven-years-old. How am I supposed to look her in the eyes and tell her that the reason she was in a coma for six months is back in the city?”

Something in Melody’s chest snapped, and Tem was pushing people to the side and away from the doorframe as she leapt to her feet and slammed it open.
“You didn’t tell me!” She screeched loud enough to wake the dead, and the adults all startled and stared at her with looks of shock.

Tony’s melted away to anger faster than anyone else’s, as he stood. “Melody, what did I say about eavesdropping on meetings?”

“Oh no, no, no, don’t change the subject! The people who are responsible for all of this’, she gestured wildly to herself as if that made sense, “are back? Why didn’t you tell me? And the whole SHIELD’s Avengers thing, what the hell?”

This time, FRIDAY didn’t reprimand her for language, and Tony looked drawn and vaguely ill. He glanced at the other superheroes with a long exhale and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Could you give me a moment alone with my daughter, please?”

There was a particular edge in the word daughter, and Melody’s stomach still wasn’t finished twisting itself into knots.

She didn’t look at any of her aunts and uncles as they left one by one, although some glanced at Tony like they were trying to tell him to go easy on her.

The door shut as loudly as it opened, and then they were alone.

“Melody”, Tony said, slowly, “Never use that tone with me. Ever. I didn’t tell you about the organization who caused the explosion because I was scared- I can admit that. I can own up to it. And I’m sorry. But I didn’t tell you about SHIELD’s Avengers because I knew you would want to run into it, half-cocked, like you do with everything else”.

Melody gritted her teeth, but forced herself not to shout. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, young lady. You’re just like I was when I was your age. Stubborn, and reckless, and you may not care if you get hurt but the rest of us do”.

“Dad-”
“Wait”. He held up a hand. Inhaled. Exhaled. Like he was trying to control his temper. “I knew you wanted to join the program. You love to help people, but you can’t. Not in the same way I do, and the rest of the family does. It’s hard. We’ve all lost people, or come too close to it. Melody, you’re the smartest girl I know but you don’t think things through sometimes. I know you think you can do it.”

“I can do it”, Melody cut in, and Tony didn’t stop her again, so she kept going. “I want to make sure people don’t lose loved ones like that ever again, I want to make you proud of me, and I want to put the guys who blew me and Brian to pieces away. Dad, I’ll be careful-”

“No, Melody, you won’t!” Tony shouted, effectively silencing her. “Because you don’t learn from mistakes, you make them over and over again, and you don’t listen! I knew the first chance you got you’d run towards danger and ignore all the warnings. Because, you know what? It’s been nine years and you haven’t changed a bit”.

Melody couldn’t find it in herself to shoot back and retaliate. She felt hollowed out. She almost wanted to cry, but there was no way she was doing that in front of her dad.

He was looking at her like he’d wanted to in the hospital when she was seven- with all of the disappointment in the world, because she hadn’t listened to him, and now she was suffering the consequences of bad actions.

Melody turned around and fled.

The gang, with no parents in sight, found her sitting on a park bench in Times Square.

She probably looked pathetic, with a red face and bloodshot eyes, even though she hadn’t shed a single tear. On the way, here she’d thought over and over again about what he’d said, and how much she wanted to prove him wrong.

He’s wrong, isn’t he? He has to be.

Melody bought some bread for the pigeons, so there was a whole flock of them cooing and pecking at the gravel by her feet. She talked to them aimlessly for the three hours she sat alone, and thought of every risk.
Teenaged vigilantes only exist in movies, Mel.

(Except, no, they kind of didn’t).

You don’t even have a costume, Mel.

(Except, no, she definitely had the resources to find one).

The others will never help you, Mel.

(Except, no, because maybe she could convince them. At least to keep her secret. If her father was worried about her hurting others, then fine, she’d never drag another person into her problems like she’d dragged Brian towards that canister all those years ago).

Jessie knelt down in front of her while Aiden and Jace shooed away the birds. All Brian had to do was look at them and they’d go flapping away like they were scared. Tem stood off to the side, not saying anything, but her lips were pressed into a thin line.

Melody opened her mouth- to explain, to give her reasons on why she had to do this, and maybe cuss out her father, but no sound came out.

Only Jessie, Tem, Brian, and Jace had come over to talk to her. The only ones involved in the attempted robbery that started it all, and the ones who had planned to join the SHIELD’s Avengers program with her.

The rest were lingering by some trees, giving the six of them space.

Riley was talking with big hand gestures. Penny was on her phone. Izzy was on the phone too, but she was speaking into it where Penny was texting.

Melody opened her mouth again to try and offer her verbal presentation for the second time, but the blonde offered a hand to pull her to her feet before she could.
Tem was smiling slightly, now. Brian was staring at her. Aiden was silent but unwavering and Jace looked ready for something (ready for what, she wasn’t sure).

Jessie grinned as if she was saying, “say no more”. She looked determined. Confident.

“We’re in”.
Since no one felt like going home, they went to the next best thing- Penny’s apartment in Queens. (Thankfully, her mother wasn’t there, or else she might’ve questioned the number of teenagers filing through her door).

“Thanks, nerd”, Christa said, as she flopped onto the bed and pulled Marya with her.

Penny rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Izzy and I called back-up; they should be here soon”.

Melody frowned at the word back-up, but the argument was still fresh in her mind and the resolve to prove her father wrong was stronger than any concern.

Izzy didn’t comment on Park’s statement. She sat cross-legged on the floor and adjusted the sleeves of her baggy gray sweatshirt, nervously.

“So”, she said, “You’re really doing this?”

The genius nodded. “Oh, yeah. How much of the fight between my dad and I did you hear?”

“Enough”, Brian said darkly, and Tem eyed him with could’ve been concern.

Melody cringed. In the heat of the moment, back in the Compound, she hadn’t seen his reaction before she barged into the meeting.

Riley cleared his throat. “Okay, then. Let’s start with the obvious questions- don’t you need suits and equipment? Among other things”.

Melody clasped her hands together and hummed. She’d already given that part thought while sitting on a park bench, feeding pigeons. “The suits shouldn’t be too difficult. I can build them. It’s the materials that are the problem”.

Over by the corner, Penny grinned slyly. “That’s what my back-up’s for”.

“Mine’s getting us Chinese food- *but*, I think she can help us in other ways”, Izzy added, rather flatly.

Before Melody could ask what that meant, the doorbell rang, and the two ran to open it along with Great Aunt May.

When they came back they were towing four other girls- a dirty blonde with pale blue eyes, a brunette with coffee-colored eyes, a blonde with baby blue eyes, and a curly-haired redhead with one green eye and one cyan eye.

Melody’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “You needed back-up and the first people you called were *Uncle Wade’s kids*?”

Wanda Wilson, the brunette, laughed. “I take offense to that”.

Her older sister Noah, the dirty blonde, rolled her eyes and cuffed her sibling on the back of the head (gently). “Go sit with your girlfriend”, she said in a bored voice, ignoring Penny’s indignant squeak. Wanda didn’t seem to mind, and flounced over to her best friend.

The youngest of the trio, the blonde (otherwise known as Alex), hovered over Noah’s shoulder and practically vibrated with curiosity.

Growing up around superheroes had exposed Melody to multiple enigmas, and Wade Wilson’s family was one of them- probably because nobody would’ve pegged Deadpool to be a good father.

Noah was sixteen, which made her as old as most of the kids in the Compound. She was actually Wanda and Alex’s *half*-sister, and had come to live with them when she was eight. No one knew the whereabouts of her biological mother, and no one asked.

Wanda was fifteen, and they only knew her through Penny. The big rumor in the circuit was that she had a crush on the only child, and honestly, Melody wouldn’t be surprised.

Alex was fourteen, and she was sort of wondering why they’d brought her at all if they were going to be talking about vigilantism.
“They can help”, Penny promised sincerely, and since she normally had a clue what she was doing regarding these people, Melody decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

Instead, she turned to Izabela, who was talking to the girl with mismatched eyes.

“You called your little sister?” She asked, even more incredulously.

Ruby Devon was fourteen like Alex, and the daughter of Aunt Katya’s best friend, who had died when she was baby. K and Bucky had taken her in long before Izzy made an entrance.

Ruby scowled, possibly because she didn’t like being referred to as the little sister.

“I can help”, she said, almost petulantly. She shook the brown paper bag she was holding. “I also brought Chinese, so, bow down if you want some”.

Melody exhaled and ruffled the young girl’s hair. “Yeah, yeah”. She glanced towards Izzy and mouthed no, really, what is she doing here?

Izzy grinned and mouthed back, powerful telepath.

Her eyes widened slightly. She knew that Ruby had the same powers as her deceased mom, but she didn’t know the extent of those abilities.

“Oooh, I see”, she said, “You’re our spy on the inside, aren’t you?”

Ruby grinned a terrifying grin that should not be possible for anyone her age. “Well, Izzy wouldn’t let me do anything more dangerous”.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing”, Izzy grumbled, rolling her eyes and taking the Chinese food bag out of her hands. “Chow’s up, y’all”.
They pounced on the food and gathered in a more orderly semi-circle, now that the back-up had arrived, and they all dug in.

“So”, Riley said, with his mouth full, “My point still stands- materials?”

Melody made a wide gesture with her plastic fork and almost poked Aiden in the eye. “You know, Kevlar, leather, metal. All sorts of things”.

Wanda kicked up her feet and cracked open a fortune cookie. “That’s why Penny texted me”, she interjected, with a smirk. “We have connections”.

“No, Dad’s the one with connections”, Noah corrected. “We just have access to them. You know, places like Weasel’s bar and other mercenary hangouts”.

“If Uncle Wade doesn’t tell you this, how do you know about it?”

Alex snorted. “Eavesdropping. We’re very nosy. That, and when I was little, Cable let me use his phone, so I wouldn’t get bored while he was babysitting me. I went through his contacts and found a lot of stuff no ten-year-old should be exposed to”.

Tem raised her eyebrows. “Interesting. You realize they won’t sell you stuff, right? We’re all minors. Literally children, in their eyes”.

Noah’s eyes gleamed wickedly. “That’s just it. We’re not purchasing anything”.

“Then who is?”

“Our Dad- well, technically anyway”. Wanda waved a dismissive hand in the air. “We made up a game-plan with Pen’ on the phone. We use our money, but we use Deadpool’s name”.

Melody straightened, definitely interested now. “Seriously?”

“Oh, yeah”, Noah sounded immensely pleased with herself. “After the purchase is over we’ll erase
all knowledge of the buy- at least from a technology standpoint. If the guy ever asks Dad anything, and he says he doesn’t know, there’ll be no proof otherwise”.

Jace shook his head and massaged his temples. “That sounds illegal. So, so illegal”.

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Something that’s not illegal?” Jessie asked, hopefully.

The demigod thought for a moment and deflated. “Nope”.

Melody made a face. “While the idea of breaking the law doesn’t sit well with me-”

“Sure, it doesn’t”, Aiden muttered.

She glowered at him, before continuing. “While the idea of breaking the law doesn’t sit well with me, I think still it’s worth a shot. Plus, are we sure it’s 100% illegal?”

Jessie looked like she at least thought it was, but didn’t protest again. Neither did Jace.

Noah seemed to take their silence as a confirmation, and she nodded. “Okay. We’ll get what you need, but I don’t know when it’ll arrive”.

“Soon, hopefully”, said Brian, who still looked pretty grim.

Melody reached over to shake the other teen’s hand, and she obliged with an iron grip.

“Pleasure working with you”, she joked, and Noah snickered.

“Yeah”, she agreed. “I’m just looking forward to seeing the six of you crash and burn”.
“We’ll see about that, Wilson. We’ll see”.

Eventually, they had to go home, so they bid Noah, Wanda, Alex, and then Penny farewell (Penny had already contacted her parents, and she was going to the Wilson’s for the night).

When they arrived at the Compound Melody abandoned the thought of dinner entirely, and went to stake out the awkwardness in her room.

Except, five minutes into that endeavor, Aiden dropped by with a plate.

“Jessie said I had to bring you shit”, he said, putting the food on the dresser (Melody knew he was lying without having to read his mind. Jess would’ve brought it herself if that were true, and on rare occasions, they could worry about each other. Extreme, rare occasions).

A fight with any of their parents had never gotten that heavy before. Melody could see why he was showing concern, albeit in a secretive way.

“Tell Jessie she is a goddess and that I love her”, she replied sarcastically, face down on her bed so the sentence was muffled. “Did you bring me a napkin?”

“Yeah, Tem made me bring you that too”, Aiden snorted, so he must’ve been able to hear her anyway. “I kind of wanted to make you eat without one”.

“I would’ve broken the plate over your head, mister. Was it weird out there?”

The mattress dipped which probably meant he’d sat down on the end of the bed. She could almost picture the pissy expression on his face, and the childish way he crossed his arms.

“Oh, yeah”, Aiden said, tiredly. “Aunt Pepper had this torn look that said she didn’t know whether to be angry at her husband or you”.
Melody groaned at the thought of her mother, who was downright terrifying when enraged.

“She’s going to kill me”, she squeaked. “I didn’t think a confrontation through”.

“No, you didn’t. That doesn’t make what he said okay, though. Even if some of it was true”.

She lifted her head and shot him a suspicious glare. “Which parts were true?”

Aiden shrugged (her mental image of his posture had been on point; she gave herself an inner high five), and stood. “Hell, if I know. I couldn’t hear the argument very well because Tem and Brian were hogging all the good eavesdropping space”.

Melody rolled her eyes and he left, leaving her to sit in sullen silence. She considered putting effort into eating before dinner got cold, but the energy to move had left her, and accepting any gift from her archenemy felt wrong.

“You know”, she looked up to see Tem leaning against the doorframe, blue eyes sparkling like someone had sharpened two sapphires to a point. “Your little rivalry is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen”.

Melody stuck her tongue out and the shorter girl brushed a strand of long hair behind her ear. “Never mind”, she huffed, “That was the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen”.

The brunette scowled and Tem took a few steps into the room, hovering next to the bedpost. She looked like she was trying to find the right thing to say.

“I contacted one of my sisters”, she announced, finally, and Melody bolted upright.

If Tem was bothered by the sudden motion she didn’t show it. Instead, she handed her a notepad, and when she gave her a weird look she gestured discreetly to the ceiling.

**FRIDAY.**
Melody nodded and took it as she said, “I was thinking of asking for advice about the fight you had with your dad. She made me write a list of things I should do differently with my mom to avoid it; can you believe that?”

*Elisabet’s mother is one of the higher-level SHIELD agents,* the notepad read in her elegant handwriting. *She can help us get some weapons. Nothing lethal.*

Melody laughed and ripped the page out before handing it back. “Not bad, not bad. I didn’t know your sister was good at creating healthy relationships”.

Tem grunted as she tore the evidence neatly in two. “Eh. I think I’ll throw it away”.

“And you felt the need to come to me with this, why?”

“You were involved in the aforementioned fight. I felt obligated to show it to you”.

“How sweet. Do me a favor and hand me that plate on your way out?”

She smirked crookedly and passed her the food; retrieving the notepad and tucking it under her arm, while the halves of the message got stuffed in her jacket pocket.

“You have to get up for the napkin!” She called over her shoulder, as she glided down the hallway, ignoring Melody’s cries of, “Tem, what the heck!”

The redhead, unfortunately, was either ignoring her or already out of hearing range.

She looked sadly down at her lap and pondered eating with her hands after all.

“Uh, Mel?”

She jolted and almost dumped the meal onto her bedspread. “Gah!”
Jace arched a quizzical eyebrow. “You okay?”

Melody’s eyes narrowed. “Are you all taking turns visiting me, or something? Because the only one who hasn’t stopped by is Jessie and Brian”.

He wrinkled his nose and picked up the abandoned napkin still perched on the dresser.

“Well, in his defense, Brian doesn’t really stop by to see anyone”.

“Really? I could’ve sworn he had a crush on Tem. He liked her when they were twelve, and went out for ice cream. It was disgustingly cute”.

Jace smiled as if he was remembering the moment fondly. “Oh, yeah. I dunno if he still does, though. Kid crushes don’t tend to last very long”.

“That was no kid crush. That was love~.”

“Sure, it was”. He didn’t look convinced in the slightest. “My Dad’s coming back from Asgard soon to take me to visit the godlier part of the family, and I was hoping you could come as back-up, like the Wilsons were with Penny and Ruby was with Izzy. Or something. Aiden and Tem said no”.

Melody’s lower lip jutted out in a pout. “You asked Aiden and Tem before me?”

“Mel! I wasn’t about to ask Brian, he’s scary!”

“What happened to him just not stopping by to see anyone?”

Jace made a sound in between a dying animal and a “why, me?” He looked as though all of his dreams had been crushed. “Are you going to help me, or not?”

Melody hummed. “What about the thing?”
“The thing?”

“The thing”.

His eyes widened. “Oh. No, no, that’ll be fine. I’m not leaving for another week or two. Plenty of time for the thing, Melody”.

*Our secret vigilante team that is going to get our asses caught, jeez.*

She grunted. “Sorry man, but I still don’t think I can come. Ask Jessie, she never goes out. I’m worried she’s become immune to cabin fever and will spend the rest of her life indoors, never enjoying things”.

Jace frowned deeply, as if that greatly disturbed him. “You know she goes to the gym, right? That’s far from being a hermit, or…whatever you just described”.

Melody shuddered. “*The gym.* That’s exactly my point. Besides, even if she doesn’t want to come, she’ll say yes to avoid hurting your feelings. Jessie is the most self-sacrificing person I’ve ever met when it comes to stuff like that. I, however, am not. If you’re looking for someone to boost morale, look for someone with real morals”.

Jace shook his head, tossed her the napkin (she whooped with joy), and backed up to leave.

“All right, okay”, he muttered. “I’m just going to ask Jessie”.

Melody gave him a thumbs up and started eating. It was Uncle Steve’s turn to cook that night, and his hotdogs were glorious, no matter what anyone said.

*The next time Jessie comes by I’m telling her that if her dad ever retires, he should open a hotdog restaurant,* she thought.

Of course, that also made her feel sick. The Avengers retiring was what had gotten them into this whole mess, and she needed to clean it up before she worried about the idea of Captain America opening any kind of food joint.
Melody finished eating, put the plate on the nightstand, and threw the napkin in the trash, before asking FRIDAY to dim the lights and flopping back onto the covers.

“He could call the restaurant All-American Buns”, she whispered, to herself.

The next morning was rough, to say the least.

Melody and her father practically danced around each other, speaking in clipped tones if they had to interact at all.

The passive-aggressive tension in the room was enough to make Brian get up and leave in the middle of breakfast. He was quickly followed by Marya and Ruby (both girls were either clutching their heads or massaging their temples).

Melody frowned at her pancake and tried to imagine what kind of powers Brian would have that would give him the ability to sense negative emotions like a dog.

“Maybe that’s his power”, Tem mumbled later that day, when they were all gathered in the living room doing mundane tasks. “Maybe he turns into a giant dog”.

Aiden snorted. “Are you kidding me? That’s the lamest superpower ever”.

Brian, who was curled up on the couch, shot him a glare with sickly black eyes. “Shut up”.

Melody eyed him with thinly concealed worry (he’d had bad days before, but they’d started being few and far between after he hit twelve. This looked like a crappy day if she ever saw one, and when they were little their parents had forced them away during those).

In a rare act of human decency on her part, she took the quilt off the back of the couch and dropped it on his head.
“Happy birthday”, deadpanned Melody.

Brian’s gaze was more questioning than anything else, but he still covered himself up and exhaled into the armrest. Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead.

Tem had taken notice to that miniscule detail as well, and she brushed his bangs out of his face and checked his temperature with the back of her hand.

“You feel kind of clammy”, she said, unhappily.

Brian made a rumbling sound that didn’t seem entirely human. He retreated further into the quilt and spat something about being left alone.

“Touchy, touchy”, Melody muttered indignantly, but she backed off anyway.

Before Tem stalked off to her room, she thought she saw fear glimmering behind her eyes.

What Are Brian’s Powers???????????

- He growls a lot and makes inhuman noises???
- Telepath (we could have the same powers)
- Red energy shields? (Once again, we could have the same powers)
- The power to sense emotion? Is that a thing? I think that’s a thing
- He growls?????????
- And makes a lot of inhuman noises?
- Maybe he has no powers and he’s secretly a closeted furry who gets migraines

At that thought, Melody giggled quietly, prompting Aunt Natasha to look up from her book and narrow her eyes at her.

“What are doing?” She asked, because apparently sitting on the couch, scribbling onto a piece of scrap paper, and chuckling to yourself is a cause for alarm.
At least, in her house it was.

Melody turned the laughter into a cough and tried to angle the list away from her line of sight. “Nothing, nothing. Thought of a meme”.

*Great cover story, idiot.*

Aunt Natasha still didn’t look completely satisfied, but she went back to reading, and she went back to writing. They both left it alone.

Brian would probably flay her alive if he found out she was trying to narrow down what his abilities might be, but she was about 90% sure she could effectively shield herself from attack.

*Giant dog, she thought. Hah!*
Chapter 7

A week passed. Melody and her father still didn’t speak to each other.

Even Pepper tried to convince them, but nothing was working. Her mom spent those seven days acting as the mediator until she gave up.

Meanwhile, while the Avengers were off doing classified missions, she and the others were off trying to make headway on their own team.

“Do you think we’ll get codenames?” Aiden asked, a bit of excitement spilling over into his tone. “What about a name? Or a cheer?”

Tem looked up from her phone. “Ah, yes, that’s exactly what we need”, she said, blandly. “A team cheer to boost morale in the throes of battle”.

Brian, who was looking much better recently (less growly and irritable), frowned. “Never say that again”.

Jace was too busy having a crisis over going to Asgard to put in his own two cents.

Between the attempted bank robbery, the SHIELD’s Avengers crisis, and now forming a vigilante group, Melody was astonished he’d made room to worry about it.

“It’s just your family”, Jessie tried to comfort him to no avail (she’d agreed to come with, just as the brunette said she would. Uncle Steve had been hesitant, but he’d allowed it).

Jace snorted; his head buried in his arms. “Yeah. My godly family. I’m the heir to the throne, you realize that right? Behind my dad?”

The blonde pat him on the back and sent a look to Melody that said, *help me out here.*

Melody smirked over the screen of her laptop and did nothing of the sort.
Jessie exhaled, her forehead creasing in annoyance at the refusal. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. You don’t have to become king. Uncle Thor won’t force you. There’s no obligation here”.

“Yes, there is”, his voice went a few octaves too high, “There’s so much obligation”.

Melody hummed at that and eyed an ancient shoe box with trepidation.

As it’d turned out, her room was the only place they could successfully disable FRIDAY in, so the AI couldn’t tell on them. They settled with sitting in the walk-in closet, though, to avoid being walked in on. It was cramped and degrading, but at least secretive.

“I find it hilarious that you’re only freaking out about it now”, she said; glancing over at her phone when it started to play X Gon’ Give It to Ya.

Melody picked it up and hit answer, pinning it between her shoulder and ear and continuing to type (she was trying to Google how to sew, but that was beside the point).

“Hey, bitch”, Noah said cheerfully. “You’re not being bugged, are you?”

She huffed into the receiver. “Nah, we’re in the one place FRIDAY can no longer monitor 24/7, otherwise known as my closet”.

“Aren’t you all straight?”

“Haha, very funny. I swing all ways, thank you very much. I’m guessing since you asked you have news on the stuff? Hey, do I sound like James Bond?”

There was a scuffling sound on the other end, like someone was wrestling Noah for the phone, until she spoke again. This time she seemed a little winded.

“Yeah”, she said. “The stuff is here. And no, you don’t sound like James Bond. If you did it would give me nightmares. When can you come pick the crap up? Alex can’t keep it stashed under her
bed forever, like we do with Wanda’s dog”.

“Wanda has a dog?”

“When around my parents, no, she does not. Are you on your way?”

Melody glanced at the others, who appeared indifferent.

Aiden still looked distressed about the team cheer, Tem still looked like she thought he was an idiot, Brian still looked bored and upset, Jace was still having a crisis, and Jessie was still trying to comfort him. And Melody herself still needed a crash course on the art of sewing.

“I can send Penny”, she said, finally. “You all like Penny”.

Breathy laughter came from the speaker, and then a yelp, like Noah had pushed someone out of her general space bubble. “Yeah. We like Penny. Wanda especially”.

“Good, because I can’t come get it myself at the moment. I’m busy”.

“Doing what?” Noah sounded so surprised that Melody wanted to be offended, but it wasn’t like she got out much.

“I’m learning how to sew”, she grumbled, “And thanks for the help”.

“No problem. I’m still salty we weren’t invited to your birthday party though”.

“Noah!”

POV CHANGE- Penny

Penelope Ashlee Park didn’t know how she kept getting roped into these situations.
“I am a good, upstanding citizen”, she muttered, dodging another pedestrian and pulling her coat tighter around herself. “I have done nothing to deserve this”.

A random businessman looked at her funny, probably because she was talking aloud, and her face flushed.

Penny sped up and breathed a sigh of relief when she finally reached Uncle Wade’s apartment building- a huge, slightly sad brick structure that had definitely seen better days.

As dilapidated and in need of remodeling as it was, it felt like a second home to her.

Penny and Wanda had met here when they were little, and much to Peter’s chagrin (and Wade’s delight), the two had become fast friends.

Penny glanced around for witnesses before circling to the fire escape and ascending; trying not to step on anyone’s potted plants or window gardens.

Ever since she’d gotten big enough to come without an adult, she hadn’t used the door. Her mom didn’t know about it, and neither did Peter, but at least she wasn’t in danger of falling when her hands could stick to most surfaces (they didn’t know about that, either).

Wanda was already waiting, and she pushed open the window at the top.

The brunette slid through with a thud and an, “Oof!”

Her room looked messier than ever, with clothes strewn all over the shag carpet, dog toys and supplies shoved haphazardly under the bed, and 80s movie posters on the walls where the paint was peeling (which was everywhere).

“Hey, Spider Queen”, Wanda said cheerfully. She was wearing an ancient pair of Hello Kitty pajamas, and her wavy hair was tucked underneath a bright red bandana.
Penny huffed and brushed herself off; accepting a hand to pull her to her feet.

“Hey”, she replied, ruefully. “And don’t call me Spider Queen. The jokes I receive from everybody else are bad enough”.

“You mean their arachnopuns?”

“Oh my god”.

Before Wanda could respond with yet another quip, Noah stuck her head into her sister’s room with an unimpressed look on her face.

“Are you done?” She asked, in an equally unimpressed tone. “Mom and Dad just left so you have a little time to get the stuff, before you go”.

Penny nodded and shifted her weight from one foot to the other; frowning. “Why do we keep calling it stuff? It’s just material. That I don’t want to know the source of”.

Wanda slung an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “No”, she agreed, “No you don’t”.

“Is that Park!?” Alex’s voice came from the living room, diverting the three’s attention. She sounded gleeful. “Cable wants to say hi!”

Cable was Wanda’s one-year-old pit-bull, who was named after Uncle Wade’s friend (and former lover? No one was quite sure).

The dog had a tan and white coat and big personality, one that reminded Penny of its owner. Unfortunately, it also had a bad habit of jumping on people.

She’d been with Wanda when they’d found Cable as a puppy, writhing around in a trash bag behind a dumpster near a fast food place. They never would’ve found the poor abandoned creature if it hadn’t been whimpering so loudly.
“I still don’t approve of keeping him under your bed behind your parents’ backs”, Penny said, still following the two into the living room. She gave Cable a few pats on the head and laughed when Alex tried to wrestle the animal onto the couch.

She sat down next to the blonde and held out her hands expectantly, doing her best imitation of a James Bond voice.

“Give me the package”, she declared.

Wanda snorted and disappeared into Alex’s room for a minute, before returning with a heavy-looking metal crate. It looked like it weighed at least a hundred pounds.

“I’m going to drop this”, she warned with a huff, and Noah dashed over to help (literally dashed. Her biological mother’s superpower had been superspeed).

The container ended up on the floor in front of Penny’s feet. They had to push the coffee table out of the way to make room; careful of the stacks of magazines on it.

Wanda plopped down on Penny’s left and rubbed her hands together, deviously. “The stuff in here is great, if I do say so myself”.

“And you do say so”, Noah agreed dryly, pulling out black leather and turning over the fabric in her hands. “This is nuts, though. I’m not too proud”.

Alex looked like she was resisting the urge to say, yes you are.

Penny snickered at her painfully conflicted expression, and started digging as well, finding all sorts of things from metal plates to Kevlar.

“The day I die will be the day someone puts Aiden in spandex”, Wanda said, upon seeing a bright red cloth. She removed it from the bin and pretended to hold it up to her friend’s frame. “This would look great on you though, ‘Pen”.

Penny shot her a glare and took it, stretching it in her hands. It was surprisingly flexible, and when
she tried to rip it in half it didn’t so much as stretch.

Noah arched an eyebrow, impressed. “Super spandex”.

Wanda plucked it from her grasp and set it off to the side. “Yeah, okay. I’m keeping that”.

“You’re not even going to be a vigilante!”

“No, but it’s not like the six of them are going to use everything in here. I’d go for the red leather kinda jazz anyway, you know? With some black padding”.

Alex snorted. “So, like Dad’s suit?”

“Yeah- like Dad’s suit! Why, what would you wear?”

The youngest of the family bristled at the way Wanda sounded. “I’d go with something simple, like a bulletproof vest. Maybe a tank top and some pants. Definitely some heavy-duty combat boots. Nothing fancy”.

“Boring”, Noah declared, and cackled when Alex tried to set Cable after her.

Penny ignored them in favor of the magic red spandex, which was still balled up in its dejected pile.

For a second, she considered making her own outfit, and her own name, and imagined swinging from skyscrapers on the webbing that sometimes came out of her wrists.

(Her mom didn’t know about that. Peter didn’t know, and he was the closest thing she had to a father. She never found the way to tell them).

Maybe I could…
“Earth to Penny”, a hand waved in front of her face, and Wanda appeared in her line of vision. “Yo. How are you going to get all of this into the Compound?”

Penny snapped out of her daydream and cringed. “I have no idea”.

I can’t believe you almost went there.

Still, even as she argued with the Wilsons about the best way to smuggle supplies past FRIDAY, her brain filed away the idea for later.

POV CHANGE- Jessie

“Are you sure you’re okay with coming?”

“Yes”. Jessie stuffed a sweater into the duffel she was taking to Asgard, rolling her eyes. Maybe the overwhelmed feeling really did show on her face, and she wasn’t that good at controlling her emotions. “I’ve said it a million times. It’s fine. I’ve never been anywhere but here, so I’m actually kind of excited”.

“But are you sure?”

“Jace”.

The demigod finally deflated, looking down at his own bag of clothes for the next week or so. “Sorry”, he muttered; arms crossed defensively over his chest. “I’m just nervous. What if I disappoint my dad somehow?”

Jessie sighed and tried for a reassuring smile. “You won’t disappoint your dad. No matter what, you could never make Uncle Thor think less of you”.

Jace snorted. “Are you sure about that?”

“Absolutely”, she said confidently, and felt a bit of pride swell in her chest when some of the
tension went out of his shoulders. “Besides, if you ever need to freak out by yourself, I’ll fake the stomach flu, so you can escape for a few minutes”.

That time a smile tugged on Jace’s lips. “You always think of everything, Jess”.

Jessie grinned more genuinely that time as she zipped the duffel bag shut and slung it over her shoulder. It was light as a feather (thank genetics for super soldier strength).

They were both already dressed for the trip, they were just waiting for Uncle Thor to arrive, so they could use the Bifrost.

“So”, Jace seemed to be trying to angle the conversation away from his fear of the godly part of his family. “Have you ever traveled by Bifrost before?”

“How about you?”

“Uh…when I was seven. I haven’t used it since though, and I threw up afterwards, so…” He looked positively horrified at the prospect of blowing chunks in front of Heimdall, who could supposedly see everything in the whole world.

Jessie struggled not to laugh at the face he was making. “Look at it this way, Jace. If Heimdall can see everything than he most definitely saw when you had that really bad food poisoning a long time ago. If he’s already seen you at your worst, then you have nothing to be ashamed of!”

“But children of Thor don’t throw up after a trip through the Bifrost!”

“How would you know? You’re the only child of Thor!”

Jace sighed, but didn’t argue, possibly because had no counterattack. “You know, you sucked at comforting me a couple of hours ago”.

Jessie pat his shoulder and yelped when he tried to swat at her hand.
“What can I say?” She said, as she dodged the strike, “I needed some time to warm up before I could go launching positivity like a cannon”.

“Pfft”.

Jace was thankfully calm for the rest of the wait for Uncle Thor, and after he returned there was another thirty minutes of catching the god of thunder up on what’d happened while he was away. Then there were more goodbyes.

She hugged her mother and father goodbye a little too tightly, and even Izzy, who whispered something in Russian that was only half understood.

When Uncle Thor shouted, “Heimdall, open the Bifrost!” Jessie felt as ready as she’d ever be.

She threw up.
POV CHANGE- Jace

It wasn’t that Jace didn’t love the godly part of his family. If anything, the fault could be placed on his father for not taking him to visit in so long.

He just wasn’t sure what to do. Jace had been freaking about it for at least a month in advance, but after the attempted bank robbery and everything with Melody and her plan, it’d taken a backseat.

Until now.

Jessie’s presence helped, although Jace still felt guilty she’d come along out of politeness. She was clearly uncomfortable despite the Asgardians treating her with respect.

(He may or may not have still laughed after the Bifrost).

“It’s been three days”, Jessie attempted to reason, leaning against the huge fancy doorway that led to Jace’s room. “How are you panicking again?”

He felt like glaring at her, but didn’t have the energy to. The night before, Uncle Volstagg had challenged him to an arm-wrestling match, and he’d definitely pulled something.

The satisfaction of watching Jessie beat him a second later was bittersweet.

“I’m not panicking”, Jace snapped; staring at the too-high ceilings and trying to get a hold on his breathing. “I’m tired”.

Well. At least that was partially true.

Jessie scoffed and took a few steps into the chamber. She was wearing the dark gold dress and sandals she’d been given upon their arrival to Asgard, and she looked oddly nice.
“Pretty, Jace’s mind supplied.

“There’s no way you’re tired, you crashed hard last night”, her voice interrupted his inner monologue. “Don’t you remember anything from when you were here the first time, about how to interact with gods?”

“I was seven”, he protested, indignantly.

Of course, he did remember some things, just not enough to give him a basis on how to act correctly. He remembered wandering away from Thor and exploring the palace (he’d been yelled at after being found, by both his father and mother. There was always an itch to that memory though, like he was forgetting a key detail).

Jessie rolled her eyes. “So? Come on, it’s breakfast”.

Jace grimaced but followed her out anyway, trying not to look like he was chafing in his own Asgardian garments. He felt like a fish out of water.

“Are you sure you’re not panicking?” She whispered out of the corner of her mouth, on the way down the hall.

He scowled. “It’s not just panic, Jess!”

“Then what is it?”

In truth, he didn’t know. There’d been an unfamiliar buzz in his veins for days; a feeling that wasn’t anxiety but made him jittery all the same. It was like something was missing, and that something was so close he could sense it.

Jace dragged his hand over his face and sighed. “I can’t explain it”, he admitted, and this time Jessie’s frown was more concerned, but they reached the dining hall before she could get an elaboration.
Everyone else was already at the table.

There were Thor and Odin upfront with Lady Sif (who was one of his most terrifying aunts, tied with Natasha), and the Warriors Three (Fandral, Hogun, and Volstagg).

Jace was already sweating. Great.

They went to go sit, but no one had noticed them yet, and Jace’s grandfather was in the middle of speaking.

“He is not ready”, Odin argued, “Have you even taught the boy to fight?”

Thor looked angry and exasperated, like they’d had this conversation before and it was getting old. “Of course, I taught him to fight. He is proficient with a sword”.

“He will likely have a Midgardian lifespan”.

“Is that a problem, Father?”

Odin opened his mouth- probably to say yes, it was a problem -when he finally noticed Jace and Jessie hovering uncertainly.

He straightened, a cool expression sliding over the frustrated one that had dominated his features seconds ago. “What are you doing?”

Jace ushered Jessie forward and they sat quickly, trying not to make eye-contact with any of the adults (he could feel Odin’s piercing gaze on him, and he resisted the urge to hide under the table or possibly snap at the king).

Thor seemed happier at the sight of his son, and Jace accepted the food he was offered with a grateful smile. Jessie had already begun to eat, likely to ward off conversation.

*Smart girl.*
Volstagg grinned and leaned over to pound him on the back. “We’ll have to take him hunting for bilgesnipes, won’t we Thor?”

Jace sighed in relief when his uncle finally pulled away, and his father smiled back, albeit with less vigor and enthusiasm. Before Thor could reply (and otherwise seal his fate), a guard burst into the room with their sword drawn.

“Intruders!” They shouted urgently. “At the front of the palace!”

The adults leapt to their feet and grabbed for their weapons immediately, but Fandrall was the only one who spoke.

“How many?” He asked. “What did they come for?”

The guard shook their head. “At least ten. They’ve come for the heir”.

Jace choked. Thankfully no one stared at him when he did so, since it was very unbecoming.

Jessie looked alarmed. “But why?” She demanded, the question muffled by the food in her mouth. None of the gods looked impressed by her etiquette, and her cheeks colored with embarrassment before she swallowed.

Thor looked to them with a sigh. “There are some fanatics, who believe a full-blooded Asgardian should ascend, instead of a demigod. I didn’t think they would be so bold. Jace, I want you to take Jessie and barricade yourselves in your quarters. Do not come out until one of us comes to get you”.

Odin arched an eyebrow. “I thought you said he could fight?”

“They are children, still”, Thor sounded so cold the air itself seemed to develop a chill. “I will not expose them to battle yet”. He turned back to them and said, “Go. Now”.

Jace grabbed Jessie by the wrist and bolted.
“Do you know where you’re going?” Jessie asked, tight-lipped with repressed panic.

He cursed, in both Norse and English. “It’s been nine years- I must’ve made a wrong turn somewhere. I have no idea where we are”.

Her expression was anything but reassuring. “What do we do?”

“I don’t know”. The buzzing feeling was stronger than ever, and it made it harder to concentrate, not that he could discern whether it was him just freaking out or not.

“Where is the little Midgardian?”

“He’s here somewhere, be patient. The prince is probably protecting him”.

“No, the distraction at the front is where they’ll be. The weakling is alone”.

They froze. Jessie fisted her hand in the back of his shirt, eyes wide.

There were voices coming from down the hall- the fanatics, if their words were anything to go by, and they were coming this way.

Jessie reached for the closest set of doors (two enormous ones) and pulled with all her might. “We have to hide!” She hissed, trembling with either fear or adrenaline.

He reached over to yank on the doors himself and they gave way almost instantly, allowing the teens to tumble inside, before shutting unprompted behind them.

Jace took in their hiding place, which was definitely not anyone’s bedroom.
“Is this…?” Jessie trailed off, evidently shocked.

“The armory”, he agreed.

She recovered quickly and began to tear a round shield down from its place on the wall, blowing a strand of hair out of her face. “Grab a sword!”

Jace didn’t need to be told twice, and his eyes fell on a weapon at the back.

It was the same blade he’d seen when he was seven- Thor had asked him time and time again how he’d gotten into a place that was locked at all times, but he’d had no reply.

The doors had simply opened for him, the same way they’d done seconds ago.

The sword was the length of his forearm now (the length of his entire arm when he was a kid), and it was completely solid gold and razor sharp. The same color as Jessie’s dress.

It floated over a stone pedestal, and Jace was wrapping his hand around the hilt and pulling it free before he could register the motion.

The buzzing electrified for a painful second. His fingers burned, and went numb.

“Ow”, he heard himself say, sounding more surprised than hurt. It was only then that it occurred to him that picking up a mysterious sword may not have been a good idea.

“Jace?” Jessie cut through the haze, fear coloring her tone. “Are you- are you glowing?”

He faced her and frowned. If he’d been giving off any light he hadn’t been aware of it, and the electricity had dulled to a low hum. “I- I am?”

“Y-You-” Before she could respond the doors burst open again. This time the sound was loud enough for it to be mistaken for Thor’s thunder.
It was obviously a forced entry, and there stood three bearded Asgardians in leather armor; armed to the teeth with swords and axes.

The one upfront grinned, and Jace was horribly reminded of the drug lord back at the bank (except this time there was no Melody to shield-throw him through a window).

“Well, well, well”, his voice was a rumble in his chest, “I think we’ve found our prey, haven’t we? What do you think, Asif? Aegir? Do you want the boy or the girl?”

Jessie gritted her teeth and planted her feet firmly on the ground, and in all of Jace’s life he’d never seen her look quite so angry.

Briefly, he wondered if she was going to bend a sword over her knee like she’d done with that baseball bat.

“Neither”, she snarled, and threw her Viking shield like it was an oversized frisbee. It bounced off of Asif’s (?) helmet, producing a loud metal clang.

The Asgardian dropped, and Jessie held out her hand, but the shield only clattered to the uselessly to the floor next to its victim.

“Oh”, she said, weakly. “I thought it would come back”.

There was moment of awkward silence. No one seemed sure how to proceed.

Finally, the leader raised his weapon with a cry of, “Attack!”

The sword in his hand thrummed and Jace lurched forward before he could make the decision to move. It was like the object was pulling him along as it sang through the air and intercepted a blow meant for Jessie’s face.

The blonde scrambled for her shield out of the corner of his eye; grappling with Aegir(?) in the
process, and Jace dodged when his opponent tried to swipe his legs out from under him.

“Little one’s got more fire in him than I thought!” He huffed, feinting and attempting to get at his unprotected side.

Jace backed up further and twirled the sword in his hand, jumping out of the way once more and slamming the flat of the blade against the back of his knee. There was no armor there, and it would’ve been all too easy to slice open a tendon.

The Asgardian buckled, and he took the opportunity to plant the hilt into the side of his face. He collapsed and didn’t get back up.

Jessie, meanwhile, had gotten her shield back. She brought it down on Aegir(?) and soon he joined the other two in the land of unconsciousness.

She was practically gaping at him. “That- that sword is-”

“Um”, Jace glanced down, wondering if he should put it back like nothing had ever happened. “Right. I should...I should return this”.

He pivoted on his heel to hurriedly replace it, when the blade shimmered and began to spark. It happened so suddenly he didn’t have time to drop it, and Jessie’s cry of alarm got lost in the ringing in his ears; until the light died just as quickly.

In the place of the sword there was a leather bracelet; with a smooth gold charm hanging from it. There was a Norse symbol carved into the rock- it looked like two triangles joined to make a B shape:  .

Jessie gave the incapacitated foes one more nervous glance, before venturing to peer over his shoulder. “What is that?” She asked, shakily.

He gulped. “Um- it’s called Berkanan. It means birch, or stuff like that. I don’t know why it would be on this, though. What does it mean?”
“Hell if I-”

Before Jace could be even remotely surprised at her rare cursing, a yell interrupted their conversation, and Thor and the others burst into the armory.

Jessie practically lurched away, and he hid the bracelet behind his back instinctively as his father pulled him into a bone-crushing hug.

“By the Nine Realms”, he said, after withdrawing, “What are you doing in here? The fight in the front was a diversion-”

“Yeah”, Jace agreed, trying to sound braver than he felt. Post-battle adrenaline was starting to kick in, and he was tired. “We kind of already know. It was my fault- I took a wrong turn, and we heard them coming-”

“Thor”, Odin cut through the exclamation like it was paper. The king pushed past them (if he was at all relieved they were alright he didn’t show it), and stopped in front of the empty pedestal that Jace had taken the sword from. “Sumarbrander is missing!”

Thor’s brows furrowed. “What? How?” He looked back to Jace, putting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing too tightly. “Did you see what happened?”

He opened his mouth to respond without being entirely sure of what he was going to say.

_Gee, dad, I just picked up this dangerous looking blade after the armory doors opened by themselves, and look it turns into this cool accessory!

Oh no. He was so screwed, on so many levels.

Just then, Jessie came to his rescue. “No”, she said. “It was gone when we got here- we heard their voices while we were trying to find a place to hide, after we got lost. We knew they were probably trying to steal something important, so we came in-”

Thor looked both worried and troubled by something else, something different.
“That was reckless, Jessie. You’re lucky neither of you were hurt. Father, perhaps the sword is on one of the fanatics we caught?”

Odin grimaced. “Besides these three, the others are dead, and it is no small feat concealing a sword of that size. Fandrall?”

Fandrall, who had just finished rooting through the pockets of the men, looked up and shook his head. “Not here”, he said, grimly. “Frey’s sword is gone”.

Frey?

“Quick question”, Jace shoved a few (normal) shirts into his luggage; feeling the strange weight of the bracelet around his wrist. “Why did you tell them we didn’t know what happened to it when we clearly know what happened to it?”

Jessie made a face (she was already done getting ready to leave. After the attempted assassination, the trip had been cut short, and Jace couldn’t say he was disappointed).

“Look”, she said, “This is going to sound Melody-levels of crazy, but…you looked like you were meant to wield that thing. You were honest-to-god glowing”.

Jace tried not to look at her as he crammed a few more things into his bag.

“So, the solution is to just pretend I don’t have it, on a gut feeling? That really is Melody-levels of crazy”.

“Well, how did it feel? To use it, I mean”.

He blinked, momentarily caught off guard. “It…I dunno, it felt powerful, I guess. The buzzing feeling, I was experiencing when we came here hasn’t come back since that fight, so…do you think it was the sword calling me? I know I said I couldn’t describe it before all of the shit went down, but in truth I thought you would think I was nuts”.

Jessie twirled an imaginary mustache and hummed thoughtfully.

“Maybe. It sounds like every cliché film ever, but maybe. We’ll have to ask Mel when we get back”.

“Are we taking it with us?”

“Did you think we were going to sneak it back right before we left? I know it’s not my style to pull something like this, but you need a weapon, don’t you?”

Jace felt like pointing out she needed one and didn’t exactly have one either, but restrained himself. “If my Dad finds out about it he’ll be pissed beyond belief”.

Jessie groaned. “Which is why we don’t tell him”.

“What if Heimdall sees?”

“Technically speaking, that means Heimdall knows what Mel’s planning on Earth. Has he ratted us out yet? No. Therefore, I think we’re in the clear”.

Jace wasn’t so convinced, but he ran his fingers over the leather strap, and felt the abnormal warmth radiating from the ordinary looking trinket.

Even when it’d been controlling his movements, the sword had felt like an extension of himself-easy to manipulate how he saw fit.

Perhaps Jessie was onto something, here.

“Yeah”, he said finally, and continued loading his stuff. “Clear, alright”.

A tiny pinprick traveled up his arm from where the bracelet was; like the sword could understand
what they were saying.
POV CHANGE- Khari

“I’m telling you”, Joven’s voice buzzed as the connection momentarily shorted out. His image blurred and sharpened; his acne-ridden face much too close to the computer screen. Khari could see the other boy’s pores. “This shit is crazy”.

The prince of Wakanda snorted, shifting his laptop onto his other thigh. “So you’ve told me, multiple times already”, he agreed. “What has Melody done now?”

“Oh, nothing specific. Jace and Jessie got back from Asgard early and the first thing she did when they came home was throw herself at them dramatically”.

Khari snorted and spared a glance at his bedroom door, to make sure no one was coming. When he heard no footsteps, he turned back to the vidcall. “That does sound like Mel. Why did Jace and Jessie come back early?”

Joven’s face drooped. He brushed his curls off his forehead and swallowed nervously; eyes darting around the room. “The palace was, um…attacked”.

“Attacked?”

“Yeah. Apparently godly extremists are a thing, and they don’t want our good buddy ascending to the throne. Luckily, no one was hurt, and Thor took them home afterwards because he figured it would be too dangerous to stay there any longer”.

Khari frowned. He’d been through his own fair share of danger, being the heir to a throne himself, but the news was nevertheless disturbing. “I suppose that did not improve Jace’s opinion of his father’s home world?”

Joven huffed. “Not one bit. But…” he hesitated. “Something else happened, too. Is this a secure line?”
Khari made a face. Of course, all of the technology he and his family used was secure, but the question itself was suspicious. “Yes, it is. Why?”

Joven got somehow closer to the camera, until all he could see was his eyebrow. “They brought back a sword”, he said, in a hushed tone. “It turns into a bracelet- Jace wears it around his wrist, and it won’t transform for anyone but him. Man, you should see him fight with it. It’s both the scariest and coolest thing ever”.

“He stole an Asgardian weapon!?!”

“NO!” Joven (thankfully) backed away, eyes wide. “Apparently, during the whole extremist attack, Jace and Jessie got lost on the way to their rooms and hid in the armory. The doors just opened for them, and he said the sword called to him. It moved by itself!”

Khari could hardly understand what he was hearing. “It moved. By itself?”

The brunette nodded vigorously; lips pressed into a thin line. “We don’t know what it means, not even Melody does. But, on the bright side, apparently, he has a weapon now for their big plan. I have no idea what he was planning on using before”.

Khari hummed. He knew all about Mel’s crusade to try and create her own Avengers team in an attempt to prove her father wrong. Personally, he thought a plan like that could only end in disaster, but it was still intriguing. He and his twin sister had agreed not to tell anyone about their little secret.

“Well, there’s that”, Khari acquiesced, dryly. “I must go, soon. I told A’yana I would spar with her, before the flight, and if I don’t she will exact her bloody vengeance”.

Joven snickered. “Only you would be afraid of A’yana”.

“Everyone is afraid of A’yana. It is a very healthy fear”.

“True, true. At least we’ll be able to talk in person tomorrow night”.
He grinned and nodded. He and his family (King T’Challa and Queen Nakia) were going to New York to stay at the Compound for a couple of weeks. He and his sister had managed to convince their parents to leave them there longer, with the accompaniment of a few guards from the Dora Milaje.

“At least we have that”, Khari sighed. “I’ll talk to you, tomorrow”.

“You’re aware I’m going to text you while you’re on the jet, right?”

His smile widened. “Yes, Joven. I’m well aware”.

They ended the call and Khari dragged a hand over his face, closing the laptop lid and shoving it off his lap. His bags were already packed, and he slipped the computer into its bag before slinking out of his room.

He found A’yana hanging out on the balcony where they usually came to spar. She smirked; brown curls piled on top of her head and eyes gleaming.

“Done talking to your boyfriend?” She asked, playfully.

Khari rolled his eyes and got into a fighting stance. “Joven is straight. I’m aromantic and asexual. I have no interest in dating”.

“I kid, I kid”. A’yana matched his position. “Your form is sloppy”.

“Not as sloppy as yours”.

“How rude”.

He chuckled. They both were being taught to fight in preparation to take their father’s place as the next Black Panther, and they always argued over who was better.

A’yana made the first move this time, and they continued to banter back and forth.
“So”, she said, “I was thinking of smuggling along a little gift for Jessie”.

“Oh?” Khari dodged a kick to the head, amusement coloring his tone. “What kind of ‘little gift’ are we talking about?”

“She needs a weapon of her own, if they’re planning on backing up their parents- I know I have more faith than you do, by the way”.

“I’m listening”. He kicked at her waist and she flipped over his head, landing slightly unsteadily on her feet. He whirled to face her.

A’yana’s expression twisted like she was expecting him to be angry. “I’ve been keeping in touch with Tem. She told me what happened with the sword, and it gave me an idea”.

“What idea? And why are you looking at me like that?”

“I was thinking Jessie should have a shield”.

Khari froze; stalling long enough for her to tackle him to the ground and pin him (a move that definitely had not been taught by their tutor).

He was too stunned to be angry about the defeat. “You want to give her vibranium?”

A’yana laughed. “Of course, not! Just an alloy Aunt Shuri’s been working on- not as powerful as Steve’s, but effective. I’ve already found a suitable one, so it’s a bit late to stop me”.

Khari pushed her off and sat up, brushing off his shirt and sending her a glare. “I could always make you put it back”.

“You could try. It wouldn’t work”.
“It’s a terrible idea”.

“I think it’s a great idea. Not a terrible one, at best. Jessie would be good with something like that, you can’t deny it”.

Khari made a displeased sound in the back of his throat, and he climbed to his feet. “I’m not denying anything. Why are you telling me this?”

A’yana, who made no move to stand, flopped back down and stared up at the cloudy sky above them. “I trust you not to tell”. A pause. “Are you going to tell?”

Khari considered it for a minute. Vaguely, he wondered how she’d even gotten ahold of the alloy, but then again A’yana had a talent for sneaking around unnoticed.

“No”, he decided finally, noting the way her shoulders relaxed. “I will not tell”.

There was a moment of silence, and he held out a hand to help her up, which she accepted.

“I still think it’s stupid, though”.

“I can pull rank on you, little brother”.

“You’re four minutes older than me!”

When they arrived at the Compound the next afternoon, the alloy safely hidden, they were met with hugs and cheerful greetings.

Joven and Khari did what Melody liked to call a “bro hug”, much to their chagrin when she called them out on it. A’yana and Tem exchanged an embrace followed by a high five.

As their parents left to talk superhero-ing (Khari had been told about Melody and her father’s fight,
of course, but seeing the tension was different), the many teenagers gathered in Mel’s closet. He still wasn’t sure why it was the only place that wasn’t actively monitored by FRIDAY that was big enough for everyone.

The evidence of hard work was all over the place. There was a trashcan stuffed haphazardly underneath some boxes; filled with discarded pieces of Kevlar and leather, and bits of metal were scattered about the floor. It seemed she’d moved more than half of her workshop up to their secret “hideout”.

“I’m almost finished with our outfits”, the brunette said, a mug of what Khari suspected was coffee in her hands. She looked like she hadn’t slept in days.

“Will they offer adequate protection?” A’yana asked curiously, one eyebrow quirked. Her body was tense with nervous energy, the present for Jessie in a bag over her shoulder.

Her brother didn’t know how she’d managed to smuggle it so successfully. It was just as infuriating as it was impressive.

Melody sniffed. “Of course, it will. How dare you insult my craftsmanship”.

“You knitted me a sweater for Christmas once, and it fell apart when I put it on”, Jace deadpanned (he looked remarkably well for someone who had recently experienced the brunt of an assassination attempt. Khari could see his new bracelet/sword shimmering on his hand, and he eyed it with no small amount of wonder).

Mel squawked indignantly. “I made that with love!”

“Uh huh”. He sounded less than convinced. “When can we see the suits?”

“Oh, soon, soon. First, we need to figure out a weapon for Miss America, over there”.

Khari swallowed as A’yana cleared her throat and stood, zipping her bag open.

“I believe I can help with that”, she said, presenting the stolen alloy with a flourish.
Instantly, Melody made a screeching sound, like a metal detector or an over enthused toddler. She snatched up the precious metal and started examining it; making soft cooing sounds like it was a baby.

*It’s hard to believe she’s a genius.*

Jessie looked physically ill. “Is that *vibranium*?”

“Not *exactly*, but close”, Khari sighed reluctantly. “It’s for a shield”.

“YES!” Melody pumped her fist in the air. “This is the best day ever!”

“A-Are you sure?” The blonde was now quivering like a leaf in between two racks of coats that’d never been worn. “This…this is a pretty big responsibility”.

Penny nodded sagely in between Wanda and Noah (Alex and Ruby had not been allowed to come, much to their protests, but Izzy had managed to convince them not to put up too much of a fuss. They would be further integrated into the loop after things were better put together. Meaning, after all the stuff was set up).

“With great power, comes great responsibility”, she agreed, ignoring Wanda’s groan.

“Alright, enough with the Hallmark card sayings”, Brian declared, dragging a hand down his face and massaging his temples. “We’d be moronic to refuse it”.

Out of all the years they’d known each other, that was the most he’d ever spoken.

Jessie looked like she was trying to swallow a marble, or something equally unpleasant. “But…but what if…” she trailed off and ran a panicked hand through her hair.

Khari exhaled, slowly. “Joven has probably told you all my opinion on this matter, but, if you are afraid of misusing such an item I doubt you have anything to be concerned about. There is no one
else I would trust this with”.

He and A’yana were only fifteen, and sometimes he still pondered if they were too old for this. If it felt like it, that meant they were, right?

Jessie’s eyes widened subtly, but gradually her shoulders relaxed. “Okay”, she relented, and then, “Thank you. This is amazing”.

A’yana grinned proudly. “I hope it serves you well”.

Melody hummed and waved a dismissive hand; apparently bored with her friend’s crisis.

“I think there might be too much of it for a simple shield. I could be able to install some… modifications”. She seemed to vibrate with excitement and it made Khari uneasy.

He made eye-contact with Joven across the closet and he mimed a cuckoo symbol.

Jace watched her with the same level of wariness. “What kind of modifications?”

“Oh, you know. Pointy edges. Those are fun”.

“’Pointy edges’?” Tem repeated, skepticism coloring her tone. The redhead was the only one who hadn’t looked stunned to see the vibranium alloy. “Seriously?”

“I dunno”, Riley offered, half-heartedly. “It sounds pretty cool”.

Marya and Christa exchanged a look, and Izzy sighed deeply. “Sure”.

“I’m the actual wielder of the shield”, Jessie said, with a defensive scowl. “Shouldn’t I decide whether or not it has pointy edges?”
“Nope”, Melody popped the “p”, hugging the material to her chest and rocking back and forth. “I’m vetoing everything you say in this situation. Pointy edges are awesome”.

Khari hummed and leaned against the wall as the others started to bicker (at one-point Wanda threatened to chuck a shoebox at Brian, and Penny had to hold her back).

During that time, A’yana shuffled over and curled up next to her twin. She watched the commotion with a wry smirk, and shot him a sideways glance.

“Still think they’re crash and burn?” She asked, bemused.

“Definitely”, he replied dryly. “But it’ll be interesting, I’ll give it that”.
POV Change- Tem

Melody called them into the closet three days after Khari and A’yana’s arrival.

“It feels wrong when you say, ‘to the closest!’”, Brian muttered under his breath. He almost looked like he was pouting, and Tem decided to snort instead of calling him out on it.

“It’s because we’re straight”, she said, dryly.

“I’m not”, Wanda, a Known Pansexual™, interjected, with a wide grin.

The redhead smirked and rolled her eyes. “Especially for Penny”.

Wanda started spluttering and flailing, much to the chagrin of the people sitting near her.

“Hey!” She complained, only to bolt when Penny actually slipped into the room. “’Pen!”

Brian made a face at the unsubtle affection. The middle child of the Wilsons seemed to think she was the stealthiest person in the world when it came to her feelings, but that definitely wasn’t the case.

Judging by Noah’s silent laughter over by the shoes, she agreed.

Gradually, everyone else filed in one by one; some nervous and others not, all at least 90% unsure what Melody had in store for them.

Less than five minutes after the last arrival, the genius burst in pinwheeling her free arm (the other toted a large metal box) and screaming at the top of her lungs.
“I FINISHED THE SUITS, MOTHERFUCKERS!” She declared, loudly, initiating a plethora of cheers and clapping as her extended family celebrated.

Jessie did neither of those things. In fact, she looked a little sick. “Oh, my”.

Tem couldn’t agree more. She couldn’t say she trusted her cousin’s handiwork completely, if only because her fashion sense wasn’t exactly the greatest.

Melody ignored the blonde and set down her large crate, with a satisfied hum.

“Pick your poison, my dear friends”, she said. “Also, guys, wait outside. We have to get changed”.

They filed out obediently to wait in her bedroom.

Tem glanced at the other girls, who all looked marginally nervous, before huffing and marching over to the container.

“If anything is spandex”, she said, crossly, “I’m going to kill you”.

At her back, there was a collective chorus of agreement.

Luckily, as it turned out, Tem’s outfit fit like a glove. There was also no spandex.

It was a bit of a mystery in itself, because she’d never given her, her size for anything. Neither had the others.

The suit reminded her of her mother’s, in the retrospect that it was slim. But it had a turtleneck collar instead of a flared one, and there was no front zipper.

The fabric was leather too, save for the Kevlar padding in the chest, back, and stomach, and Melody had also paired it with gloves and thigh-high thick-soled boots. There was a mask that extended up to her nose and cheekbones, and it seemed to meld to fit her face.
It reminded her of Uncle Bucky’s Winter Soldier mask, but she thought it unwise to say it.

There were twin gun holsters for the ICERs and several sheaths for several knives. The metal buckle on her belt had a purple serpent etched into it.

The whole ensemble was black. Tem appreciated that.

Melody’s outfit was another jumpsuit, with the same leather/Kevlar design, but her boots were more like motorcycle boots and her gloves were fingerless. The front was accented with red, and there was a replica of an arc reactor on her belt.

She had a full-face mask with holes for the eyes, and to be honest it looked as terrifying as it did cool. Tem was rarely intimidated by the brunette, save for her unmatched intellect and destructive capabilities, but she gave off a truly deadly vibe in the suit.

Jessie put on her own outfit, took one look at herself in the mirror that’d been dragged in, and groaned loudly. “Seriously?”

In other words, it looked just like her father’s old one- the suit that Phil Coulson, otherwise known as Uncle Phil, had designed before the Battle of New York.

The battle that brought together the Avengers, in the first place.

Tem laughed with no remorse. “Why? That’s borderline cruel, Mel”.

Melody pulled an expression that said she thought her opinion was superior.

“It’s a stealth thing, mortals”, she corrected, in an equally superior tone. “Steve would never expect you to wear something so gaudy. Therefore, it removes you from the playing field of ‘All Possible Suspects of Who the Vigilante Is’”.

Tem, while she still found it hilarious, understood. For once, Melody’s logic had some truth to it.
“Clever. But where’s her shield?”

“Oh, that’ll be showcased after the boys get changed”.

Her eyes twinkled mischievously. All thoughts on her logic being solid promptly vanished.

About twenty minutes of closet fashion runway later, the boys were finally able to try on their own homemade gear.

Tem took one look at Jace and had to blink spots out of her eyes. “Whoa”.

Thankfully, his traditional Asgardian armor lacked the bright red cape, but it was made out of gold metal. It sparkled like the material of his sword and he looked uncomfortable in it, though she doubted it was heavy or difficult to move around in.

Aiden’s outfit was a sleeveless jumpsuit accented with purple, and unlike hers and Melody’s, it was nearly completely Kevlar. Probably because he was planning on using a bow and arrow. She must’ve thought he would need the extra protection.

There was a chest guard seamlessly built in, as well as two more holsters then Tem, and one knife sheath at the back of his belt. The boots were thick-soled and lace-up, coming almost all the way up to his knees, and he had arm guards and finger tabs on both hands. The mask was a black bandana tied around the lower half of his face, and a pair of goggles with violet-tinted lenses, to cover his eyes.

Tem nodded in approval (Melody preened while Aiden glowered), took one look at Brian, and arched an eyebrow. “What the hell?”

He huffed and pulled what appeared to be a gothic-style trenchcoat tighter around himself, as if he wanted to curl up inside it. From what the redhead could see of his black clothing, it consisted of a bullet proof vest underneath the coat, padded leather pants, and boots. A hood was pulled up over his head along with a mask that went up to his nose and eyes, like hers, and altogether he looked kind of like he belonged in Assassin’s Creed. There were things that looked almost like gauntlets fastened to his forearms; with metal canisters attached and nozzles extending past his wrists.
“That’s hilarious”, Riley deadpanned, over by the closet door. He looked like he was valiantly fighting not to laugh, which meant he had more self-control than Wanda, who was yowling. Penny was trying to quiet her with no success (even she thought it was funny).

“You look amazing”, Noah snickered, wiping away a fake tear.

Melody grinned widely with a mouthful of metaphorical shark teeth. “We don’t really know his powers, or if he has any, so I had to improvise. Which brings us to our next objective: weaponry. Jace has his sword, so I didn’t give him anything- oh, don’t look at me like that. Suffer”.

She gave the demigod a glare and he stuck out his tongue, eliciting Jessie to sigh.

“We’re getting off topic”, she said, tiredly. “You were saying?”

“Ah, yes!” Melody brightened instantly. “Tem, congratulations, you’ve got two standard issue ICERS and no less than ten knives of varying sizes. Also”, she frowned, glancing down at the snake belt buckle, “I don’t think that’s part of my design”.

Tem shrugged. “Call it my own personal touch”.

All that did was earn her a weird look, but she must’ve decided the issue wasn’t worth pushing, because she continued.

“Aiden, you have four ICERS, one knife, and a bow and arrow. You’re lucky I managed to get a scan of Uncle Clint’s stuff or otherwise I would’ve never been able to make something remotely close to a replica. Bow down, ungrateful bastard”.

Aiden didn’t, obviously, but Tem could tell he was excited. If not for the actual vigilantism, than getting his own high-tech bow and arrow.

Melody finally turned to Jessie and rubbed her hands together. “I’ve got your shield, as promised-big round of applause for A’yana and Khari for getting us the materials”.

Penny clapped half-heartedly. A’yana rolled her eyes and Khari exhaled like he had a migraine.
Tem could relate.

“We’ll work on it”. She waved off the botched attempt and hurried over to the second box in the back, that presumably contained all their weapons.

*When did she have time to bring that in?*

Melody hummed to herself as she dug around, before presenting a shield like Uncle Steve’s, except the only thing white was the star. The stripes went red, blue, then red.

Jessie accepted it and held it out awkwardly, squinting at its maker suspiciously. “I don’t see any pointy edges. Should I be concerned?”

Melody chuckled unconvincingly. “Of course, not! There’s a button on the handle- hold it further away and squeeze it”.

Jessie’s eyes narrowed, and she glanced at Tem, who made an indifferent sound.

*Does it look like I know what the fuck to do?*

The blonde gulped and did as requested, only to jump back when a bunch of red and white dagger edges emerged from the rim of the shield, with an audible, *shink*.

Tem uncrossed her arms and resisted the urge to go closer. “Okay, that’s pretty cool, I’m not gonna lie. You could do real damage with that”.

Mel hummed. “Which is why we’re all going to train extensively until we’re sure we won’t kill each other by accident. But it *is* pretty cool, huh?”


“Uh…his might be better demonstrated outdoors”.
Aiden scowled and gestured to their clothes. “Where the hell are we going to go outdoors wearing these?”

“Calm down, ye of little faith”, Melody scoffed. “I know someplace we can go”.

They went to an alley behind Uncle Wade’s apartment building, which in hindsight, was probably not as inconspicuous as Mel thought.

“Great”, Aiden grumbled. “This is so much better. We’re lucky we weren’t caught trying to sneak out, you know”.

Tem elbowed him in the side and grinned (it was fake, but he didn’t need to know that, especially since it was for her peace of mind as well). “You worry too much. I’m just curious as to why Melody brought a fire extinguisher”.

“Yes”, he agreed, “That is precisely why I’m worried”.

The extinguisher-wielding inventor shot them a glare and turned back to her test subject, who was holding the twin nozzles far, far away from his body.

“I don’t trust you”, Brian practically growled, cringing at the mystery weapons. “Please tell me they won’t explode as soon as I turn them on”.

Melody smirked all-knowingly. “If you don’t trust me, then it won’t matter if I tell you they won’t explode”.

“Dammit”.

“Oh, by the way- they won’t explode”.

Brian’s look was one of pure betrayal. He turned to Tem and arched an inquisitive eyebrow; clearly
hoping for her opinion. He looked so confused, it was cute.

Tem responded with a thumbs up and winked. He turned scarlet.

Melody ignored them and jumped up and down slightly, like a kid in a candy store.

“Allright, guys”, she declared, “I need you to stand back. Brian- aim the nozzles towards that trash can, pump your arms, and press the switch”.

Aiden’s nose wrinkled. “That sounds like an elaborate dance move”.

“Will he slide to the left?” Noah asked, dryly.

“Hush”, Tem snapped. “I want to see”.

She motioned for Brian to try and he heaved a long-suffering sigh, before following the genius’ instructions.

The gauntlets made a click sound, and instantly started spewing white-hot flames.

“Holy moly!” Joven shouted in awe, as Penny yelped and scrambled away from the heat. Wanda grabbed her best friend and shielded her from the blaze, with a cry of, “Don’t worry, Spider Queen, I’ll protect you!”

Tem blinked spots out of her eyes and risked a peak at Melody, who was full-on cackling like the mad scientist who had just created a better, newer Frankenstein.

Brian, who may or may not have been screaming over the roaring sound, staggered back.

The steady stream cut off abruptly and Tem watched him pant like he’d run a marathon; pupils blown wide (although it was hard to tell with how dark the irises were).

Melody gestured proudly to the trash can, which was nothing more than a pile of cinders.
“I call them Hellfire Bracelets”, she said, matter-of-factly. “What do you think?”

“Whoa”, Brian said, lamely. His knees were shaking.

Penny weaseled her way out from behind Wanda and tried to look as though she hadn’t almost fainted. “I thought it was…impressive!”

Noah looked less than convinced. “Do you need to sit down, Park?”

“What? Of course, not!”

“Excuse me”, Melody interjected. “Can we get back to my amazing invention?”

Aiden rubbed his temples like he had a migraine. Melody seemed to induce those in him often. “Fire. Why did I have a feeling it would have something to do with fire?”

Tem pretended as though she wasn’t slightly concerned for the archer’s health, and turned back to everyone else. “I think it’s cool. Deadly, but cool”.

“Yeah”, Riley pointed out, tersely. “It’s deadly. How is Brian not going to kill someone while shooting flames at them?”

“Like I said”, Melody explained, patiently. “Practice”.

Jessie, who had yet to comment on anything she’d seen, slung her shield over her back. Tem was amazed she wasn’t worried about accidently being stabbed if the razor-edge feature got turned on by accident.

“Well”, the blonde said, amiably enough. “When does the training start?”
As it turned out, the training did not start that same day.

“I can’t be out of the house too long or dear ol’ Dad gets suspicious”, Melody complained about the reason, as they slipped off their suits and stashed them in various places. The boys had gone first, thankfully, and had already scattered to the four corners of the Earth.

Mel’s tone still betrayed some of the bitterness she felt surrounding their fight. It’d been weeks ago, and they still weren’t talking.

“Maybe you should try making up?” Jessie suggested, hesitantly. Her fingers traced the rim of her new shield with an absentminded quality, like she was still thinking about the responsibility it put on her shoulders. “You can’t be mad forever”.

“Um, excuse you”, Melody’s eyes narrowed, “Yes, I can”.

Tem exhaled as she unsnapped the snake belt buckle from her belt. “Holding a grudge like that isn’t good for a relationship. At the very least, lie through your teeth and say you were wrong”.

“To a Stark? Are you kidding!?”

The redhead face-palmed as the brunette began to rant about her father’s stubborn pride, never mind the fact that she herself had just as much.

Unfortunately, Tem knew what it was like to feel hostile towards a parent. She and her mother weren’t nearly as close as some made them out to be, whether that was because of Natasha’s naturally secretive nature, or the teen’s own disposition regarding the adoption.

*The adoption.*

Tem resisted the urge to cringe at the memory. While Izzy had taken moving to a new place with new people harder than she had, it’d been difficult nonetheless.

*All five of us were taught something,* she thought, sadly, as she slipped off the jumpsuit and pulled a t-shirt over her head.
Irina and Elisabet were taught to disappear. Izabela was taught to obey.

I was taught to adapt.

Tem caught her sister staring at the belt buckle with an unreadable expression. It’d been a gift from their biological father, a long time ago.

Izzy arched a delicate eyebrow (it was obvious that she recognized it), and rubbed at the sleeve of her right hand. The sweatshirt rode up for a second just in time for Tem to catch a glimpse of smooth metal, and her heart squeezed painfully.

We were all taught to kill.

Tem knew when she started thinking about the past, it was hard to stop, but this was ridiculous. Normally she had better self-control.

“I don’t suppose you want to be asked if you’re alright?” Izzy’s voice sounded husky, like she’d been crying, or possibly screaming.

She stood in the bedroom doorway uncomfortably, like she didn’t belong there. The sweatshirt from earlier was gone, revealing the gleaming iron replacing her right arm.

It’s nearly identical to what Bucky’s used to look like, Tem pondered, warily. Except for the star, of course. Funny, since they aren’t related by blood.

Instead of saying any of that out loud, she chose to change the subject. “So, how do you think I look in my outfit?”

Izzy’s lips creased into a frown. “We both know that’s not the problem”.

“I know. I just don’t want to talk about our-”
Her voice caught on the last word. What were they, anyway? *Family?*

“I don’t want to talk about it”, Tem settled, finally.

Izzy nodded, once. “We haven’t talked to the others in a while. Maybe we owe them a call?”

“Maybe”, came the noncommittal reply. She wished neither of them had brought it up.

The last time she and Izzy had talked to Irina, Anastasia, and Elisabet, had been a couple of months ago. The video call had lasted around five hours before Natasha kicked them off, and the last time they’d met in person was when they separated.

*Four years ago.*

Izzy, who was apparently thinking the same, sat down on the end of the mattress and pulled her legs up to her chest.

Tem’s room looked a lot her old one- neatly made bed, white walls, few belongings except for a stray hairbrush and cell phone. The only differences were the abundance of drawers, the adjacent bathroom, and the fact that it was much bigger.

“Sometimes, I think Aunt Natasha and Dad don’t want us to see them”, Izzy said; hovering in apologetic territory, as if she hadn’t wanted to make her suspicions known. “Or, maybe SHIELD doesn’t want us to see them”.

Tem snorted. Out of their adoptive parents and the secret organization, she thought it was more likely that Fury didn’t want them together.

“We *are* dangerous”, she admitted. “I don’t think Mom knows I have the belt buckle”.

“I didn’t know you had it either. Did you swipe it?”
“Before we came here, yes. Call me sentimental but I felt like I needed something familiar in a strange place. I was, after all, a kid at heart”.

Izzy rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t what you’d call ‘familiar’?”

Tem laughed, but it lacked humor. “I can’t carry you around in my pocket”.

The other girl gave a reluctant nod and reached out to trace the viper etched into the face of the belt buckle, which had been sitting by the owner’s knee. She glanced at her sibling for permission before picking it up and turning it over in her hands.

“I remember when you got this”, Izzy said, conversationally. “They used to call you ‘little viper’, because you were the quickest out of all of us”.

Tem hummed and plucked it from her grasp, holding her index finger over one of the tiny snake eyes.

Izzy’s eyes widened, and she jerked, as if to stop her. “The AI-”

“It’s alright”, she interrupted. “FRIDAY won’t tell”.

Without waiting for a reply, Tem pushed the cleverly concealed button, and the belt buckle hissed and extended into a long bow staff.

Izzy eyed the weapon with both recognition and wariness. “I haven’t seen that in a while. Are you thinking of…”

She let the question trail off, but they both knew what hadn’t been said.

“Well”, Tem smiled. “There’s a first time for everything”.
Chapter 11

Their first battle happened less than a week after Melody gave them their suits, and some hadn’t had access to them when it went down.

Tem and Brian weren’t at the Compound with the others, either. They’d gone into the city to grab the group lunch after a grueling training session.

“I think all my armhairs were singed off”, he complained, as they weaved their way through the crowds of NYC. They weren’t terribly far from where the bank robbery had taken place, and the cluster of stores around them looked like they should be condemned.

Tem rolled her eyes. “Yeah, but on the bright side your skin is very smooth”.

Brian huffed indignantly but the redhead saw the corners of his lips quirk up. It gave her a rather pleasing feeling of satisfaction.

The two had been dating for a couple of months now, though becoming a team that could help save the world had taken top priority, and their friends didn’t know. Keeping it under the radar had seemed like a good idea.

Brian slung an arm around her shoulders and gestured with his head to a fast food restaurant, across the street. “Quick bite?”

Tem arched an eyebrow and leaned into the contact a little. “Melody hates Burger King”.

“Yeah, but you don’t hate Burger King, and I don’t hate Burger King”.

“I think they call that a date”. Her heart did a funny thing inside her chest, and Tem sighed inwardly. Liking someone was so…embarrassing, as it was enjoyable.

Brian grinned widely with a mouthful of white teeth. His skin tone was almost the same color, which was unsettling: before the explosion he hadn’t been nearly as pale, or so his family claimed. His black eyes had also been a nice shade of brown.
Tem tried imagining it, and found that she couldn’t. Incorporating all the sharp edges he had now into the alternate Brian gave her a sense of wrong.

“Yeah”, he said, jolting her out of her thoughts, “That’s kinda the point”.

She smiled, banishing what could’ve been to the back of her mind (it beats thinking about the past, a part of her whispered, which was quickly silenced).

“In that case”, Tem hummed. “I would like that”.

They crossed over arm-in-arm, like an old-fashioned cliché. It made Tem’s head spin when she thought about how others mistook them for normal civilians.

It was always times like those when her hands felt…unclean.

“So”, Brian hummed. “Penny for your thoughts? I can tell something’s been bothering you”.

Tem shrugged noncommittally. “It’s just pre-vigilantism nerves”, she replied, lowering her voice slightly in case of any eavesdroppers. “What we’re doing is pretty dangerous. We’re blindly following Melody Stark into the unknown”.

“The natural order of things”, Brian said, dryly. “But I know you, and you never get nervous, or you at least never admit it. What is it, really?”

Tem was beginning to think that she’d grossly underestimated how much she could keep under wraps around her boyfriend.

“Ghosts from the past”, she decided, finally. “Nothing more nothing less”.

“Are you sure?”
She could tell by his tone that he didn’t fully believe her.

That night, Tem would wonder if it’d been because he smelled it on her- whether it was hesitance, the trace of fear, or the underlying resentment.

But then, she had thought nothing of it, and simply elbowed him in the side (a clear sign he was pushing too hard). “I’m sure”, Tem said, as gently as she could manage.

Brian made a face but let it drop. That was the thing: he’d inherited the same nonconfrontational trait as his father, Bruce. It was handy when it came to arguments on whether or not Tem was hiding something, yet in other situations it wasn’t helpful at all.

From what the redhead had been told, Brian’s unwillingness to fight had placed him in a lot of tough spots as a kid.

According to Jessie, it’d gotten his books stolen and his glasses stepped on multiple times, by the kindergarten bullies. According to Aiden and Jace, it made him shy and skittish, like a baby bird who was afraid to fly. According to Melody, Brian had all this pent-up rage because of it, and would snap one day like a rubber band.

Now, the first two, Tem could believe. She’d seen the pictures of preteen Brian and taken note of the glasses, which were normally taped or even cracked. His posture had indicated someone quiet and flighty, like any second he would bolt out of the camera frame to hide.

As for Melody’s theory, Tem didn’t know. She never saw any fracture or fault in his eyes when she looked into them; even now when Brian was suspicious and untrusting of her explanations. There was nothing behind the black irises but worry.

Still. There were occasions when Tem wondered.

During the bank robbery, he’d made noises that were less than human. Sometimes when he was stressed he would pace like a caged animal, and more often than that Tem could mistake him for one because of his defensive and withdrawn behavior.

That was the Brian that Tem remembered from when she was twelve- the first time she’d met him, after a couple of months living with the Avengers.
All Natasha had said was that he was Uncle Bruce’s son, and very sick. Not a lot of people were allowed to see him. Brian had been in quarantine at that point. The cause had been the same radiation that gave Melody her powers, but the adults figured it’d sent her into a six-month coma, and that was that.

Tem had been young. Curious. She’d snuck in to see him, and hadn’t liked what she found.

Brian’s eyes flashed for a second as he held the door for her (they’d finally reached the Burger King). Tem realized he was thinking exactly what she was thinking, and winced.

“Anyway”, she said, aloud, cutting through the tense silence. “I think I’ll get some fries. What about you?”

He was grinning tentatively again when he opened his mouth to reply. “I’ll take-”

**BOOM!**

Instantly, the ground shook. Tem lost her balance and nearly fell, taking Brian with her.

People in the streets started scattering. Most were screaming, while some were filming on their phones. Cars careered wildly as they tried to avoid the debris- some of them almost crashed into other buildings because of it.

The customers in the Burger King were shouting, but Tem wasn’t listening. From what she could see, the explosion had been the cause of a single shot. Possibly a grenade. She couldn’t see any bodies either, and the destroyed structure had looked abandoned when she and Brian passed it, five minutes ago.

“What the hell”, his voice filtered in through her right ear. “What the hell!”?

Tem reached out to latch onto him as another- she could see it now that she was looking; a small handheld grenade -fell from the sky and burst on the roof of a parked Honda.
This time, the blast was close enough to blow out the Burger King’s windows. Tem rolled away from the spray of glass and knocked both her and Brian behind a table.

“If it’s close enough to blow out the windows, it’s close enough to blow us up,” Brian commented as he pulled the fire alarm. “EVERYONE OUT!”

They were sitting ducks in the Burger King. Any second whoever was dropping grenades could lob one at the roof, bringing the whole place down on their heads.

So, the vigilante teenager did the logical thing. She jumped up and pulled the fire alarm.

“EVERYONE OUT!” She screamed. “GO THROUGH THE BACK DOOR!”

Everyone, clearly panicked and looking for someone to listen to, began to follow the instructions. Once Brian realized what Tem was doing he started to direct them towards the exit, while shouting his own orders.

When the last person (the girl at the cash register) scurried through the opening, Tem made to go after when Brian tackled her around the waist abruptly. Before she could react, he’d thrown them both out of the main entrance and onto the sidewalk.

Surprise aside, her head almost smacked against the curb when they landed. The rest of her body exploded with pain and she was going to bruise badly.

“Brian! Why would-”

Tem never finished. He must’ve heard it coming. Or maybe, like he had with the fear, hesitance, and resentment, smelled the attacker above them.
The Burger King blew up, sending shrapnel and smoke up into the air. Tem and Brian crawled away, narrowly avoiding getting burned or impaled.

“This is bad”, he chanted nervously, “This is really, really bad”.

She hissed under her breath and frantically scanned the sky above them, until the source of the chaos was pinpointed- a middle-aged man in a black bodysuit, with grenades in both hands and more hanging from his belt. He was flying.

Tem nearly choked when she realized they were facing an actual supervillain- except, without any of the cool stuff Melody had made them.

“Oh, hell”, she said. “Stand clear! Get out of the way!”

She climbed to her feet and bolted; waving pedestrians further from the madman and trying to herd them out of his path.

*I wish I had my gun.*

Tem glanced at Brian when he joined her, picking up a straggling little girl and shoving her into her mother’s arms.

Grenade Man, as she had mentally dubbed him, raised his arm to drop another, just as a red-streaked shape hurtled out of nowhere and slammed into him.

Tem had to fight to keep her jaw from dropping, and screaming, *Melody!*

Brian looked as stunned as she felt. “I’ll be damned”.

It was indeed Melody Stark, dressed in full superhero gear and grappling with a flying man, who dropped explosives on public areas for kicks.

It must’ve been only five seconds before they started moving again, but in those five seconds the
brunette looked downright amazing—whenever he tried to drop another grenade, a barrier of red energy would surround him; whenever he tried to throw a punch another shield would appear between his fist and his target. It was like watching a bizarre dance routine that was happening a hundred feet in the air.

“Tem, come on!” Brian sounded significantly more optimistic, and Tem forced herself to refocus as they continued to try and push bystanders away from the fight.

That, of course, was when it happened.

Melody landed a right-hook on the supervillain’s jaw and he jerked violently; the grenade he’d been holding flying out of his hand and going wide.

Before anyone could think, it slammed right into one of the supports holding up a billboard.

That explosion was probably the most spectacular.

The screen sparked and flickered; while the board itself groaned as it began to tip forward. Pieces of the decimated support fell and came close to crushing those near it.

The billboard’s shadow extended across the crowd that’d managed to gather underneath it, including Tem and Brian, who were frozen as they watched it fall forward.

She understood two crucial details in less than a millisecond—

1. The billboard was going to fall on them
2. Melody couldn’t catch it, she’d never tried anything that big before

Up above, the genius was yelling something, when movement caught Tem’s eye.

It was Brian, running forward and shoving men and women alike out of his path. He was making a beeline straight for the looming shadow, and while she wasn’t one to cry out, the shriek of his name was on the tip of her tongue when his body began to change.
Just like that, Tem was twelve again.

From this distance, she couldn’t see it well, but she saw Brian’s face elongate. She saw his bones crack and move under his skin when he shed his favorite leather jacket, and she saw him grow until he towered over the likes of Godzilla.

The stuff that had changed Melody Stark had changed him also, and perhaps it would’ve made them the same if not for the preexisting gamma in his blood. It had been those two substances having a volatile reaction inside his body that made Brian so sick, not the alien radiation alone. It had turned him into something drastically different.

In the simplest terms, it was a wolf.

A giant wolf, with dark inky fur, glowing red infernos for eyes, and glistening white teeth that could’ve torn into the hull of a Helicarrier.

In poetic terms, it was a hound- a hound from hell, and Tem watched in horrified fascination as it caught the billboard in its mouth, and stopped it in its tracks.
POV Change- AJ

AJ had heard of SHIELD before, but she’d never thought she’d find herself going to their headquarters to meet with the Director.

In fact, in the last couple years (three, if memory served), she hadn’t thought about much besides finding a place to sleep, finding food, and finding new clothes.

*And weapons,* she thought idly, as the car went over a pothole. *Weapons are important.*

The “nice” SHIELD agent that had approached her outside a seedy bar in Jersey hadn’t taken her weapons. Maybe he didn’t know she had them, or maybe he figured he could take her down with or without them.

AJ didn’t like that. She resisted the urge to pull out the bowie knife she’d stolen from a pawn shop, and sharpen it in front of his calm; collected face.

*Impulse control was always your greatest weakness.*

However, the more worrying aspect was that AJ had no idea *why* the Director of a covert agency would want to meet with her. She’d sort of guessed the world thought she was dead, after what’d happened when she was thirteen.

The only logical explanation was that SHIELD had found her in an old file, and wanted to know if she had information on her father’s work.

Well. *Former,* work. Her father was dead.

AJ focused on her reflection in the rearview mirror, to distract from the unpleasant subject her mind had dredged up- light brown hair (she’d shaved the left side clean ages ago), unsettling brown eyes, and a gaunt and pale face. She hadn’t eaten anything concrete in a week, and hadn’t showered in three days. How quaint.
AJ tugged on the sleeve of her worn bomber jacket subconsciously. She felt oddly vulnerable, like something was about to change- for better or worse was unclear.

The brunette had been so caught up in her thoughts that she hardly noticed when the car pulled to a stop, on a wooden dock of all places.

AJ only got out when the agent- Phil Coulson, apparently -started to. She slung her knapsack over her shoulder and took in the sight that was waiting.

“Ho-ly shit”, she muttered.

It was a Helicarrier, floating in a remote lake in the middle of nowhere. From this distance she could hear people scurrying around on deck, but couldn’t see them.

“It’s one of the only ones left”, Coulson said, conversationally. “Fury likes to keep it in tip-top shape, so we’ll have to take off soon. Come on”.

AJ didn’t answer and trailed after him as he boarded. Some of the other agents shot her looks as they walked through, whispering to each other. A few even glared.

So, they had heard of her father, or, at least this had something to do with him.

Fantastic.

Coulson led her through the halls to a place that looked more like a conference room or teacher’s lounge than anything else. There were a couple stainless steel cabinets, a long table with plenty of comfortable(?) wheelie chairs, and a coffee maker.

AJ could make do with the coffee maker. She could not make do with the eighteen other people in the room. All of them were teenagers like her, ranging from her own age (sixteen), to as young as fourteen.
“What the hell”, she said flatly, as all conversation ceased.

Everyone turned to look at her and Coulson, who acted as if they weren’t present.

“Stay here”, he informed her, “Director Fury needs to wrap something up first”.

With that cryptic statement, he left. AJ heard the tell-tale sound of the door locking from the outside, and felt like smashing pretty much everything except the coffee maker.

One of the youngest of the group was the first to speak. Her sensible shoes squeaked on the floor when she inched forward, and she had mousy brown hair and the biggest pair of doe-eyes AJ had ever seen.

She stuck out her arm as if she wanted a handshake. “H-Hi! I’m Clara!”

The older of the two couldn’t tell if Clara had a stutter, or if she was just nervous. Either way, she didn’t care, and regarded the outstretched appendage with distaste. “AJ”.

Clara blinked, glanced at the space between them, and put her hand down; embarrassed. “Nice to meet you”, she gulped, and forced a smile. “What are you in for?”

“That’s the problem”, AJ sighed and brushed the unshaved bangs back behind her ear. “I don’t know. What are you in for?”

“Oh”, Clara’s eyes somehow brightened, “I’m a prodigy!”

“Come again?”

A girl in the back with curly ginger hair and green eyes, cleared her throat.

“I’m a telepath, not to mention telekinetic”, she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “My name is Emma. Emma Summers. Clara’s last name is Fitz- her dad’s a SHIELD engineer and her mom’s a SHIELD biochemist. My parents are X-Men”.
AJ was beginning to get a very, very bad feeling about this. “Okay. What about the rest of you? And can someone please tell me what we’re doing here?”

A kid who was on Emma’s left fidgeted uncomfortably. “I’m Joseph May”, he mumbled. “My mom’s a pretty famous agent, but I don’t have any special abilities”.

“I’m Alec Campbell!” A blue-eyed boy with sandy hair piped up, with a toothy grin. He’d coveted one of the wheelie chairs, and was propelling himself around the room. The others kept having to dodge when he flew past them. “I’m an Inhuman”.

“An Inhuman? Are you kidding me?” AJ had only seen those on TV- they were wildly powerful beings, not too different from traditional mutants, but their powers were more “passed down”. They were also infinitely more complicated than simple genetics.

“Not kidding”. Clara sat in another seat and clasped her hands in her lap. “He has wings and can fly”.

“Fly?”

“It gets weirder”, a girl interrupted. She had a crooked smirk and a twin brother- their matching reddish-brown hair, blue eyes, and freckles were unmistakable. “I’m Elysium. The idiot who is my clone is Josh. We’re…what people call ‘expert marksmen’, I guess”.

“Interesting”. AJ’s frown deepened. “Why are we all so young?”

“It’s so they can make us their minions”, Alec wiggled his fingers as if he were casting a spell, and Josh glared at him while Elysium giggled. Clara smiled hesitantly.

“It’s because we’re more susceptible to learning experiences”. An emo-looking guy with dark hair and eyes made a face, as he corrected them. “My name’s Adam. My dad’s a mutant, too, he can make you see your worst nightmare. I guess-” he faltered for a second, before, “-I guess I can do that, too”.

Adam was at least as young as Clara, but had a much less friendly atmosphere about him. AJ
almost felt sorry for him since he seemed so miserable.

“That’s damn cool”, a curly-haired brunette huffed a laugh, although no one else seemed to find it funny. He leaned forward on his elbows and sighed. “I’ve just got adoptive muscle memory. The name’s Andy Masters, master of everything you can do, pretty much”.

“Well, who’s your dad?”

Andy hardened immediately (touchy). “I don’t know. They found me at my foster home”.

AJ’s heart twinged in sympathy at that. “Hm. They found me on the streets”.

None of them appeared to know how to reply to that. Andy brightened a little, as if someone having a life as bad as his made him feel less alone.

Clara, who was definitely looking to make some friends, turned to another one of the young recruits(?)- a Blake Lively-looking type girl -and asked, “S-so…what’s your name?”

The girl shrugged indifferently. “I’m Kelly. Rand. My dad’s a vigilante”.

“Oooh, which one?” That was Alec again.

Her eyebrows drew together into an annoyed V. “What part of a secret identity do you not understand?”

Someone who was AJ’s age exhaled slowly. She flipped her dirty blonde braid over her shoulder and covered her blue eyes with an exasperated hand. “Okay, settle down. There’s no need to be cross. I’m Maggie Carter. My mom’s an agent, too”.

“You mean Sharon Carter?” A blonde boy practically exploded, from where he’d been silent and observant the whole time. His arms pinwheeled as he flailed excitedly. “She’s legendary! Oh- I’m Simon Danvers, by the way. I can fly and absorb energy!” His blue eyes shone with admiration. “It’s great to meet you all!”
“Uh huh”, AJ didn’t reciprocate the sentiment. “I’d still like to know why we’re here”.

A black-haired girl with gray eyes, who was leaning against the wall next to a green-eyed blonde, spoke. “I do magic, so I don’t know why they’d need me. My name’s Quinn Strange. Pleasure to make your acquaintances”.

The blonde hiked up the strap of her paisley messenger bag. It looked like they’d pulled her straight from school. “I’m Kat Paige. I know magic too, but, it’s a little…different”.

AJ’s eyes narrowed. “Different? Different, how?”

“That’s…not something I can just explain, I think”. Kat looked apologetic. “I don’t know”.

“You don’t know?” A dark-haired girl with startling blue/black irises looked considerably suspicious. “How do you not know?”

“Ella”, a boy who must’ve been her brother (they didn’t look alike though, with his reddish-brown hair and brown eyes), chastised nervously. He put a hand on her arm. “Be polite. I’m James Murdock, and this is my little sis. We don’t have any powers”.

Ella scowled. “Don’t call me little”, she spat, “Isn’t anyone else worried about this?”

“Well, y-yeah”, Clara said, meekly, “w-where’s D-Director Fury?”

The last male in the room, a wavy dirty-blond boy with blue eyes, hummed.

“Busy”, He groaned. “Interesting. I’m Antione Hunter. My parents are SHIELD agents as well. No powers, as far as I know”. He sounded disappointed.

The teenagers who had already introduced themselves turned expectantly to the last two in the room- a pair of dark-skinned girls with black hair and brown eyes.
The one with shorter hair gulped and wiped a bead of sweat off her forehead. “I’m Lily Rhodes”, she said. “I’m an engineer. I intern for Tony Stark”.

The other looked at the circle of adolescents distrustfully. “I’m Anael Ayala. I don’t have any special powers either”. She looked at AJ with a piercing gaze. “And what can you do?”

She gritted her teeth, ready for a challenge despite herself. “None of your business”.

“Come on, we spilled, it’s only fair!”

Anger sparked to life in her stomach. “That’s not how it works-”

“Adrianne Jeannette Freeman”, a voice behind them cut her off. “Enhanced reflexes, an inability to feel pain, and accelerated perception”.

On his wheelie chair, Alec yelped and tumbled off with a thud.

In the doorway stood a graying man with a beard. He had a SHIELD visitor lanyard around his neck and the suit he wore looked musty and professional. During the introductions no one had heard him come in.

Maggie jumped to her feet. “Mr. Magnus!” Her cheeks flushed like she’d done something wrong, but he ignored her completely and walked to the head of table.

“I understand you were expecting the Director, but Fury has elected me to be in charge of this new project”, he said, as he sat. “My name, as Miss Carter pointed out, is Nate Magnus. I used to work for SHIELD”.

AJ, who was fuming silently, glowered at the old man. “And what exactly is this project? They seem to know, but won’t tell me no matter how many times I ask”.

“Hey!” Maggie protested.
Magnus’s hazel eyes glittered mischievously. “The SHIELD’s Avengers Initiative”.

For a split second, she entertained the notion that she was being pranked, but the others all looked serious. Unable to do much else, AJ arched an eyebrow. “Come again?”

“The SHIELD’s Avengers Initiative-”

“Yeah, I heard that part! What does that entail?”

Simon pouted as if her snappish attitude was killing his groove. “You don’t have to be so rude about it”, he said, indignantly.

AJ was ready to shout at him too, but a stern look from Magnus shocked her into silence. He looked as though he’d been expecting this, and hadn’t been looking forward to it.

“It means that you’ve all been chosen specifically to be a part of SHIELD’s program to train a team of new Avengers”, he explained, patiently. “It’s your own choice. We’ve already gotten permission from your legal guardians, and-”

“How’d you find us?” Anael asked. She sounded dismayed. “Does SHIELD have files on us all?” Strangely, she didn’t ask how the guardian in charge of her could be okay with this.

“On your parents, yes. I apologize if you feel as though it is an invasion of privacy”.

He seemed sincere. AJ wondered if he had children of his own, or grandchildren.

“And it’s our choice”, she muttered quietly, under her breath. Considerately, this time. At least with SHIELD she would be guaranteed protection from any of her father’s coworkers, at least the ones that were left. “Great”.

Magnus opened his mouth as if to continue, when another agent burst into the room. Their hand rested on the gun at their belt and AJ nearly stood up and got out her dagger.
“Sir”, they said, breathlessly. “Director Fury needs to see you. There’s been a situation in downtown New York”.

Magnus spared a glance at the teens assembled around him and his expression was pinched. It was obvious he’d hoped this “meeting” would go uninterrupted. “Coming, coming. How severe is it?”

The last part was said quietly, after he’d crossed the room, as if he hadn’t wanted to worry them. Perhaps keeping them calm was part of the plan.

They never found out the answer. The agent didn’t reply until the door was shut.

There was a moment of silence. The “chosen” seemed to be thinking it over, carefully, and weren’t inclined to share. More than a few were too preoccupied with what had just happened to even consider the offer.

Finally, Clara cleared her throat. “S-So…w-what was t-that a-about?”

Simon’s bottom lip jutted out as if he were deep in thought. “Maybe there’s been an attack?”

“An attack?” The color drained from Maggie’s face. “What kind of attack?”

“Who knows? It’s New York! Someone’s trying to take it over every five minutes! Take a bet between killer robots and killer aliens”. Alec had climbed back onto his wheelie chair, and had begun to push himself around once more. AJ could already tell by the way he gesticulated wildly that that he had a flair for the dramatics.

Adam scowled. “Like Ultron or the Chitauri?”

“God knows no one needs a repeat of either of those”. Anael massaged her temples as if she had a migraine coming on, or like one had arrived. “I hope it’s taken care of”.

“It will be, I’m sure. We’ve got the Avengers on our side”, Kelly said. She paused for a moment and took in each and everyone’s faces. “So…what do we do about the whole…SHIELD thing? Do you think we should do it?”
Clara nodded vigorously. “O-Of course we should!"

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! This is a huge deal!”

AJ didn’t bother listening on (as far as she could tell, they were on the fence, but still thought it was the opportunity of a lifetime). Instead, she put her stuff down on the table and began to roam the perimeter of the room.

_The next Avengers_, she thought. _What a joke!_

But…AJ had been on her own for a long time. There was a (admittedly, cautious) optimistic side of her that pondered whether it could work. She could start a new legacy for her family.

That struck a nerve for AJ. More than one.

“Momma, what was Daddy like?” She used to ask, tugging on Clarissa Freeman’s skirt (her mother used to wear long dresses, that always had floral patterns she tried to trace).

She had only picked her up and cradled her like she was still a baby, and said, “Your father isn’t a part of our lives, darling. I think it’s better if we just forget all about him”.

“But why?”

“Addy”. There was the stern tone, the one that always got AJ’s older sister, Sarah, to stop pulling her hair; to stop leaving her muddy shoes at the door; to stop asking about the man Clarissa wouldn’t tell either of them about. The tone that had never worked on _her_.

AJ used to keep pushing until her mother eventually grounded her, but it didn’t reach its breaking point until she was thirteen.
“If you want us to forget about him, then why did you take his last name?”

It’d been the last thing she’d said to Clarissa before her father’s men had broken into their apartment, killed their mother, and kidnapped her and her sister.

*A bullet to the head. The blood stained the carpet so badly, I bet there’s still a brown spot.*

AJ had never seen Sarah again. The loss was still an ache in her stomach and chest.

*Sarah would never let you put yourself in that much danger, but she would’ve done this to avenge us. Sarah was braver than you.*

But, if she could change it…she’d never be able to bring back her family, but making a new legacy would insult her father’s memory *and* remember Clarissa and Sarah’s perfectly.

It would be everything she’d ever wished for.

*Revenge,* in every sense of the metaphorical word.

But of course, AJ was also realistic. There was no way she could picture fourteen-year-old Clara fighting crime with whatever prodigal skills she supposedly had.

*You can change it.*

Oh, but can I?

*Do it for your family.*

My family’s better off.

*You’re an idiot for refusing.*
I’ll get myself killed.

*It can’t be worse than living with the guilt.*

That was true, even if she didn’t want to admit it.

Anael caught her eye while she was poking around, and AJ banished those thoughts, smirked, and knelt down in front of one of the cabinets. It wasn’t like she needed to let her in on her inner turmoil.

She let the thoughts go and found fancy bowls and cups - not fitting, but at least there weren’t taps or bugs listening in on their conversation.

*They probably have high tech cameras to suit that agenda, don’t they?*

“Uh, AJ?” Josh asked, warily. He and the rest of the squad seemed to have come to a decision, and now they were watching her. “What are you doing?”

She didn’t bother explaining, and drew her knife. Clara gave a yelp of surprise and Maggie yelled something about having a weapon here was illegal.

*Yeah, right. These guys are the next Avengers!*

With a ginormous eye roll, AJ jammed the blade into the lock and wrenched it open.

She dug around inside and produced a huge bottle of whiskey, and Maggie’s shouts tampered off into silence. Josh laughed uncomfortably.

“Found the liquor cabinet”, she announced, rising to her feet. The brunette sheathed the bowie knife and set the cups on the table, but only poured herself a drink. If they wanted any, they could get it themselves.
Amazingly, no one tried to stop her, despite the fact she clearly wasn’t twenty-one.

*At least I won’t be “working” with a bunch of snitches.*

“So”, AJ scoffed, using one hand to gesture with the bottle and the other to hold the cup. It felt cold in her hand even though there was no ice. “The jury’s decision?”

Maggie looked defensive, as if she was bracing for an argument of counterattack of some kind. Or, maybe she just really didn’t like the bowie knife. “We’re in”.

“Really? No offense, but some of you seem wishy-washy”.

“W-we’re in”. Clara clenched her hands into fists, glowered, and for the first time since Coulson walked her through the doors, she began to think there was more to the kid than an innocent Bambi who was about to put too much on her shoulders.

“Fan-tas-tic. I am, too”.

Maggie blanched. “You…you are?”

AJ snorted and held her glass in the air, as if she wanted to propose a mock-toast.

“Raise a glass to the fucking future”, she said dryly.
Chapter 13

POV CHANGE- Brian

Brian’s head hurt.

He’d been bundled up in Melody’s room with the “flu” for more than an hour, after turning into a giant- well, thing, and catching a billboard.

Aunt Wanda’s quilt around his shoulders had been his only comfort ten years ago, but now it felt like a grim reminder. As if the unpleasant memories were ingrained into the fabric.

Nevertheless, another swell of chills caused his teeth to chatter. Brian pulled the patchwork wool even tighter around himself and tried to fight the tremors.

He had a vague recollection of what had happened. The grenades, Melody, and the billboard’s shadow on them were the clearest, but after that everything got fuzzy- the change, holding the fallen ad like a dog would a frisbee, and chucking it all the way into the Hudson and out of harm’s way.

Bet even Uncle Thor couldn’t do that, a part of him that was strangely chill thought, dizzily. It hadn’t been heavy, that was true. It’d been like holding a sheet of paper between his teeth, if they even counted as his teeth.

At some point, Brian had changed back; disoriented and naked as the day he was born. Tem and Melody had managed to smuggle him out of the chaos unnoticed, somehow. The brunette and redhead had brought him back home, which was where Brian’s mind had really started to clear up.

Of course, his first coherent thought was: what the hell did I just do?

As if his girlfriend had psychic powers instead of their pseudo-cousin, she reentered their current hideout and sat down on the end of the bed.

Tem’s eyes glittered, like sheets of ice. “How the hell did you do that?”
There was no hint of humor in her voice. Not even shock, but Brian supposed she’d seen the dumbed-down version five years ago.

Back when they were twelve, and he was still “sick” in quarantine.

Brian had heard about Aunt Natasha’s adoptive daughter, but he hadn’t actually seen or met her. During the last visit, his father had filled him in- her name was Tatiana; but everyone was supposed to call her Tem, she had red hair like her mom, and she had a sister who was being adopted by Uncle Bucky and Aunt Katya (she was Izabela, but Bruce had called her “Izzy”).

Brian had never wanted to be out of quarantine more.

Everyone who visited (the adults, mostly, since the radiation was too dangerous for kids), had to wear protective gear. The room itself was small, square, and mostly white. It had a few objects of Brian’s here and there, and the only way in was a huge metal door that only opened from the outside. No one had told him this, but he thought it was guarded at all times.

I want to go home.

He pulled his legs up to his chest and glared at the cream-colored mattress he was sitting on.

I hate this.

Just then, the door opened with a loud squawk. A slim, fine-boned girl slipped through, and he had to blink a few times to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating.

The girl was twelve, and wearing what looked like clothes from Goodwill. She had a shock of red hair shaved into a military buzzcut, that was in the process of growing out. The ends were beginning to curl and Brian was viciously reminded of Natasha.

Her eyes were blue. The same color as winter frost.
He glanced around nervously, but the stranger came to a stop beside the bed and clasped her hands behind her back.

Brian swallowed. “Um. Who are you?”

The girl hummed indifferently. She never took her gaze off his face, which was kind of weird. Creepy, even.

“Tem”, she said, as if reciting from a script. “And you’re Brian”.

He brightened almost immediately- he wasn’t sure how he hadn’t seen it before, she looked exactly like the kid his Dad had described. “Oh! You’re Tem? Dad didn’t say you were coming”.

“I snuck in”. Tem said it nonchalantly, like it was nothing more than a simple fact, but the heart monitor on Brian’s left spiked when his blood pressure did.

“What?” He asked, appalled. “You snuck in? Isn’t that dangerous!?”

“You don’t look dangerous. I wanted to meet you. Natasha said I had a cousin who was sick, but I wanted to know if she was telling the truth”.

A headache was beginning to pulse behind his eyes, but that was the last thing on his mind.

“Why would she lie?” A cold feeling settled in Brian’s stomach.

Tem didn’t reply. There was a long silence.

He moved to tell her she should probably leave in case someone found them, but before he could get the words out his chest constricted. Brian began to cough loudly instead, startling Tem into recoiling.

Something vaguely threatening flashed in her eyes before she warily came closer again.
“Are you okay?” She reached out to touch his shoulder when he started to retch.

Ever since the explosion, Brian had been prone to dizzy spells and coughing fits. When he was younger he used to cough so hard blood would come out, but that hadn’t happened in years. Except, his stomach spasmed in agony, and bright red droplets splattered the back of his hand and the sheets.

Brian’s lungs relaxed long enough for him to gasp for air, which sent him into another fit.

Tem was moving towards the door but he could tell she was hovering in between leaving him alone, and going to get the doctor.

He tried to tell her to go and more blood bubbled up from his throat and spilled over his chin. The headache was so bad his temples felt like they were splitting open, and the red stuff had begun to take on a black, slimy color.

His vision swam, and the monitors began to scream as the readings went off the charts.

Through the haze of pain, Brian couldn’t make out much, but he remembered his bones breaking as they morphed into something bigger, stronger.

He screamed through that part.

He remembered watching his own fingernails get pushed out as large claws took their place, and that was around the time he blacked out completely.

The last thing Brian heard was the sound of Tem shouting for someone to help her.

The memory was still fresh. He hadn’t relived it in a long time.

After the “incident”, Brian had woken up in restraints, in a different room. The doctors had told
him he’d had a bad fit, but Tem snuck in later and revealed the truth.

(He’d had a feeling she was armed, though. She didn’t get as close either).

Apparently, Brian’s body had morphed completely. His limbs had grown until they were disproportionate, his nails and teeth had sharpened into points, and his face had elongated into a wide snout.

His eyes had also turned red. Tem had explained that detail with stunning clarity.

At that point in the transmutation, Brian had been no longer aware of himself. He’d lurched out of bed three times the size of a grown man, nothing but a poor imitation of a werewolf dripping the same black stuff he’d thrown up moments before. Tem said he’d left puddles of it on the floor.

He probably would’ve killed her too, if security hadn’t arrived last minute and shot him full of tranquilizers. He almost bit the jugular of one of the men before that could happen.

“Hey”.

Tem’s voice jolted Brian out of his thoughts, and he met her eyes solemnly.

“I don’t know”, he said. “I…I don’t think it was a decision, really. It was an instinct. Like, somehow, I knew I could do it- or, I knew I had to”.

For a second he thought she would call him crazy, but Tem only shook her head and groaned. She folded her hand over his and pressed a kiss to the knuckles.

“Okay”, she replied, unwavering. “Do you have any idea what…I, is?”

At that, Brian couldn’t help but snort. That made whatever the wolf was the equivalent of a character in a horror movie.

But…it was an I, at least until further notice. Whether it sounded right or not.
“I think it was born because of the reaction between the gamma radiation in my blood, and whatever stuff was in that canister”, he said. “It’s…a living thing. I can feel it- during the bank robbery, it was all I could do not to tear out those guys’ throats”.

“So it wants to kill?”

Brian huffed. “It’s a predator. That’s what it does”.

“A predator?” The color drained from Tem’s face.

He realized what he’d said (the sentence had come unthinkingly), and before they could break the silence Melody exploded in.

“You know”, she said, obviously annoyed, “If you’d told me you could turn into a giant dog I never would’ve made you that cool stuff. I could’ve been done in a third of the time!”

Tem gave her an exasperated glare. She slipped her hand away from his and Brian resisted the urge to whine like a puppy.

“Seriously?” She sounded pissed. “That’s what you’re worried about right now?”

“Oh, not just that”. Melody seemed entirely unconcerned about what’d happened. Either she was truly unhinged from reality and didn’t care, or she was a really good actress.

Brian suddenly felt ten times more exhausted. After holding up a billboard and turning into a monster, dealing with his cousin seemed like a terrible task.

“Oh, yeah?” He dragged a hand over his face. “What else plagues your dreams, Mel?”

Melody danced around her bedroom and pulled a notebook from one of the desk drawers. “Your crazy-awesome superpowers. Also, SHIELD is all over where you changed. You don’t shed, right? You didn’t leave any stray hairs?”
If it hadn’t been said with such a straight face, Brian would’ve laughed.

“Uh”, Tem answered for him, when he took too long, “I don’t think so”.

“Well, cross your fingers. Imagine them building a ginormous microscope to put an equally ginormous hair in it to check for your identity”. Melody cackled, despite the other two’s silence, and she didn’t hand them the notebook until she was just snickering.

“Here”, she said, grimmer now. “I made this list a while ago”.

Tem took one look at it and growled. She passed it to Brian and he managed to regret all of his life choices.

**What Are Brian’s Powers??????????**

- He growls a lot and makes inhuman noises???
- Telepath (we could have the same powers)
- Red energy shields? (Once again, we could have the same powers)
- The power to sense emotion? Is that a thing? I think that’s a thing
- He growls????????
- And makes a lot of inhuman noises?
- Maybe he has no powers and he’s secretly a closeted furry who gets migraines

“A closeted furry who gets migraines’?”

“Come on. Hellhound is, like, the ultimate fursona”.

“A what?” Tem, who had no idea what a fursona was, looked incredibly confused; while Brian was stuck on one word in that wrong, wrong sentence.

“What…what did you call It?” He asked, hesitantly. His eyebrows furrowed, and Melody made a face, as she took back the notebook.
“Hellhound”, she said. “You know, the name for the dogs that drag souls into Hell. I think. I don’t know a lot of lore ‘n shit. Why? You don’t like it?”

Brian grimaced. “It’s not really a matter of me liking it or not. But…”

The more he thought about it, the more the name made sense.

“…Hellhound is good”.

Melody grinned. “Thanks. I was thinking we should all get codenames, too. I’d be Omnia, and Jess could be-”

“Think of the nicknames later”, Tem interrupted. She was starting to get angry again, Brian could tell (he could smell it on her; an unpleasant indescribable scent).

The genius looked hardly pleased at being cut off, but she let it go. “Whatever. Anyway, back to the matter at hand. Can you control Hellhound?”

Ah, yes. That was the million dollar question, wasn’t it?

Brian guessed he could control it, to some extent. There was theory and then there was practice, which would be less fun than anything Mel had in mind.

There were times when he thought he could feel it scratching the surface of his skin, itching to get out and rip anything that got in its way to pieces. He’d held it back, like he was now, although Hellhound wasn’t fighting as hard.

Maybe letting it out earlier had made it more lenient?

“Yo, wolf boy”. Melody hummed. “You good?”

“I think…” he started, slowly, “I have some leverage”.

“Any chance you can try and harness it? Like Uncle Bruce can do with the Hulk?”

“That- that took years of practice and meditation!”

“Then we’ll have to get you a yoga matt”, Tem said, wryly. “It’s a good idea. Hellhound looked powerful”.

It was powerful. Brian knew that. If it was made of the same stuff that granted Melody her shields, there was a whole treasure trove of unlocked potential.

Which terrified him. A lot.

Tem frowned (she must’ve noticed his discomfort. If there was a silver lining to this, it was that Hellhound had distracted her from what’d been bothering her earlier). “Are you okay? Maybe we should run some tests to make sure you’re alright”.

Melody’s lips creased into a thin, displeased line. “Yeah, that’s a great idea. Except we can’t get our hands on any equipment without notifying an adult, unless you want me to build it, which could take weeks and weeks. Which would mean telling aforementioned adult what happened. Which would mean telling them”.

“She’s right”. Brian ran a hand through his hair. “We can’t tell them. I don’t think it’s anything drastic, anyway. It’s just the strain”.

He needed a shower. And some Advil.

“So, basically, you need rest?” Tem didn’t look convinced. “I’m not making you soup”.

Melody slid off the bed and started to pull him with her. “Nah, we’ll get Riley to do it. He makes a mean clam chowder”.

Brian sighed reluctantly and let himself be escorted to the living area, where Tem nestedled him onto
the couch like she was tucking him in. Melody flounced away, presumably to find Riley, calling, “Heeeere, bird boy! Chirp!”

“Don’t move”, his girlfriend ordered, sitting down next to him and curling into his side.

“Aww, I don’t think I can”, Brian answered truthfully, throwing an arm around her shoulders. He’d needed help getting down here. Moving alone would be awful.

Tem must’ve been thinking the same thing, because she chuckled into his shirt sleeve. “I don’t think you can either. I felt the need to say it anyway”.

“Did you think I needed to be told?”

“When we were fifteen you needed to be told not to set something on fire ‘for science’.”

Brian gave a squawk of indignation and Tem started to laugh. It was a little strained, but still genuine, and that was all he cared about.

“Yeah”, he agreed, finally. He pressed his face into her hair and whispered, “Who do you think we should tell?”

She stiffened like a livewire. “I…don’t know. Jessie, Jace, and Aiden are people we should be able to trust. Izzy’s probably figured it out by now on her own”.

“What about Penny and Joven?”

“You want to tell Penny and Joven?” Tem sounded appalled.

Brian cringed. Penny and Joven were younger than they were, but that was hardly the problem. The two were akin to siblings.

But, Park tended to panic when put in stressful situations, and if she thought he was in real danger, his parents would know about Hellhound in five seconds.
Joven, however…Joven would faint.

“Yeah”. He rubbed the small of her back, trying to get her to relax. “Maybe not Joven and Penny. But Noah probably knows, and she probably told her sisters, which means Wanda told-”

“Penny”, Tem finished, begrudgingly. “And she would tell Joven. What makes you think Noah already knows, though?”

“That girl has a spidey-sense for trouble. I can…well, *smell* it on her”.

She put her feet up on the coffee table, right next to some of Uncle Clint’s magazines. “I hope one day you can explain to me how that works”.

“If it’s any consolation, it’s also why I don’t need my glasses”.

Tem laughed again and Brian laughed with her, momentarily allowing himself to forget what’d gone down in the last couple hours.

Until it all came rushing back. He doubted he would be able to sleep tonight.

*This is crazy*, he thought, tiredly. *This is really crazy.*

Brian wondered how Melody thought he was going to learn to control Hellhound- it had a conscience, it wasn’t a puppet or a robot that you could program commands into.

Somewhere deep in the pit of his stomach, its presence shifted.

On good days, even when he didn’t know what to call it, it felt like a vague disturbance in the back of his skull. On bad days, he could feel it curled around his spine like a snake.

It didn’t help when Hellhound was angry, and Hellhound was angry often. Not quite *Hulk* levels of
rage, but when it roared his insides rattled.

\[K\ldots\]

It was scared, too. It reminded him of when the bomb had gone off when he was seven, and the world had dissolved into painful light.

When the last thing Brian remembered feeling was scared.

\[\ldots ill.\]

He sat up ramrod straight, almost dislodging Tem from her perch.

“Brian?” She asked, carefully. The fun had gone from her tone. “Are you okay?”

He shook his head once, then twice, then offered her a smile. “Sorry. Thought I heard something”.

\[Ki\ldots\]

The same sound- a low rasp that was more a snarl than it was a voice -purred again. Brian could feel it on some fundamental level, but he couldn’t hear what it was saying, not that it didn’t terrify him anyway.

\[Kill.\]

His blood turned to ice.

Brian began to realize that when he’d called Hellhound a predator, he’d been telling the truth in every sense of the word.

\[Kill.\]
It was talking to him, now. It hadn’t before, possibly because it was dormant, and had only woken up when he’d used it to catch the billboard and save that crowd.

*Kill.*

It wasn’t *just* talking to him, either. It was repeating one word, over and over on a constant loop.

“Um, Tem”. Brian felt numb.

“What?”

*Kill.*

“…Nothing. When’s Mel coming back with Riley?”
POV change- Alex

Alex was in her room watching the last four episodes of *Law & Order: SVU*, when Wanda exploded through the door.

In the span of five seconds, a part of her brain wondered, *is she going to A: tell me dinner is ready; B: tell me someone has died; C: tell me Dad is going to be home late tonight; or, D: tell me something has happened regarding our friends’ team?*

In the midst of the fifth second, Wanda gasped, “Family meeting”.

*Ah. Neither. The answer is, E: tell me a cryptic statement.*

Before Alex could ask what the hell that meant, her older sister pinwheeled away like an out-of-control cyclone at Coney Island.

She glanced momentarily back at her paused computer screen, debating whether she could get away with ignoring the order. “What the *fuck*”.

“Language!” Came Noah’s voice from the living room, but she sounded strained, and if something had happened than that was very foreshadowing.

Reluctantly, Alex slid off the bed and dashed to the couch. She hopped over the back and landed in between her siblings with a dull *thud*.

“So”, she said, “What’s wrong?”

Noah pointed at the TV (it was a nice flat-screen, that in hindsight, Deadpool had either stolen or bought with his mercenary cash). “*That’s wrong*”.

Briefly, Alex entertained the notion that the *Star Wars* prequels were on, before she actually
looked at the TV and did a full doubletake.

“Um”, her tone went up an octave, “What the hell is that?”

It was actually a local news program, and it was showing a grainy picture of a giant black beast holding up a fallen billboard. It stayed like that for a moment before flipping to a blurry action shot of a girl in a suit, wrestling a man with grenades in midair. It was unmistakably Melody.

The headline read: LATEST VIGILANTES OR LATEST MENACES TO SOCIETY?

“Oh, jeez”, Alex said, dismayed. “There was a fight?”

“Yeah, downtown. A psycho was dropping bombs on civilians”.

Wanda dug her patented Stark phone out of her pocket and started thumbing in a number.

“I’m calling Penny”, she declared, hopping off the couch and venturing into the adjacent kitchen for a semblance of privacy.

Alex and Noah exchanged a look before the youngest Wilson cleared her throat. “Mel made a debut. That’s okay, as long as no one’s hurt, and the bad guy is behind bars. But what’s with the werewolf?”

“Super furry”, Wanda guessed, now holding the cell up to her ear and listening to it ring. She seemed to find the idea hilarious, unlike the other teens in the room.

“Brian”, Noah corrected, decisively.

“Brian’s a super furry?”

“Wanda!” She glared at her, successfully earning complete silence. “I know it sounds crazy, but hear me out. We don’t know what his powers are. He growls a lot. If you look really closely, that shade of red is the same color as Melody’s shields”.
Alex sighed loudly. “Great. It’s definitely Brian. We’ll have a discussion on how alien radiation can differ in what it dishes out, later. What exactly are you going to do about that? Tell an Avenger?”

Wanda opened her mouth to reply just as Penny answered the phone. Instantly, the fifteen-year-old began explaining a mile a minute. She was talking to fast her words almost blended together, which wasn’t uncommon when excited or stressed.

Noah stuck her hand in between the couch cushions, looking for the remote. She pulled it out and shut off the TV with an air of finality.

“We’re not telling anyone”, she said. “At least, no one who isn’t within our social circle. We keep it secret, and we keep it quiet”.

“Will Park agree to that?”

“Penny may have a stick up her ass, but I don’t think she’ll rat him out”.

Wanda leaned against the island and snorted. She held the speaker away from her ear. “Pen’ heard that”, she declared. “She loves you, too”.

Alex cringed. Penny rarely spoke of it, so it was easy to forget she had enhanced senses, and was a perfect eavesdropper.

“Tell her to come over”. Noah looked hardly bothered by the spider-girl’s super hearing. In fact, she looked uncharacteristically grim. “Mom and Dad won’t be home for a couple more hours. It’s enough time to come up with a game plan”.

“A game plan?” Alex asked warily, the same time Wanda piped up with, “For what?”

Noah’s eyes glittered mischievously. “If we can figure out who the wolf is easily, that means the adults can too. In other words, we gotta help by coming up with an alibi”.

“An alibi?”
“They’ll want to know where Brian was at the time of the incident. They may want blood samples, too, which will be significantly more difficult to gloss over”.

Wanda’s mouth shaped itself into a rare frown. She returned the phone to her ear. “Uh, Penny. You might wanna come over here quick, but do me a favor first. I think we may need Ruby on this one. Izzy, too”.

Alex was beginning to quiver subtly with adrenaline (and a generous amount of fear).

*What did we get into?*

Penny arrived twenty minutes after Wanda called; crawling through the bedroom window and landing neatly on the carpet. She was getting better at sticking landings.

“That was surprisingly fast”, Wanda said, with the normal cheer she adopted when talking to her best friend. The frown from earlier had vanished. “Did you run here?”

The brunette shook her head, clearly winded. “Swung”.

Alex, who was leaning against the doorframe, almost choked on her own spit. “*Swung*?”

“Yeah, you know”, Penny made the same hand-gestures her Dad did when he was using his web-shooters. “*Thwip*”.

“I…didn’t know you could do that”.

“Not a lot of people do. I keep it on the down low”.

Wanda slung an arm around Penny’s shoulders and beamed. “Isn’t it awesome?”
“Sure. Awesome”.

Penny looked down at the floor, evidently embarrassed, and Wanda grabbed her wrist and began to move to their center of operations (which was still the living room).

“Come on”, she said, less peppy than before, “Noah’s waiting”.

*That makes it sound like we’re in the middle of a bizarre business deal*, Alex thought, dragging her hand over her face and following them out.

Noah was indeed waiting; on the couch for the last quarter third of an hour, and her expression brightened a fraction. “Hey, Park. Not freaking out?”

She barked an unconvincing laugh. “Oh, I’m freaking out alright. I’m hiding it”.

Alex patted her on the back and collapsed onto the carpeted floor, whistling for Cable. Wanda’s dog loped over and she started to scratch him behind the ears.

Penny (technically Cable’s other mom) let him lick her hand a few times before sitting down. “Izzy and Ruby will be here soon”.

“Are they bringing pizza?”

“Is pizza what’s important right now?”

There was a pause. “No. Are they?”

“…Uh huh”.

Alex could feel her spirit lifting at the promise of free food, even if the notion of what they were doing weighed heavily. “We’ve got some food for thought. Any ideas on how to make sure Brian’s identity stays a secret?”
“Oh, is that what we’re talking about?” Izzy chimed in.

She shut the apartment door (no one had heard her and Ruby come in), and glided over to the huddle. “Penny only said it was an emergency. I thought maybe Wanda asked her out”.

“Ha”, Wanda replied, dryly. Penny flushed and elbowed her in the side.

The redhead bounced up and down behind her older sister. She had three pizza boxes in her arms and the minute the door was closed, they levitated into the air and set themselves on the coffee table.

“Show off”, Alex grumbled.

Ruby rolled her eyes, unimpressed. “We brought you two pepperonis and one with, like, ten toppings on it. Be grateful”.

The blonde made a face and hugged her knees. “I am grateful. I am also insanely jealous of your telekinetic powers. Why must you rub it in my face?”

While Alex was loathed to admit it, it wasn’t just Ruby she was jealous of it. Wanda and Noah both had powers, too- Wanda had their father’s healing factor, and Noah had that and superspeed, thanks to her X-Men mother.

Alex had nothing. It kind of sucked being the only normal person surrounded by a bunch of mutants, despite the fact that Joven had no powers as well.

We should form a club.

Ruby, who must’ve known what she was thinking, softened slightly. “Whatever. Dig in, everyone. What are we going to do about Brian?”

“Form a Brian Banner Defense Squad”, said Wanda.
“No”, said Penny.

“There’s no need for a defense squad, Tem has that covered”. Izzy appeared as though she was regretting showing up. She ran a restless hand through her bangs. “I think we need a lot of false evidence”.

“Starting with an alibi”, Ruby finished. She took a piece of pepperoni and bit off a humongous chunk. “He can’t be at the Compound during the fight. FRIDAY would’ve recorded him and Tem leaving”.

Noah made no move to grab any food, and stared contemplatively into space. “Date?”

“You want them to explain to their parents that they’re dating?”

“How do you know that?”

“I read minds, remember? I pick up on stuff”.

“Oh, right”. She winced sympathetically, maybe thinking about the last time she’d tried introducing a romantic interest to their own dad. “How about…they went out to grab food for everyone, came back when the bombing started, Brian got sick, and that’s it?”

“It’s a start”. Ruby sat down on the coffee table and swept aside a stack of unused cup holders. “I can work some aforementioned mind magic-” at this part she glanced warily at Alex “-to see if I can get them to ignore certain details”.

Alex stuck her tongue out. “Wouldn’t that be crossing a line?”

“We’ll see if it needs to be done, first”, Wanda relented, unwillingly. “I hope it doesn’t”.

Izzy kicked her feet up and scrubbed at the pizza grease on her metal hand with a napkin (Alex had never asked why she had one, and didn’t want to know).
“So”, she said, “Went out to get food, got sick, had to come back. I get that right?”

Alex shrugged. “I think”.

“What about if they try to take blood samples? To check for radiation?”

Penny shook her head and took a slice when Wanda passed it to her. “The radiation levels in his blood shouldn’t change. If they spike, we can write it off as him being sick”.

There was a moment of silence.

“Why are we going to all this trouble?” Izzy asked, finally.

She didn’t sound overly upset about it, but she examined her third piece of multiple-toppings-pizza with a trouble expression. The girl could go through a whole box by herself.

Wanda grinned. “‘Cause it’s fun”.

While Alex wouldn’t have chosen those exact words, no one disagreed. She wondered if that said more about their poor morals, than it did anything else.

“Alright”, said Brian, after the detailed rundown of their plan.

Wanda pouted and made a show of draping herself across his lap. “Really? That’s it? We slaved over that brilliant solution!”

“Wanda”, Penny complained, dragging her friend off the sick human mutate. “I know, and you know we didn’t slave over it”.
“It’s the principal of the thing!”

“We appreciate the effort”, Melody deadpanned. “Would you like a medal?”

Noah snorted and put her feet on the other girl’s desk, not bothering to listen to her protests. “We never kid about medals”, she said, seriously. “Don’t fuck with us, Stark”.

“Language”, Jessie stressed by the door, but even she didn’t sound too into it. She looked worried, mostly, and Alex could understand why.

If she hadn’t believed the wolf was Brian before, she believed it now. He looked terrible.

The constantly present bags under his eyes had grown and darkened in the span of a few hours. He was sweating and shivering despite the quilt spread across his lap, and he looked as though he wanted nothing more but to curl up and sleep for ten years.

Experimentally, Alex leaned over and pressed the back of her hand to his forehead.

“Well”, she said, withdrawing, “You’re running a fever. The sickness is provable”.

He batted her still-outstretched arm away with a half-hearted growl (it sounded like the real thing, though. It shot chills down the young girl’s spine).

“Yeah”, he agreed, “I’ve realized that much. I feel like death warmed over”.

As if summoned, Riley entered holding a bowl of steaming soup.

“I didn’t make this”, he said, eloquently, “One: because even though I feel bad for you, I cook for no one; not to mention it’s your own fault, and two: there’s a perfectly good restaurant that delivers a couple of miles away”. He handed the takeout to Jessie and left with a, “Bye, losers”.

Izzy smiled fondly at his back. “Well said”.
“Thanks for the empathy”, Tem said, rolling her eyes.

“Empathy? I don’t know her”.

“Is that a meme? Who taught you that meme?”

The brunette’s eyebrows furrowed in an owlish way that was almost cute. “What’s a meme?”

Melody made a noise that was both insulted and appalled. “My hard work was for nothing if you still don’t know what a meme is”, she said, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

“Anyway”, Brian looked as though their conversations were adding to his discomfort, which was more believable than their plan. “Back to more important things?”

“Ah, yes”, Wanda nodded sagely, “The furry thing”.

“I am not a furry!” His cheeks flushed and this time the reprimand rose to a shout.

Except, while Brian could be slightly terrifying on his own, that wasn’t what made the yell terrifying. At the end of the exclamation his voice turned animalistic, like a roar. It ricocheted off the walls and made Alex’s ears ring.

Wanda jumped back so fast she fell off the bed. Penny’s sharp reflexes weren’t enough to catch her as she slammed into the floor and banged her elbow on the headboard.

“Ouch!” She shrieked. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry!”

Melody’s pupils had blown wide. Alex couldn’t tell if she was scared or fascinated (both, most likely, which…not surprising).

Tem, who had been leaning on him, turned ghost white. Her hand had drifted towards her pocket
like there was a weapon inside.

Brian looked like he was going to puke. “Sorry”, he managed, leaning back and pulling the quilt up further. “I-I don’t know what just happened”.

Alex laughed nervously. “Got an answer, Melody? We sure need one”.

Mel gulped, paused, then grinned in an uncomforting manner that made her wish she hadn’t asked. “I think Hellhound is triggered by anger”.

Noah blinked. “Did you just say Hellhound?”

“It’s what we’re calling it. Nice, huh?”

“Nifty”, Wanda said, sarcastically. She stood up and rubbed her elbow, eyeing the rapidly fading bruise with trepidation. “You scared the heck outta me”.

“You did call me a furry”.

“I apologized!”

“Only after I scared the heck outta you”.

She hummed unhappily and sat back down, but Alex could tell she’d given up. Wanda had a hard time knowing when to throw in the towel, and thankfully today was one of the days she didn’t need prompting to stop.

“Do you have a handle on it?” Izzy looked him up and down curiously. “I need to know whether to buy some chew toys or a doggy door”.

“Bite me”.


“How ‘bout I don’t”.

“Guys”, Tem exhaled as if she needed strength to keep talking to them all. “Nobody is biting anyone. We’ve got a plan. We got this”.

Melody nodded proudly as if she’d orchestrated the entire thing, before narrowing her eyes at the small group, dully nicknamed the Brian Banner Defense Squad despite Ruby’s objections. “Now get out of my room”.

With lack of anywhere else to go, they invited (meaning dragged) Park back to their place to get cook some ramen on the stove. It’d gotten late after all they’d accomplished.

Penny collapsed onto the couch and curled around one of the pillows. “What time does your Mom get off work?”

“Eh. Late. Dad’s usually home, unless he has a job”. Alex shrugged noncommittally and sat down too, shifting the other’s feet away.

“A job?” Penny’s face turned slightly green.

Like pretty much everyone else, she knew what Deadpool used to do for a living, and didn’t like it.

“I think he’s helping Uncle Spidey”, Wanda supplied helpfully, sitting cross-legged on the floor and beckoning Cable over to pet. “Don’t know with what”.

“I don’t either”. Penny sighed. “Peter doesn’t tell me much about his superhero stuff, ‘cause I think he’s worried he’ll encourage me. It’s part of the whole mentor-mentee thing”.

“Wasn’t he literally your age when he started being a vigilante?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t want that for me, though. I never told him about my…mutation”.
Just then, the lock on the door started to turn, and Noah almost spilled water on herself while she was filling up the pot. Wanda leapt to her feet, scooped up Cable, and bolted to her room to hide him. Penny rolled her eyes and followed, leaving Alex to greet their parents.

Deadpool, thankfully, wasn’t wearing his gear; otherwise he probably would’ve accidentally impaled her when she swooped in for a hug. Their mother Vanessa was behind him, and Alex faltered slightly when she went to hug her too and saw the expression on her face.

She looked tense. Like something had gone wrong, or something was about to.

Alex embraced her anyway and turned back to Wade (he had the same look, she realized with mounting fear, and Noah must’ve seen it too because she didn’t look so cheerful anymore. She’d abandoned the pot of water to approach them).

“I think we’re gonna go marathon some films”, the older blonde said quickly, grabbing Alex by the wrist and hauling her away. “Night, love you”.

Without waiting for a reply, they wheeled around and bolted into Wanda’s bedroom.

Wanda took one look at her sisters and frowned. “What happened?”

“Mom and Dad don’t look so hot. Where’s Penny?”

“She left”, she gestured to the window, now suspicious. “Aunt MJ wanted to know where she was, and she’s been spending enough time here as it is. What do you mean they don’t look so hot?”

“I mean they look like something’s wrong”, Noah snapped.

“What?”

Alex ignored them and crept closer to the closed door. She knelt down hesitantly and pressed her ear against it, tuning out the bickering easily (she’d had practice).
After a second, Vanessa’s voice filtered through.

“Are you sure? You killed everyone left-”

“Yeah, I thought I did too, but apparently there’s another fucker running the show!” Wade hissed back (Alex almost recoiled. She’d never heard him sound so angry).

“Does SHIELD have a lead?”

“If they did do you think I’d still be here?”

There was more back-and-forths after that, but Alex understood plenty. She pulled away with her heart in her throat- there was only one thing she could think of that could set Deadpool off like that. “I think I know what’s wrong with Mom and Dad”.

Noah stopped speaking, gritted her teeth, and silenced Wanda with a look. “What is it?”

“Um-” a cold feeling sat at the pit of Alex’s stomach. “Do you remember Weapon X?”

She watched their eyes widen in horror, like they already knew what she was going to say.

They did. Of course, they did.

“I think it’s back”.
Chapter 15

POV change- Izzy

Izabela Barnes walked into the family living room that morning; to find all three Wilsons, Ruby, and the Maximoff cousins gathered in a loose circle around the coffee table.

Noah’s head was bent exaggeratedly towards the group, but she straightened when she saw the brunette approaching. Whatever conversation they’d been having tampered to a pause, while Ruby perked up immediately.

“Her”, she declared. “We’ll need her”.

The others nodded sagely, ignoring the obscurity of the statement. Izzy’s stomach began to fill with a tired sort of dread. Common when living with a juvenile psychic.

Unwillingly, she took the bait. “What?”

Wanda clasped her hands together and offered a Joker-level grin. “We need your help with something important- dangerous, too, but important”.

“Dangerous?”

“We”, Ruby’s voice sounded matter-of-fact, “Are going to help Wanda, Noah, and Alex research the old Weapon X program”.

“Us too”, Marya agreed. Christa nodded vigorously.

Izzy blinked. It took a minute to process the information- and its unfortunate implications -before she sat down in between her and Noah. “Alright. Why?”

“It’s back- or, at least we think it is”, Noah explained, grimly. “We thought we’d help by finding out what we can about ‘last year’s model’, so to speak. We’ll compile a list and send it
anonymously to SHIELD, in the hopes they can find patterns through it. Ruby thinks she can make sure they can’t track it back to us”.

Christa smiled and rocked back and forth on the armchair she was perched on. “It’s pretty cool, huh? Ruby said they needed extra back-up, so here we are”.

“So, what am I here for? And this is a terrible idea!” Izzy gritted her teeth.

It was bad enough they wanted to do something deadly, it was worse that they were also aware of the possibility, and wanted to continue anyway.

Wanda’s eyes narrowed. “Well, you’re here because you have a metal arm. If it comes down to a fight we may need you to punch somebody”.

“That’s not an incentive for me to assist. How exactly are you planning on creating this ‘list’?”

“Oh, simple really. Ajax”.

“Ajax?” A voice from the doorway interjected, appalled.

For a split second, the hairs on the back of Izzy’s neck stood up. She started to reach for the knife hidden in her boot before she realized it was just Riley.

Riley, who had clearly heard everything. The look on his face was nothing less than dread- it was hard to believe he was the son of the same guy who ran around with the notoriously reckless Captain America. But, he was definitely going to join.

Izzy could tell by the rapidly growing resignation. With a sigh, she realized she was in, too.

If only to make sure none of them did anything even more stupid. That seemed to be their role in the grand scheme of the family’s shenanigans.

Ruby looked unruffled, like she’d been expecting him too. “Hello, Riley. Have a seat next to Izzy
and we’ll tell you the plan”.

Izzy slid over, so he could share the couch with her. They exchanged one last exasperated look (the look of the unappreciated), and that was it.

“So”, she said. “Ajax. Isn’t he the guy who experimented on your dad? And, what are we going to find out that Uncle Wade hasn’t already found out? I mean, sure, that crazy bastard would probably know more, but he’s dead”.

“Please tell me we aren’t doing a séance”, said Riley. His complexion had gone chalky.

Wanda snorted derisively. “Of course, not! Yes, my dear friends, Ajax is indeed dead as a doornail. But, he left something behind”.

“What’s that? Emotional, mental, and physical scarring?”

“No-” she paused. “Well…yes. But that’s not what I’m talking about”.

“Then get it over with! What’s he got left?”

Wanda nearly looked angry, and Izzy thought she was about to smash a chair. Instead, she leaned across the table and whispered conspiratorially, “a teenaged daughter”.

There was a moment of stunned silence.

“What the fuck”, Riley said, finally. “That guy was married?”

“Not likely”, Ruby hummed, “I got Mel to let me borrow all her dirt on SHIELD’s Avengers. The file said the girl’s name is Adrianne Jeannette Freeman. They hardly know anything about her except age and powers, but she’s here in New York. I know where”.

Izzy wondered if she should pack a few extra knives for the trip. Riley was certainly giving her the go-ahead, if the elbow in her ribs was an indication. “Okay. Isn’t it kind of presumptuous to assume
“Maybe”, Wanda agreed. “But she’s got practically no backstory. I can recognize a person with skeletons in their closet when I see one”.

Christa stood up and brushed off her jeans. “Well. What are we waiting for?”

As it turned out, Adrianne Jeannette Freeman was in a SHIELD facility.

The weakness of the unappreciated was heavily guarded SHIELD facilities.

“Do we have a plan to get in?” Riley asked, dismayed.

*My thoughts exactly.*

Marya examined the guards considerately before she walked up to them and started to speak. Izzy wasn’t sure if she imagined the flash of blue light, but in five minutes they were weaving through corridors and skirting around security cameras.

“Smooth”, Christa giggled. “Where is she?”

Ruby closed her eyes (Izzy grabbed her arm and steered her away from the wall when they cut a corner), and her forehead pinched in concentration.

“Bunk”, she said, opening them once more. “Take two more rights, then a left. It’s three doors down”.

“Great”. Marya walked a little closer to her cousin. “How are we going to convince her to tell us anything? It’s not like we can torture her for information”.

Wanda shrugged. “Well, we could…”
“Wanda”.

“Kidding! Obviously”.

Izzy got the feeling she wasn’t completely kidding, but didn’t mention it.

They walked quietly for the rest of the journey. No one offered any ideas.

Surprisingly, when they reached the door and Ruby began to type in the passcode, Alex said, “Let me do the talking”.

Noah frowned and cut her a sideways glance. “What? Why?”

“I just…feel like I can do it”. The tinier blonde looked uncomfortable, but her oldest sister simply examined her again and looked away.

“Alright”, she relented. “Just don’t say anything stupid”.

“I always knew you believed in me”.

The door opened with a hiss and the eight infiltrators filed in one by one, gathering in a close-knit huddle as their only way of escape shut behind them and locked.

Adrianne had been on her feet and digging through her duffel bag when they interrupted. Izzy resisted the urge to frown when she realized the girl was about their age.

Ruby may have said teenager, but it’s different seeing it.

Her short, straight hair was light brown, with one side shaved completely. Her eyes were a few shades darker, and there may have been scars peeking out from her shirt collar.
Adrianne’s posture remained relax, though. Like she hadn’t decided if they were a threat yet. Izzy almost entertained the insane notion she’d known they were coming, like a horror movie villain or classic movie monster.

“Uh”. Her voice cut through the tautness like a knife. “Who are you, and what the fuck are you doing in my bunk?”

Alex took a step forward and held up her hands in a, “we mean you no harm”, gesture.

“We just want to talk”, she said. “We’re with SHIELD”.

“That’s a lie if I ever heard one”. Adrianne straightened up, but kept one hand in her duffel bag (one weapon, possibly a gun, Izzy thought). “Who are you really with?”

“Okay, I admit we’re not with SHIELD. We’re-”

“Looking for information, Adrianne- that is your name, right?” Noah interrupted. She attempted a friendly smile that was a little strained at the corners.

“It’s AJ. And what information?” Her feet shifted as she took a battle stance, clearly expecting or ready for a fight.

Izzy tensed and did the same, almost not of her own body’s volition. Her metal hand curled into a fist and Ruby grabbed it as if she could keep it still.

“Whoa, whoa, everyone calm down”, Riley said, hastily. “We’re looking for information on an organization called Weapon X”.

AJ stopped dead in her tracks. Some of the color drained from her face and the battle stance bled away.

“Of course”, she spat, “Of course, you are. Who told you?”
“Our friend found your file”, Alex cleared her throat, sounding apologetic. “Look, we’re not saying you’re with them, but we have good reason to believe they’ve shown up again. If you know something about it, please tell us”.

“Why should I?”

“Because people’s lives could be at stake!” Wanda snapped.

AJ’s gaze flicked from Alex’s scared face to her older sister’s. “Seriously? You’re going to use that cliché excuse? How much do you know about SHIELD’s success rate for this type of thing? Because I’ve been here for a couple weeks, and for a place with all the highest technology, they’re practically incompetent”.

“Is that so?”

“Don’t believe me? Interesting, since you came here in the hopes I would sing like a bird”.

Wanda’s mouth hardened into a stubborn line. “Are you trying to be intimidating? I’m not afraid of you”.

“What, are you going to beat it out of me? Good luck with that when I can’t feel a thing”.

“Well, good luck with getting me to leave when I can’t die”.

AJ’s mouth shut with a click. She opened it again, then closed it. “You can’t die?”

Izzy could feel the bad blood in the air thicken, like fog. It’d been five minutes and the two had already formed some sort of “enemies” relationship.

“Some of us are mutants”. Ruby was beginning to fidget uneasily. “Like you”.
The newest SHIELD recruit, for whatever reason, looked dumbfounded. Then, realization dawned in her expression, and she was full on cackling.

“*Oh, I get it now!*” AJ cried, “*You’re Deadpool’s kids, aren’t you?*”

Wanda’s hand went towards her belt, but Noah stopped her with a glare.

(*Bowie knife, Izzy thought. Concealed cleverly*).

“You know who we are?” She asked, carefully.

The laughter died off, and AJ was left just chuckling. She pushed the duffel bag away (*disarmed*) and crossed her arms over her chest.

*Weapon X does*, she said. “So, I do too. I’m gonna say this once- I’m not with them. I never will be. But, I do have a piece of information that may help”.

Alex was beginning to look more confident, like they had this in the bag. “Then spit it out”.

“On one condition”.

Izzy didn’t really like this girl, even though they had technically trespassed on what was *technically* her space. Still, her fingers itched to go for her knife. “And the condition is that…?”

AJ’s eyes were slits now, like a predator’s. “First of all, don’t ask me what the information means. I’m not at liberty to tell you my life’s story. Second of all, leave right after, and I’ll deny you were ever here. Third of all, why do you need this in the first place?”

“First of all, sketchy. Second of all, sounds great. Third of all, none of your business. We’re just trying to help people”. Wanda seemed cheerful as always, but to Izzy it was more like the mask she always wore was ready to crack.

The problem was, nobody really knew what was underneath. She rarely got angry, not even when
Penny accidently nearly let it slip she was hiding a dog under her bed.

AJ’s lip curled into a scowl, but she nodded. “Fine. Can anyone here draw?”

Izzy spared a cursory glance at the others, and raised her hand.

“Good. Come here and pay attention”.

Still half-cocked for a fist-fight, Izzy crossed the room and bent over the pencil and paper that was handed to her.

“Descriptions”, Riley pondered back at the Barnes’ apartment (Izzy and Ruby’s parents were at the Compound taking care of some business, conveniently leaving them alone). He paced the length of the room for the fiftieth time with his hands clasped behind his back.

Izzy, who was back on the couch where she (in her opinion), belonged, looked at the sketches she’d drawn off of AJ’s word. “Yeah”.

There were at least ten drawings in total, each one a different depiction of a man; all of them ranging from late twenties to late thirties. None were familiar.

They were probably Weapon X members. That is, if Deadpool hadn’t gotten to them during his search for Ajax.

“We could have Melody run facial recognition”, Marya suggested. The auburn-haired teen had stretched out on the floor, and was letting wisps of blue energy travel between her fingers absentmindedly. “I bet her computer could find these guys in no time”.

“What if they don’t have criminal records?” Riley asked. He paced a final time (fifty-one), before slumping onto the couch. His head landed next to Izzy’s thigh and he groaned loudly, sending vibrations through the cushions. “They won’t show up, then”.

“I wouldn’t worry about that. Melody rigged it to use security cameras in pretty much every spot. If they’ve been anywhere around the world, we’ll know”.

Izzy cocked an eyebrow and curled her legs up to her torso. She gave Riley a sympathetic pat and he tried to swat her away. “That sounds…illegal”.

Noah rolled her eyes and tapped her chin, considerately (she probably didn’t like the idea of asking Stark for help, since the brunette had an ego bigger than Canada). “It is, I’m sure of it. But it’s worth a shot. Go ahead and make a request”.

Ruby snapped a faux-salute and dashed away to make the call.

Izzy rolled her eyes and passed the sketches to Wanda, who began to flip through them. Her expression was unreadable, but when she looked up she was frowning.

“What do you think AJ was telling the truth?” She pondered, quietly. “I mean…this is Ajax’s daughter we’re talking about. She could’ve been lying”.

“To protect someone? Maybe”. Izzy shrugged, but deep down, there was a sinking suspicion the angry kid hadn’t been making stuff up.

There’d been something in her eyes. A bitter resolve, or perhaps a resignation.

“Or maybe she wants us to get caught”, Alex said.

The temperature in the room dropped a few degrees.

Christa made a hissing noise. She tapped the screen of her phone a few times and paused the game of Crossy Road. “Whoa. Kill joy, much?”

“What? It’s a possibility!”

Marya’s glower was disapproving. “Don’t be pessimistic”.
“I’m always pessimistic!”

Izzy resisted the urge to laugh, just as Ruby came back scowling.

“Mel didn’t answer”, she said. “It’s probably turned off”.

Noah leaned back and made a face. “She never turns off her phone. One of the best things about her is that she always picks it up”.

Izzy opened her mouth to speak just as her own phone- a tiny Blackberry that her father had given her for her thirteenth birthday- began to buzz.

“Dancing queen, seventeen~!”

She took it out, glanced at the caller ID, and stood. “It’s Jessie”.

“Jessie? When’s the last time she called you?”

“How should I know? Maybe she knows where Mel is”.

Christa grinned impishly. “Or maybe she’s calling to say that Mel’s gone missing, and we’ll have to form a search party like last Christmas”.

Riley lifted his head up and huffed. “She’s not a dog, Christa”.

“No, but that’d be pretty funny wouldn’t it?”

Izzy exhaled and accepted the call; seeking privacy in the hallway that led to the bedrooms. “Hello?”
“Izzy?” Jessie sounded like a mix of stressed, tense, and breathless. “Hey. Listen, I need you to come get us. We’re in an alley off the shawarma joint”.

“’Come get us’? Who else is with you? And why are you in an alley off the shawarma joint?”

“It’s a long story!” Jessie’s voice pitched with anxiety. “Mel, Tem, Aiden, Jace, and Brian are here, too. We…kinda tried to stop another bank robbery”.

Izzy was beginning to panic herself. “What happened?”

“Like I said”. She sighed, and faint murmurs of arguing and growling(?) fluctuated in the background. Jessie sounded tired, now. “It’s a long story”.

Many hours earlier

Ironically enough, the day had started with training.

“Going out?” Steve had asked, curiously, craning his neck from the couch to watch her move around the kitchen. He looked like he’d gotten at least five hours of sleep.

There were bags under his eyes a lot. Sometimes, Jessie wondered if it had anything to do with Brian’s heroic stunt- their plan had worked, and they hadn’t been able to figure out it was him. But now, most waking hours were spent on a wild goose chase.

Jessie had smiled back at her father despite that; grabbing an apple for breakfast, cash for lunch, and the duffel that contained her suit. “A group of us are gonna go chill in the park. I have my phone, if you need us”.

Steve’s eyes hadn’t been exactly suspicious, but he must’ve been noticing that they were out of the Compound more and more. “Have fun”.

“I will”. Jessie gave him a quick hug and was out the door in another second.

The designated spot for training was an old abandoned warehouse. It’d been damaged on one side during an old battle involving their parents and a class-A supervillain, and no one had ever bothered to fix it up.

Melody had deemed it the perfect place to practice.

Aiden was already there when Jessie crawled under the old caution tape and shimmied through a jagged gap in the wall.
“Hey, Jess”, he said, cheerfully. He finished lacing up his boot and began to fiddle with the arrows in his quiver, checking them over for any problems.

“Hey, Aiden”, the blonde replied, ducking behind a chunk of rubble to get changed.

While she was still bitter about Melody’s costume choice, she had to admit the outfit was efficient. Not to mention surprisingly easy to move around in.

When Jessie was finished “suiting up”, she folded her clothes into a neat pile and sat down cross-legged to finish eating her apple.

Aiden arched an eyebrow. “Aren’t you part super soldier? Don’t you need, like, a billion calories than what’s in that single fruit?”

She’d gotten the same lecture from her mother- and father. “I brought a lot of money for a big lunch. I’ve found I don’t fight very well when I’m too full”.

“I see we’re learning new things already”.

Tem’s dry voice cut through the otherwise comfortable atmosphere. She climbed through the hole gracefully carrying two backpacks, with Brian not far behind.

“Using her as a pack mule”, Jessie said. “How rude”.

Brian scowled. Something akin to a growl vibrated in his chest, before he wrestled it back down. “She insisted. I think it had something to do with having as much strength as possible for a shift”.

A “shift”, as Melody and the rest of the team had dubbed it, was what they were to call the transformation Brian underwent to become Hellhound.

(“It sounds like he’s a werewolf”, the leader had said, “All moody, like Jacob Black. We should get him to sign a contract that states he has to take his shirt off every five minutes”).
So far, Brian had only done a few shifts, and signed no contracts. Some had been completely successful- while he’d never gone as big as he had when catching the billboard, it was kind of aweing to watch him fight as his alter ego. However, others had resulted in no shift at all, or Melody trapping the raging beast until it calmed down enough for him to turn back.

Those times were far from aweing. They were petrifying.

Jessie side-eyed her cousin as she busied herself with strapping her shield to her arm. “Are you up for one today?”

“I think so”. Brian cracked his knuckles and hid behind another piece of debris. There was a distinct rustling sound as he shed his clothes (they tore if he turned while wearing them, instead of melding into the fur and skin. Melody insisted that the second ability would’ve been cooler, while Brian just thought it would’ve been more convenient).

“You think so?” Aiden echoed, nervously.

Tem emerged from her changing spot in the middle of a spectacular eye-roll. Her staff- Jessie was kind of afraid to ask where she’d gotten it -was in her hand.

“Afraid of a little puppy dog?” She asked, considerately playful. She sat down next to the archer and jabbed his thigh with the end of her weapon.

Aiden swatted at it with his bow and glared. “We’ve all seen Hellhound. He’s most definitely not a puppy dog”.

“Have you ever tried playing fetch with him?”

Before Jessie could ask if Tem had ever played fetch with him, Jace (in full; blinding armor), fell through the ceiling with a crash. He stumbled on the landing, creating dents in the old cement floors. If he’d actually tripped, he could have impaled himself on the magic sword he was holding.

Otherwise classified as, an injury they couldn’t explain to their parents if they took him to the hospital.
“Welcome”, Tem leaned away, “Nice entrance”.

“No one saw you, did they?” Jessie interjected. “Please say no”.

Jace scowled, as if he thought she was doubting his level of stealth. “Of course, no one saw me! Melody enters through the ceiling all the time, and you don’t question her”.

Brian laughed from where he was crouched; presumably naked. “That’s the key word. Melody ‘enters’. You ‘crash land’”.

“Hey!”

“Don’t deny it~!” Melody sang, gliding into the training session, and through the hole Jace had made. “I’m totally more graceful!”

The brunette was already in full costume too, and the mask somehow managed to make her eyes glow brighter when she used her abilities. The arc reactor accessory gave off a subtle sheen, even though it wasn’t powering anything.

Unfortunately, Jessie had to admit she was right. Melody levitated neatly, unlike their muscly surfer-lookalike friend.

“What do you want, a medal?” Aiden asked. “Let’s just get this over with”.

Melody seemed hardly affected by his tone. “Right. Brian?”

There was a tell-tale tearing sound, like fabric ripping, or (and this was what really disturbed Jessie), human skin.

This part was always the hardest, since none of them truly knew if the transformation was going to be successful. It was like a dangerous waiting game.

A loud growl pierced the air. Black fur appeared over the edge of the debris Brian had been using
as cover, until Hellhound’s entire form exceeded the size of it.

Her heart began to pound in her chest, unbidden.

“Good day or a bad day?” Aiden muttered under his breath. He hopped down and slung his quiver over his back; fingers twitching like he wanted to notch an arrow.

Tem shushed him and took a step toward the beast; weapon lowered so it was almost brushing the ground.

“Hey”, she said, softly. “How are we doing?”

Hellhound- Brian? Surely not -perked up when it was spoken to. Its ears swiveled as it sniffed the air. For a second the thing’s lips pulled back, revealing gleaming canines, before it lowered its head and wagged its tail.

“It likes Tem”, said Melody, “Which…I’m not even going to try and understand that”.

Jessie snorted, hoping her expression didn’t portray the relief she felt. “Whatever. Let’s get the training started, shall we?”

“Yes!” The unofficial team leader clapped her hands together and grinned. “I think we should start off with some sparring. Split off into pairs, and all that. I’ll fight Hellhound over here, just to see who’s the strongest of the two of us”.

Hellhound barked. It sounded like it was disagreeing.

“As much as I hate to leave him to this fate”, Tem said, “I’ll spar with Aiden”.

Jace twirled his sword a couple of times and offered Jessie a smile. “I guess that leaves us”.

“I guess it does”. Jessie pressed the button on her shield and the spiked rims emerged (Melody whooped in the background, which seemed to be her reaction whenever she used the special
feature). “I trust you won’t go easy on me because I’m blonde and a girl?”

Jace looked at the points distrustfully and held up his blade. “Wouldn’t dream of it”.

Fighting with the prince of Asgard was a surprisingly good way to pass the time.

*Good technique,* she thought, and then, embarrassingly, *good muscles.*

There was something else, though. Something different.

Weirdly, Jessie had known beforehand he was good with a sword. Thor himself had trained him, and she’d seen how he went up against the godly extremists all those weeks ago.

*Or,* was it a month ago? Time had seemed so relative recently.

But, as Jessie deflected a blow with her shield, she’d noticed that the sword really *did* fight like an independent being. Back in the armory, she’d been too busy fighting her own battles to notice.

It was the little things: sometimes Jace’s arm would jerk, and his feet would drag slightly. He’d obviously gotten better at controlling the movements, but not completely.

Jessie kicked out at his armored legs and the sword intercepted the top of her weapon, kicking up a torrent of sparks.

*Sumarbrander,* Jessie thought. *Odin called it Sumarbrander.*

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the others fighting as well.

Tem was excellent in hand-to-hand combat. She’d knocked Aiden off his feet several times in the last few minutes, not for lack of him trying (Jessie had a feeling he would do much better in a long range match).
“Ow!” He complained loudly, as Tem flipped him again.

“You need to work on your stance!” She replied, as if it were clear as day.

Melody was buzzing around Hellhound’s snout like an oversized, annoying bee. Every once in a while, a bubble of red energy would surround her as she peppered it with blasts, but it seemed more irritated than hurt. Melody hadn’t even broken a sweat.

They were doing better. There was no doubt about that. The six of them had come a long way since defeating a gang of robbers at an ATM machine.

Of course, that was when Jessie’s phone began to ring.

It was the National Anthem- the ringtone for her father, set by Uncle Tony -and Jace paused in the middle of trying to saw at her shield like a lumberjack.

“Uh, Jess”, he said, “Are you gonna get that?”

Melody stopped attacking Hellhound and groaned; ignoring the murderous glare it was giving her (and the fact she was right next to its face). “Ugh. I thought all phones were supposed to be on silent!”

“I don’t remember that being a rule!”

Tem, whose legs were now wrapped around Aiden’s chest, struggled to keep him pinned as she talked. “They’d get suspicious if we never picked up our phones. Answer it”.

Jessie sighed and sheathed the pointy edges, keeping it on her arm as she dug the phone out and accepted the call.

“Hey, Dad”, she greeted, putting it on speaker. “What’s up?”
“Jessie”, Steve sounded deathly serious, “Are you still at the park?”

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion, and when she looked at her friends, Melody (who looked vaguely worried) made an X motion with her arms.

“No”, she said, finally. “We decided to go get something to eat. What’s wrong?”

“There’s an armed robbery happening not far from Times Square. Where are you?”

Jessie’s eyes widened. “Don’t worry, we’re not anywhere near there. We’ll head back to the Compound, though, if that’s what you want”.

Steve let out a breath, like he’d been holding it. “Good. Bye, Jess”.

“Bye-” he hung up before she could finish.

Jessie let her arm fall to her side as she took in everyone else’s expressions. “We’re not going back to the Compound, are we?”

Melody wasn’t smiling, but there was a set determination in her expression.

“Hell no”, she said. “Let’s move out”.

The building was much bigger than the ATM bank.

From what Jessie could see through the skylight, there were multiple desks and computers. There wasn’t an actual ATM in sight.

The gunmen (three in total, all dressed in black), had lined up the customers on the tile floors. The News had said there were at least ten hostiles though; three had gone into the safe and four were guarding the doors.
Police cars were parked out front, with the sirens at full volume. The Avengers hadn’t arrived at the scene yet, and Jessie was willing to bet they had a ten minute window to get in, stop the robbery, and get out before they came.

They huddled around the skylight, which would also serve as their entrance, and Melody cleared her throat.

“All right”, she announced, “Here’s the plan. Tem and Aiden, you’re in charge of taking out the gunmen closest to the doors. Minimal maiming. Jessie, I need you to cover them with your shield. Jace and Brian- or Hellhound, whatever -you’re in charge of the gunmen in the safe. I’ll take care of the ones holding people hostage”.


Jessie didn’t feel ready at all, but there was no way she was admitting that. “Let’s go. The civilians down there can’t wait for us to be. Can I get a lift?”

“Count on me”, said Jace, who looked sort of sick, but like he was working past it.

“Damn straight”. Melody nodded once, and pressed her hands over the glass. “One…two…three!”

The skylight shattered, sending a downpour of shards onto those below.

Jace leapt into the bank with Jessie’s arms wrapped around his neck- it would’ve made a helluva entrance if he hadn’t overshot the distance and landed right on top of a guy.

The civilians began to scream (many of them looked like middle-aged adults), as the two staggered to their feet. Jessie’s ears were ringing in an unpleasant way.

Ouch.

Melody floated down next and threw up a shield around the hostages, who were looking more and
It landed with a resounding thud and left pawprints in the floors.

“Alright!” Melody declared, loudly, “Surrender, or we’ll have to do this the hard way!”

Jace nudged the criminal they’d landed on with his toe. “You okay, dude?”

There was only a muffled groan in response.

Melody’s eyes narrowed. “Hey! No asking the enemy if they’re okay!”

“I think I dented all his body parts!”

“Guys”, Tem interrupted, impatiently. “No conversations! Focus!”

Melody glowered at the demigod one last time, but ceased in scolding him.

That is, until the others came lumbering out of the vault, with multiple briefcases.

“Dammit, you distracted me!” She cried.

The leader, a big guy in a hoodie, stopped dead in his tracks.

There was a pregnant pause.

“Who the hell are you supposed to be?”

Jessie’s mouth opened of her own accord. “Doesn’t matter, hand over the cash and go peacefully, and no one gets hurt. Deal?”
He responded by firing his weapon at her. She yelped and rolled out of the way, bringing the shield up to protect her upper-body.

“Jess- I mean, hey!” Aiden exclaimed, diving off Hellhound’s back. He sent an arrow flying into the goon’s jacket, pinning him to the wall.

Melody cursed and raised her hands. “ATTACK!”

The opposing side seemed to take that as an excuse to start fighting as well.

“What’s the plan now!?” Jessie shouted, taking cover behind a desk and throwing her shield at the closest enemy- it bounced off the man’s shoulder and ricocheted back. She jumped up to grab it and missed by mere centimeters; instead the disc whizzed right over her and implanted itself into the wall behind her head.

“There is no plan!” Melody screamed back. She seemed to be holding her own just fine, but Jessie could tell most of her concentration was being used to protect the hostages.

Jace, who had finally abandoned the injured man on the floor, slammed the butt of his sword into one of the ones carrying briefcases.

“The doors!” He cried. “Te- I mean, you! With the red hair! Get ‘em open!”

Tem shot him the stink-eye, but made a beeline for the doors as asked. She dodged every bullet with what looked like practiced skill, and kicked the first guard in the face. “Gimme some back-up!”

Aiden, who had since been grabbed by a crony and had been wrestling him for his bow, kneeed the opponent in the groin and rushed to her aid. “I’m comin’!”

Jessie pried her shield out of the wall and threw it again, watching as it slammed into someone about to shoot Jace from behind.

Finally!
For a wonderful second, she thought it was going to come right back. Unfortunately, it careened in another direction and slammed into the fire alarm.

Loud screeching noises began to fill the air. The sprinkler systems activated, and a torrent of water was dumped on their heads, drenching nearly everyone in the room.

Hellhound, who was completely oblivious, bounded past with a robber dangling from its jaws. It looked very pleased with itself.

Jessie’s eyes bulged in horror. “No! Bad dog!” She scrambled out from her hiding place and slipped in a puddle of water and broken glass, landing hard on her butt.

Tem screeched something that may have been a Russian cuss word. She pushed open the doors as Aiden finished off the last of the armed men.

“Run!” She ordered. “Everyone out the back, quick- goddammit, Hellhound, put him down right now!”

Melody’s barriers around the (now safe) hostages dissolved, as the genius hightailed it out. Jessie rose as Jace picked up the discarded shield and followed close behind.

Her only thought as they weaved through alleys was, that could’ve gone better.

They ended up in a half-circle behind a dumpster, near the shawarma joint. They could still hear the sirens from the bank, where hopefully things had begun to settle down.

“We gotta get out of here”, Melody said. She didn’t seem inclined to talk about anything that’d gone wrong inside. “Any chance we can sneak around?”

“We need a ride”, Aiden argued, most definitely still tense. “We’ll be seen in these clothes, not to mention it’ll take too long if we want to get back to the Compound before our parents do”.
Tem’s eyebrows furrowed in displeasure, until she cut a sideways glance at Jessie. “You have your phone, right?”

“Yeah”, she said, trying not to picture the way her weapon had humiliatingly refused to come back to her. “Please don’t tell me to call my Mom”.

“No, not your mom. Call Izabela!”

“Izzy?”

“Yes”. She tapped her foot on the asphalt and absently reached to scratch behind Hellhound’s ears. “Unless you have any brighter ideas?”

While Jessie loathed the idea of explaining any of what had transpired to her best friend, she sighed reluctantly and dialed the number.

Izabela picked up on the fourth ring. “Hello?”

“Izzy? Hey. Listen, I need you to come get us”.

POV Change- Melody

Okay. Melody could admit that could’ve gone better.

Riley guffawed for a full minute after Tem was done explaining (Ruby had dubbed her the only one trustworthy enough to give them the “real” story).

That in itself, while annoying, wasn’t the true problem. It was that their cousin would stop, make eye contact with a member of the six, and burst into a fit of giggles once more.

It was a never ending cycle.

Melody was ready to throw him through a wall via red glowy shield, but figured that would be hard to explain to their parents. And the paramedics.

Izzy had come to the rescue in a large tattered van, that belonged to her mother. It’d taken a fair amount of coaxing to get Brian to change back; then they had to swing by the abandoned building and get their stuff. Then they had to beat the clock and make it home before the Avengers.

The group succeeded- barely.

“You gotta admit”, Wanda said, over Riley’s tenth chuckle-fest, “The mental image of Jessie throwing her shield, and not catching it, is pretty hilarious”.

Melody narrowed her eyes instead of justifying that statement. “Why are you all here?”

On a logical standpoint, it was a perfectly sound question. The Wilsons had definitely been hanging around more since the vigilante thing started, but that didn’t mean they usually followed Izzy during adventures and camped out in the Compound.

Christa and Marya were there too, which was only slightly better. The prodigy was actually pretty
fond of the superpowered cousins, despite their quirks.

Izzy and Riley hanging out with them was slightly stranger. With Ruby thrown into the mix, it was kind of terrifying. There’d been a purpose to the formation of the group, whether it would be shared, or not.

On a more emotional standpoint, Melody had been completely prepared to hide in her bedroom and sulk for a few hours. Their first real job as a team had been a let-down, and there was a sneaking suspicion that her dad was right.

Maybe they couldn’t handle it.

Ruby, who had taken possession of the swivel desk chair, shot her a glare.

“Don’t be stupid”. The thought drifted in and out of her head like a boat bobbing on the water. “You know you’re doing the right thing”.

Well, duh, Mel thought back. But…sometimes it didn’t feel like it.

“Well”, Brian cut through the quiet. He sounded like he was about to say the punchline of a joke. “That was a spectacular shitshow”.

“Indeed”, agreed Alex, who hadn’t been there to begin with. “Did anyone record it?”

“All”. Noah sounded more like she was saying, another time, rather than actually scolding her. “Later, please. No one died right?”

Called it.

Jessie curled her legs up to her chest in an oddly defensive position. “Everyone came out of it okay, but…I don’t know. We hoped we’d do better”.

Izzy rolled her eyes and clapped a hand across the blonde’s back (the metal hand, Melody noted.
She winced in sympathy).

“You will”, she assured her friend. “Don’t expect it to go great on the first try”.

“You still haven’t answered me”, Melody interrupted. “Why are you all here?”

Wanda shot her oldest sister an enquiring look. Noah responded with a scowl. Alex managed to glower at them both simultaneously, while Ruby exhaled loudly. The cousins began to fidget, Izzy shrugged, and Riley wilted like a flower.

Ruby pressed her lips into a thin line. “Just tell them. Please. This is getting weird”.

“We’re researching Weapon X”, Noah admitted. “Tell anyone, and I’ll disconnect your head, take it to the alley, and use it as a bowling ball”.

Tem nodded appreciatively, despite the apparent interest. “A very specific threat. Can I ask why you’re researching it?”

“Oh, yeah”. Melody latched onto the subject instantly. She could feel the blood buzzing in her veins, with anticipation now, rather than disappointment. “Do tell”.

The brunette had heard all about Weapon X- well, not all about it, but enough to know it was a place you never wanted to mess with. It was also the kind of thing you didn’t just go through and come out of unscathed.

Uncle Wade was a clear example of that.

Alex still looked unhappy, but she didn’t protest a second time. “Wanda overheard our parents talking last night. It’s back”.

“Back?” Brian’s tone pitched with stress and the word devolved into a growl.

Tem put a warning hand on his arm and his shoulders relaxed, while Melody’s fingers twitched
uneasily.

While she found his ability fascinating, there was always an underlying concern that one day he would lose control, and she wouldn’t be able to shield him. Maybe they wouldn’t even be training when it happened- they would be out on the town, or at the Compound like now, and Hellhound would shred through Brian’s skin like paper.

Judging by Aiden’s silent look, he could tell what Melody was thinking. If she didn’t hate the idea of them sharing an opinion so much, she would guess that he thought the same.

Thankfully, everyone else ignored the fleetingly tense moment.

“Are you sure?” Jessie asked, fretfully. “That’s a pretty big accusation”.

“It’s not an accusation”, Wanda snapped. “It’s the truth. SHIELD said it themselves, and we have a source that confirms it”.

“A source?” Tem’s suspicion was all natural, as if a survival technique.

Natasha didn’t teach her that.

Melody took the news in stride, but was secretly ready for a fight if she didn’t get an answer she liked. “What kind of source are we talking about? You don’t mean-”

There was a pause, as the gears in her head turned. Then, “You didn’t”.

Ruby, who had caught on, appeared sheepish. “We kinda did”.

“I told you that in confidence!”

Aiden wheeled on her, as if it was somehow her fault. “What did you tell them?”
“Nothing! Just some background on Fury’s Avengers, including that Ajax— one of Weapon X’s old henchmen—has a kid in the program”.

Jessie made a peculiar choking sound. Sparks flew from Jace’s fingers (it happened sometimes if he was surprised), and Brian’s expression was damn-near a clean slate. Tem’s face could’ve been mistaken for passive, if the slight tremor in her hands wasn’t so noticeable.

Christa and Marya seemed embarrassed, while Izzy and Riley looked on indifferently. The Wilsons were a mix of exasperated, angry, and stressed.

*Ruby told all of them,* Melody thought, not quite dismayed. In fact, she was slightly proud.

“I mean”, she said, “It’s not like I specifically demanded you keep it quiet, but that doesn’t mean you should spread it. The girl deserves some privacy”.

Wanda made a miffed noise, like she didn’t think so.

Izzy rolled her eyes when Tem looked to her for an explanation. “We went to HQ and asked her some questions. She and Wanda found they didn’t like each other”.

“Someone doesn’t like Wanda?” Brian pretended to clutch his chest in faux surprise (at least he wasn’t growling anymore). “Amazing!”

“Har de har, asshole”, Wanda griped. “But, really. She was kind of a bitch”.

Ruby sighed the way an adult sighs when they’re working with a bunch of children— unfair, considering how young she was. “That’s not the point. Also, her name’s AJ. She described some guys and had Izzy sketch them. We suspect they may be working for the program”.

“But if she has no affiliation with her father’s work, then why does she know about it?”

“Not sure. I didn’t dig too deep, but I could sense it. AJ’s not a terrible person”.
Aiden looked at the young redhead with deep sympathy. “Ruby. You think *Melody* isn’t a terrible person. No offense, but you aren’t the best judge of character”.

The telepath flushed red. “Hey!”

Melody turned scarlet too, and prepared to chuck a pillow at his stomach. “*Hey!*”

“*Guys*, Izzy hissed. “The sketches, remember?”

Ruby blew out an indignant breath. “Right. Melody, we need you to use the computer and run the pictures through some crime files and security feeds”.

While that in itself was a good idea, there was another that itched to be out in the open.

“How about we, in our outfits, go spy on those guys to see if what AJ says is true?” Melody blurted.

There was a moment of silence as that sunk in.

The rest of the team looked stunned, as if that suggestion had been the last thing they expected to hear. Noah began to laugh, before cutting off abruptly.

“Wait. You’re serious?” The color drained from her face.

“Yes”.

“What about you guys totally sucking ass today?”

“It’s our perfect shot at redemption!”

Tem leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest. “Not that I don’t *love* a good redemption
story, but there’s a difference between members of Weapon X and some bank-robbing schmucks”.

“Yeah”. The look in Jessie’s eyes already screamed, vetoed. “Weapon X would kill us without a second thought- or worse”.

Ruby arched a single, slim eyebrow. “No offense, but didn’t the bank robbers shoot at you without a second thought? That kinda cancels out”.

Aiden looked less than pleased at the recent turn of events. “Weapon X would prefer to capture us and do experiments”, he said, the decision made before he was finished speaking. “It’s above our paygrade”.

“How else do we decide if AJ’s telling the truth?” Melody attempted to stare down her friends, with minimal success.

Wanda shrugged indifferently, but even she looked uneasy at the idea. “I dunno. I’m down for making sure the intel is legit, but what if it’s a trap?”

“Better a radioactive genius, a badass redhead, a slightly less badass sharpshooter, a demigod princeling, a supersoldier, and a really big dog, than you”.

Alex made as if to protest, but slowly trailed off as she stared at her shoes.

“This is crazy”, said Riley. “Cuh-ray-zee”.

“It’ll be dangerous”, Izzy added, plainly. “Possibly more dangerous than the bank. If the info is correct, and you’re seen, you could end up on Weapon X’s radar”.

“Not if we get the sketches to SHIELD”, said Melody, “and they stop them first”.

Noah seemed to be thinking it over. She made eye-contact with Ruby, who nodded, and turned back to the leader.
“If the rest of you are in”, she relented, “Then do it”.

“Uh”, Jessie’s voice cracked in alarm. “No”.

Jace offered a weak smile. “Afraid you’ll mess up another throw?”

“Yes!” She practically shrieked. “What happened in the bank was a disaster, and you expect us to just run into something more dangerous five minutes later!?”

Brian ran a hand through his knotted hair. “I gotta agree with Jess on this one. Hellhound-” he stopped mid-sentence, expression twisting horribly, “-I think it almost killed one of the robbers. Turning again in one day wouldn’t be good”.

“So, we wait a little”, Melody cried. “We train some more, then we go”.

“And if we wait too long?”

That was Tem, who sounded grim as well as satisfied- satisfied, because that was the question Mel hadn’t wanted to answer. Mainly because she didn’t have a solution.

Aiden flinched. “Face it”, he said, “We aren’t ready”.

Melody glanced at Jace, in the hopes the half-god would be on her side, but he avoided her gaze. There was shame written in the slump of his shoulders.

“Let it go, Mellie”, Ruby said. The words were strangely light. “We’ll find another way. We do still need your help to run facial recognition”.

There was a twisted, acidic lump in the pit of Melody’s stomach that insisted they were doing the wrong thing, but she sighed nevertheless.

“Fine, fine. Party-poopers. I’ll go grab my computer from downstairs”.
Melody hadn’t counted on the Avengers being there when she left.

She’d known they were back, of course. Steve had dropped by before the mini-argument broke out to ask if they were okay, which of course, they had been.

Jessie had asked if anyone was hurt. Her patriotic father had gotten a very strange look on his face, and said no.

*Probably thinking about the blonde Miss America lookalike who allegedly can’t throw for shit.*

Briefly, on the way to the living room, Melody wondered what the civilians and criminals were saying about their heroic rescue.

*They’re probably calling us human disasters. Technically superhuman disasters.*

But, she digressed.

Melody had known full well that their parents were home, and in the Compound, but she hadn’t counted on her dad sitting on the couch when she walked in.

The two hadn’t had a real conversation since what Joven not-so-secretly referred to as The Big Fight. Pepper had tried on a regular basis to get them to make up, to no avail.

Up until now, Melody had been tip-toeing around Tony Stark with the grace of a ballerina. The key words of that sentence being: *up until now.*

There was a long moment, where the father and daughter simply made eye-contact. The awkwardness of the atmosphere intensified. Mel felt as though she could choke on it.

“Hey, Dad”, she managed.
After two minutes, Tony exhaled tiredly. He pat the spot next to him on the couch and beckoned her over with a deceptively casual wave.

“C’mere, kid”, he said. “We need to talk”.

“Ah”, Melody grumbled, even as she obliged, “our family’s four least favorite words”.

Tony glared, but it was more affectionate than angry. She could’ve peeked into his mind, and almost wanted to, but the fear of what she would find kept the urge at bay.

“Listen”, he began, once she was situated. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the people who caused the explosion. I guess…I thought I could protect you easier if you didn’t know. And I was wrong”.

Melody straightened and tried to talk, but he cut her off with a single look.

“Wait”. Tony rolled his eyes, employing the scolding voice he pretty much never used. “I’m not finished. I’ll admit I was wrong about that, but I’m not wrong about SHIELD’s Avengers”.

“Dad-”

“Melody”. There was something in his expression that stopped her that time. “I know you think you’re ready, and I know you want to help. I didn’t tell you because I knew you would’ve rushed into it, and likely dragged the others along too. You’re a good leader, and a good kid, but this life-this ‘career path’, if you can call it that…” he dragged a hand over his face and reclined back against the sofa. “It’s dangerous. We don’t want that for you guys. It may look like glory and all that, but it’s not”.

“I know”, Melody replied, exasperated. “I think-”

“Doesn’t matter what you think”. Tony was almost laughing, but not quite. “I’m the parent in this relationship. I’m sorry, Mel, but that wasn’t for you to decide”.
Frustrated tears burned behind her eyes, but she didn’t dare let him see that.

“Yeah”, she said, ignoring how her tongue felt coated in poison. “I get it”.

They hugged. Tony was squeezing a little too tightly and Melody really felt like she was going to cry for a second. If she hadn’t wanted to use her telepathy before, she definitely didn’t want to do so now.

“I’m sorry, Dad”, Melody said.

He clapped her on the back when she pulled away, allowing her to snatch up what she’d come for and scurry back to the privacy of her room.

She got the feeling he knew they weren’t apologizing for the same reasons.

Jessie took one look at her when she came back and said, “What happened?”

Melody scoffed and flopped onto the bed, sticking her tongue out at Alex when one of her socked feet came too close to kicking her in the face.

“My Dad was watching TV”, she said. “We had a heart-to-heart. He apologized. I apologized. I threw up in my mouth a little and high-tailed it back here”.

Brian made a vague noise of approval. “Nice”.

“Thank you”.

“Hang on”. Noah raised her hand like they were still in preschool, and she wanted the kindergarten teacher to call on her. “I thought you weren’t sorry for what went down?”

Melody bit her lip in concentration and started to type. “If you mean to say that I’m still eternally
bitter, then yes, I am indeed”.

Tem shook her head and pinched the bridge of her nose. “We’re never going to be on the same page regarding superhero stuff”, she said. “That’s how it’s always been, and how it’s always going to be”.

“Wow”. Alex looked marginally uncomfortable. “That sucks. Ya know, Dad talks about his mercenary work the same way. I mean- it’s obviously different, but you know what I mean”.

Wanda nudged her in the side and she yelped, inducing a small wrestling match which only ended when they tumbled off the bed and onto the floor.

Izzy looked down at them critically. “I can’t believe I’m friends with any of you”.

“Same”, Riley chimed in. He’d seemed to have stopped paying attention completely, and was playing a motorcycle game on his phone.

“Neither can I”, Melody confessed, “I’m too amazing for all this”.

Aiden made a face like he wanted to puke. He crumpled up a sheet of paper on the desk and threw it at her (it would’ve bopped her right between the eyes if she hadn’t batted it away, which just went to show you how good his aim was).

“You’re terrible”, he said. “So terrible”.

That only caused her to laugh, as she pulled up the program she’d invented a long time ago, otherwise known as the program that would run a background check for the sketches.

Melody waited until it was done loading to hold out her hand expectantly. “Give me the evidence, please”, she intoned, in a phony British accent.

“Um, excuse me”, Noah huffed, offended, as she passed them over. “I’m Sherlock in this situation, thank you very much”.
“Bitch, please”. Melody dangled them over the device she’d built onto the laptop— it looked like a mini camera, but it was actually a scanner. She and her father had created it as her first real endeavor into engineering, although it was fairly old now. But, still useful.

Noah didn’t reply, and instead pulled out her phone to scroll through her messages.

“Mom wants us home soon”, she announced, putting it away again and standing. “How long are the results going to take?”

A soft ding! (installed for a humorous affect) was her answer, and Melody quickly translated the data into a file and mailed it to the oldest sister.

“Done”, she said. “I’ll see you guys later”.

“Sure”, Wanda pretended to blow a kiss as her siblings pulled her out the door. “Later!”

Izzy got to her feet and gestured to Ruby. “Come on. We should go, too”.

They left with a casual wave, and less fanfare, leaving the six alone in the room.

It was Brian who spoke. “Are we doing the right thing?”

I have no idea.
POV CHANGE- Riley

“No”, he said.

Izzy snorted, which was close as she ever got to a laugh, and nodded.

“I thought as much”, she agreed. “But you know Ruby will go, so therefore I have to go”.

Riley grimaced, mostly because he did know. “Guess I’m in after all, then”.

“I guess you are”. The brunette began to type out her response and slouched down further. The two had just been asked if they “wanted” to go check out the men AJ had named, like Melody had suggested before her “team” refused.

Riley loved his friends. But they were a pain in the ass.

Reason number one being they were so, so reckless.

“Are you sure we can’t just convince the others to do it?” He asked, remembering every horror story he’d ever heard about Weapon X (Aiden had the ventilation shafts down pat, and they used to eavesdrop as kids in them). “Melody already traced the pictures, and we all know she wants the chance to prove herself”.

Izzy groaned, as if she’d thought of all that too. “I get it. But the others have already stated they don’t like it, and she can’t do it without them. It’s too dangerous”.

“So, we’re doing it!” Riley thought back to the genius’s remark: better a radioactive genius, a badass redhead, a slightly less badass sharpshooter, a demigod princeling, a supersoldier, and a really big dog, than you, and cringed.

Izzy’s expression closed off almost instantaneously. “Yeah. We’re doing it”.
She didn’t speak again after that.

He got the sense he needed to apologize, but wasn’t sure for what. Riley understood that he’d probably sounded like a jerk, as if he was offering their cousins up simply because they had crazy powers, but it went deeper than that.

Izzy was hiding something.

“Uh”, Riley watched her carefully, unsure if mentioning it would get him punched. “Are you okay? I’m sorry if I made it seem like I don’t care-”

“Christ, don’t explain yourself to me, Глупый”, she interrupted. Her eyebrows furrowed in annoyance. “I care about them too. You don’t have to go”.

“Yeah, yet I’m going to. And I also asked if you were alright, which, now I’m sure you’re not because you haven’t spoken in Russian since you came to live here”.

What little color Izzy’s cheeks contained vanished, but her tone remained unchanged.

“I am from Russia”, she said. “It’s not uncommon for me to speak the language. You’re just… never there. Why would I use it around you anyway, when you wouldn’t understand?”

Riley’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Then who do you speak it to?”

“Tem”.

He felt his eyes widen in surprise, and quickly coughed to hide his shock. “Really? I’ve never heard Tem speak Russian, not even when you guys were twelve”.

Izzy rolled her eyes and her mouth twisted into a rueful smirk. “She was much better at blending in with all of you than I was”.
Riley almost started laughing, because that was a blatant lie.

Tem had spoken English around them, yes, but she hadn’t tried to interact with anyone outside her sister or mother. She’d spent months flitting around the Compound as a wraith-like bird with hair shorn into a buzz cut.

Izzy shifted as if she could sense what he was thinking. “Don’t read too into it”, she said, rising from the couch and heading towards the kitchen.

Riley got the distinct impression that those six words had been a warning, so he wisely kept his mouth shut and eyed a manuscript on the Barnes’ family coffee table.

“Is your mom still writing?” He asked, finally.

“Hm? Oh, yeah”. Izzy got a glass out of the cabinet and turned on the faucet. “Not as frequently as she used to, but Dad’s been trying to ease her back into the habit”.

“Ever thought about doing something like that yourself?”

“I don’t have the talent”.

The tension slowly began to ebb away, until her phone began to ring. Ruby’s contact photo- a picture of them eating ice cream at Coney Island -appeared on screen.

Izzy pinned the device between her shoulder and ear and took a sip of the water. “Hello?”

Riley watched with undeniably bated breath, but the brunette’s face didn’t change.

When she hung up, he cleared his throat. “Are we starting?”

Her expression had turned grim. “The first suspect lives in downtown New York. We leave tomorrow morning to check him out”.

The next morning, unfortunately, their parents finally caught on.

“Okay, I gotta ask. Where are you really going?”

Riley choked on his breakfast cereal at the question. It was a good minute before he managed a swallow and faked indifference. “What do you mean?”

Sam Wilson, otherwise known as Falcon, gave him a look that said, *bullshit.*

Riley could feel the beginnings of panic stirring in his stomach. It wasn’t like he could say, *oh, we’re going to check out some Weapon X operatives, we’ll be back before dinner,* and have it not end badly. Only the adults could make excuses like that and get away with it.

“Maybe he’s got a girlfriend that we don’t know about”, his mother, Mira, called. She got up and walked over to the Compound’s island, abandoning her magazine in favor of putting her arms around her husband.

Riley stirred his Froot Loops and felt his face heat up.

Mira frowned, uncertainly. “Is it a boyfriend?”

“No, Mom!” He hurriedly shoveled a few more spoonful’s into his mouth and set the bowl in the sink. “There’s no one! I told you already, we’re just going down to the park to hang out for a couple hours”.

“Riley”, Sam said, calmly, “We’re not idiots. Teenagers your age don’t spend hours at the park feeding ducks. Now, what’s going on?”

Before he could find a way to miraculously weasel his way out of the situation, Joven and Khari came into the room talking a mile a minute. Riley straightened when he saw them.
The Wakandan prince and princess had mostly kept to themselves in the few weeks they’d been here, and it’d become a rarity to see them- or, maybe that was because they were too busy pulling dangerous stunts to go find them.

Joven slowed on the way to the bedrooms. “Oh, hey guys. We’re still meeting up at the Statue of Liberty later for lunch, right? After you’re done with community service?”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Community service?”

“Yeah!” Riley latched onto the lie like pigs flocked to the slaughter (which was not a good analogy). “We’ve been picking up trash down at the park”.

“And why wouldn’t you tell us this?”

“Because I knew you would look at me like that!” He pointed to Mira, who had adopted the mushy expression only a proud parent could perfect.

Sam still didn’t look entirely convinced, but nevertheless he relented. “Go on, then. Bring home some Chinese food- it’s Robocop’s turn to cook”.

Riley snickered and took his leave out the door; startling when Christa appeared next to him with Marya clinging to her back. The auburn-haired girl looked windblown.

“Hey”, she said, cheerfully. “Wouldn’t Uncle Bucky object to being called Robocop?”

“Probably”. Honestly, Riley had completely forgotten that the cousins were coming on this excursion, but he was glad to have them. “I’m guessing you expect me to give you two a lift over to Noah’s place?”

Marya let go of Christa and elbowed her in the side, playfully. “I’m sure Quicksilver 2.0 could run us there, but I doubt she carry me and you at the same time”.

“Better than carpooling”.

“Excuse you”, Christa protested, indignantly, “I am not a taxi service”.

“No, no, you’re right. Taxi services have more class”.

“Riley! Marya, stop laughing!”

When they made it to the Wilson apartment; Wanda, Noah, Alex, Ruby, and Izzy were waiting outside.

Wanda was on the phone talking with someone. Every once in a while, she would rock back and forth on the balls of her sneakers, and Alex would grab her shoulder to make it stop. She hung up when she saw the car coming up the curb, and didn’t look happy about it.

The youngest of the trio looked upset, but she brightened considerably when she spotted them. She whispered something to Noah, who smirked.

“Took you long enough!” Ruby shouted, when they were in earshot.

Izzy was the only one who wasn’t portraying emotion. Her face was cold and stony (Riley got the feeling there were weapons under the bulky coat she was wearing).

“Sorry”, Christa said apologetically, when they slowed to stop. “I kept egging Riley to go faster, but he’s a law-abiding citizen”.

“Screw you”, said Riley. “You wanted me to run three red lights”.

“As a joke!”

Marya blew out her cheeks and kicked open the doors. “Get in. Save the arguing until after we’ve finished our super-secret mission”.
“That reminds me”, Noah said, sliding over to make room and ending up pinned between Wanda and the window. “Where to first?”

Ruby, who was sitting on the floor with Izzy’s legs wrapped around her torso (a makeshift seatbelt, no doubt), grinned. “The nearest suspect is about an hour from here. So, we better get going if want to make it home on time”.

Izzy scowled. “I still don’t like this”.

Riley snorted and pulled away from the sidewalk, merging with the rest of NYC traffic. “You and me both. Hey- is it illegal for me to be driving with all of you at once? I only got my license a couple of months ago”.

“We’re like family, not friends”, Marya scoffed, “So, nope. If anyone asks just say we’re your cousins and that we’re going to someone’s birthday party”.

Riley prepared to state exactly why that wouldn’t work, when Ruby piped up.

“I love you guys”, she exhaled, “But leave the talking to me”.

No one protested.

They made it to the first suspect’s place a little before lunchtime.

Needless to say, Riley wished they’d taken two cars. Between Wanda’s incessant are we there yet’s? and Christa’s radio hogging, the drive felt more like six hours instead of one.

“Okay”, Marya announced, when they entered the man’s neighborhood. “This place is Michael Myers’ style creepy. Are you sure this is right?”

Ruby nodded, but even she looked tenser than before. “Yeah. I’d trust Melody’s tech with my life.”
Well…maybe my SAT scores, not my life, but…close enough”.

“SAT scores? You’re fourteen!”

“And practically a genius. Don’t underestimate the power of my brain”.

Riley could feel sweat sticking the back of his neck to the leather headrest. “Guys. Focus, please? This is giving me hives, and we need to be on alert”.

Izzy’s hand emerged from the pocket of her sweatshirt, and he saw that she’d taken the glove covering her right hand off. The metal gleamed in the light and for a second it reminded him of the same formidable prosthetic that Uncle Bucky had.

No one ever asked the brunette how she’d gotten that arm. Part of it was because the grown-ups had told them not too, however Riley knew that despite how curious they were, some things were better off not out in the open.

“He’s right”, Izzy said, lowly. “Keep your eyes peeled. Don’t let your guard down”.

As dramatic as it was, the neighborhood really did look scary.

Half of the houses lining the cracked sidewalks were broken and rundown, with boarded up windows or old caution tape lining the porches. If there were any cars in the driveways, they had dents and bullet holes marring the rusted paint.

“Some of these buildings remind me of the house on Neibolt Street”, Alex whispered, half-heartedly. She was looking out into the empty area with rapt attention. “You know, from It? The descriptions are pretty darn close”.

“Yeah, well”, Riley laughed uncomfortably, “Hopefully there’s no flesh-eating clowns”.

“At this point, I wouldn’t be surprised”.
Izzy gritted her teeth. Her patience must’ve been wearing thin. “Hush”.

Ruby shot a worried glance over her shoulder, but kept silent. The redhead pulled her legs closer to her chest and swallowed thickly.

“We’re coming up on it”, she muttered. “Stop at the roundabout. It’s the place with the blue mailbox—Mel and I checked it out on Google Earth”.

Google Earth use aside, Riley followed the request and parked outside the house with the blue mailbox (although, the paint was so chipped and faded it looked grayer then blue).

The structure looked a lot like the rest of the community, accept the windows were covered with moth-bitten curtains and there was a lack of caution tape. The grass was slightly less dead then the rest of the lawns and there was no car in the driveway.

Ruby tried to sit up and winced when Izzy pushed her back down. “He’s not home. I can’t sense anyone inside, or anywhere near here”.

Christa made a humph sound. “There goes my plan of gaining entry through pretending to sell Girl Scouts cookies. Everyone’s a sucker for thin mints”.

“Christa”, Marya moaned, but Riley took the keys out of the ignition and tossed them to Noah.

“Okay”, he declared, “What do we do now?”

The dirty-blonde raised an eyebrow, but didn’t question it. “We’ll sneak in and see if we can find any incriminating evidence. Alex and Ruby, you two stay here with Marya”.

“Hey!” They both chorused in unison.

Marya didn’t look happy about staying behind either. “Why am I not going in?”

“Because if the guy comes back and starts a fight, we need you here to protect the munchkins of
the group. Ruby can telepathically communicate with us if anything happens, so we’ll know when to leave, and Christa needs to come because she and I are our getaway”.

Christa wrung her hands nervously. “I can only carry one person”, she cautioned. “We talked about this while leaving the Compound”.

Izzy kicked her sibling lightly in the back when it seemed she would start demanding to join them. “I’ll stay and fight if I have to”.

There was a pause, until-

“Are you crazy!?"

“You can’t stay-”

“If you think we’ll just leave you, you’re very wrong-!”

“QUIET!” Izzy shouted, ignoring her own rule of keeping a low profile. “Look, Tem’s not the only one who can kick ass, alright? I can handle it. Trust me”.

Riley most certainly didn’t want to accept that excuse, but Ruby looked oddly constipated, like there was something she was hearing and didn’t like in the slightest.

“Iz is right”, she said. “She can handle it”.

Alex rounded on her, outraged. “Really? We should still be able to-”

“All”, Wanda snapped, “That’s enough!”

Noah rolled her eyes. “Wanda, you’re staying too”.
Riley white-knuckled the wheel and whistled, effectively gaining their attention. “Deal with it, okay? Come on, we should see what we can do before someone thinks we look too suspicious. Act casual”.

Before he could decide whether or not he should exit the car, he climbed out of the Honda and opened the door for Izzy.

She flitted out followed by Noah and Christa (who was bravely keeping a straight face).

He shut the door on Wanda’s angry sneer, leaving her, Alex, Ruby, and Marya. Together, the foursome approached the front door.

“Quick question”, he mumbled, as they ventured up the driveway. “How do we know if there’s any booby traps? Aren’t there normally booby traps?”

“Booby traps?” Christa’s eyes bulged. “You don’t think there are seriously booby traps, do you? Because I’m not ready for the whole running away from a boulder trope”.

Noah looked at her strangely. “You have superspeed”.

“That doesn’t mean I like to run away from stuff that’s chasing me!”

Izzy offered no comment and stopped on the welcome mat. They crowded behind her and waited for someone to speak up with a plan.

After a moment of consideration, the brunette kicked the mat aside. Riley half-expected there to be some kind of explosive or key, but there was nothing.

“That was anticlimactic”, Noah said.

Izzy hummed and put it back. She dragged her feet over it a couple times, before taking the
doorknob in her metal hand.

“Is anyone watching?” She asked.

“No”, Ruby’s voice echoed in their skulls. Christa actually jumped slightly, and Noah’s lips quirked up at the corners as if she was impressed.

Izzy nodded once, and promptly wrenched the door off its hinges.

“Oh, my”, Riley said lamely. “That’s- that’s illegal. Oh god. I thought we were being subtle!”

Noah ushered them through with a hissed, “We’ll put it back later, hurry!”

Christa awkwardly leaned it against the wall and turned to face the hallway they’d burst into- needless to say, it was not a pretty picture.

“Oh, jeez”. Riley gulped. “Is that blood on the wall?”

“Let’s not find out”, Izzy retorted, motioning for them to follow as she slunk gracefully across the matted carpet.

It was small, but there were discarded beer bottles, trash bags, and clothes everywhere; like a small squad of squatters had been through recently. The air smelled of alcohol, mold, and a stench that Riley prayed was rotting food instead of rotting flesh.

“Look for anything useful”, Noah ordered, and instantly gravitated towards the living room, which contained an ancient television set and a ratty couch.

“There may be a safe somewhere”, Izzy added. She began to head up the rickety staircase, not acknowledging Riley’s cries that they should stick together.

Christa’s shoulders were rigid, but she went into the kitchen and opened up the fridge, only to gag and slam it shut again.
“Old food”, she groaned, “When’s the last time somebody actually lived here? Unless the suspect eats parasites for breakfast, lunch, and dinner”.

Riley wrinkled his nose in disgust. “In that case, don’t check the pantry. Are we sure Melody’s intel is accurate?”

“Ruby said the satellite image showed him leaving this house. It was taken only a couple of weeks ago. Do you think something happened?”

“A-ha!” Noah cried, interjecting her statement.

She emerged from behind the couch holding a tiny flash drive. “I found this jammed in one of the vents. Interesting hiding place”.

“You found something?” Izzy appeared in the hallway again, scaring Christa into backing up against the fridge and causing Riley to nearly jump out of his skin.

“Jesus!” He yelped. “Wear a bell!”

Noah shot them both glares and handed the other girl the drive. “Do you think it could be a lead?”

“It’s certainly suspicious. Come on, we’ll take it back and-”

“GET OUT OF THERE!” Ruby’s voice, amplified by a thousand, pierced the natural flow of their conscious minds. “THE SUSPECT IS BACK- THE SUSPECT IS BACK!”

There was a moment where they were too stunned to do anything. Riley’s ears rang.

“Oh, shit”, Christa said.
Chapter 19

POV CHANGE- Marya

The teens left in the car spent five minutes in complete, vindictive silence.

Marya kept getting snatches of Wanda mentally grumbling, not a kid. Alex kept thinking about how badly she wanted to help, and Ruby was entirely unreadable.

Of course, it only took those five minutes for something to go wrong.

The vehicle that drove up and parked was a black SUV- by far the most expensive thing in the neighborhood, and Ruby made a strangled sound when Alex pointed it out.

“Oh, no”, she said, “That’s his car. They have to get out of there!”

A chill shot down the Marya’s spine. “Get down! All of you!”

Without waiting for a reply, she slumped down and flattened herself against the door as best as possible. The built-in cup holder dug into her back.

Wanda was spitting cuss words, but she crawled onto the floor with Ruby and pulled a bowie knife out of the pocket of her hoodie- unsurprising, but definitely unsettling. Alex squeaked when she saw it and curled up tighter.

“Ruby”, Marya whispered, “Please tell me you told them”.

“I did”. The redhead sounded as if she were trying not to sound as scared as she felt. “I can hear the man’s thoughts- he knows someone’s here. Dammit, I shouldn’t have let Izzy break that door!”

Wanda turned the blade in her hand and gulped. “It’s too late for regrets. Right now we have to focus on getting out of here in one piece”.
Marya nodded and lifted her hands in preparation. The last thing she wanted to do was use her powers to fight- in all honesty, she wasn’t sure that she could. She was an empath, to some extent, and had the same energy manipulation as her mother, but the Scarlet Witch had years of practice honing those skills.

Unfortunately, her daughter figured that juggling with her mind for fun didn’t count.

“I might be able to throw him”, Marya whispered. “Ruby, can you knock him out?”

“I’ve never tried. Maybe?”

“Maybe’s not good enough!” Wanda interrupted, harshly.

“Shut up!” Cried Alex, just below a whisper. “You’re gonna get us caught because he’s going to hear us arguing! Christ, aren’t two of you telepathic?”

Marya fidgeted and blue light licked at her palms. “I—”

There was a sudden shattering sound above her head. The four screamed in horrified unison as a hand reached down and grabbed a fistful of Marya’s hair.

She yelled in pain as glass rained down onto the seat and floor. It nicked her jeans as the Weapon X agent yanked her violently upwards; sharp pain lacing through her scalp.

“Who the hell are you!?” The operative roared. He was so close his breath ghosted across her neck, and he pulled harder.

“Get off of me!” Marya shrieked. There was a tug in her gut and suddenly the hand was gone, having been ripped of its hold and taking a few auburn strands with it.

Wisps of blue faded into the wind and her fingers sparked. She didn’t dare turn around to see how far the attacker had been thrown.
“GO GO GO!”

Wanda’s voice sliced through the brief moment of calm. It was all the prompting Marya needed to catapult herself into the driver’s seat.

Noah has the keys, she thought, hysterically.

She knelt and tore into the compartment underneath the pedals, with a half-finished plan to hotwire the damn thing, when the agent stuck his head through what was left of the window. There was a fresh gash going across his cheek, where he’d likely struck an object.

Before Marya could react, Wanda had lunged forward and buried the bowie knife up to the hilt in his shoulder. He made a gargled noise, like a wounded animal, and careened backwards once more. Blood splattered onto the leather and onto Wade’s middle child.

“Get him!” Alex was shouting, over and over.

Please work, please work, please work-

Marya reached for what she hoped were the correct wires, when Noah, Riley, Christa, and Izzy came barreling out of the house.

The man had finally managed to get up (he was bleeding heavily now), when Izzy appeared, as if she was the one with superspeed.

It was then that Marya realized why the brunette had claimed she could handle it.

Tem’s sister slammed her knee into the agent’s stomach, picked him up with her right arm, and tossed him twenty feet into his own fence.

“Holy shi-!” Ruby’s jaw dropped. “Izzy come on, we have to go!”
“HURRY!” Marya agreed, loudly, yelping when Riley threw open the driver’s side door.

“Move!” He demanded, not waiting for her to be mostly out of the way to jump onto the seat and gun the engine. When he hit the gas Noah and Christa lost their balance, and they crashed onto Alex and Wanda, leaving Izzy the only one left standing. One of the two had seemingly pulled her inside by the collar of her jacket, like she would’ve kept going after the guy if they hadn’t forced her away.

Marya, in a daze, brushed some pieces of glass away and sat. It was almost an afterthought to buckle her seatbelt. Riley was definitely speeding.

*So much for being a law-abiding citizen.*

“Oh god”, Ruby gasped, “Oh my god. Are you guys okay?”

Izzy straightened and set her fiery glare on her little sibling. She hadn’t so much as broken a sweat, Marya noticed, through the numb shock.

“Are we okay!?” She demanded. “Marya almost got *killed!*”

*Not killed. Maybe interrogated. Or beat up.*

“Speaking of which”, she wheezed, “How are we explaining this to your dad, Riley?”

Riley didn’t move his gaze off the road and shrugged, weakly. “I-I’ll figure something out. Do you think he’d believe we were attacked by a supervillain?”

“Depends. Do you *really* want to go there?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

As it turned out, Marya *did* have another an idea. However, she wasn’t sure if they would go for it. Especially since it was risky.
“It’s just the window”, she started, slowly. “We can find someone who won’t rat us out to repair it. Wanda also needs a shower. You’ve, uh…got some blood splatters”.

She grimaced and looked at her stained clothes. “Worth it”.

“The blood and window aside”, Noah interrupted (she still sounded rattled, and hadn’t taken her eyes off the red spots), “Who are we going to find who’ll help us?”

“Well…Lily Rhodes is a prodigy, right?”

There was a long pause. No one jumped at the proposition.

Wanda eventually exhaled. “She’s with SHIELD, though. What if she tells them, or if they find out on their own? Our parents will crucify us”.

“Uncle Sam will still be at the Compound where Mel is, and even if you text her to meet us she can’t smuggle that much equipment out”.

Riley made a face. His hands flexed on the wheel. She could already tell he’d relented.

“Fine. Does anyone know how to get to her place without being pulled over? A bunch of kids in a broken car is something that would definitely catch my attention. Even more so when one of them is bloody”.

Wanda shrunk down slightly and averted her gaze, although Riley didn’t sound angry.

Ruby massaged her temples and swallowed thickly. “Just…leave that to me”.

No one spoke after that. Marya felt too rattled to start conversation, anyway.
Lily Rhodes, daughter of the renowned Iron Patriot, opened the front door wearing Hello Kitty pajamas and slippers. Her hair had a barrage of bobby pins and clips holding it down and there were bags under her eyes.

She took one look at them huddled on the porch and her eyes widened. She peered around to see the damaged car and they practically bulged.

“Get inside”, Lily ordered; moving over in order for them to do so. “And please tell me you didn’t commit any illegal activities, like robbing a bank”.

Wanda snorted loudly and took refuge at the kitchen island. “Rob a bank? We have much more class than that. But-” she gestured down at herself. “-I could use a shower. Pretty please? We’ve had a… long, afternoon”.

Lily arched an eyebrow, but nodded, and Wanda scampered away with a hurried promise not to use all of the hot water.

“She’s going to use all the hot water”, Noah grumbled. “Sorry”.

“It’s fine. I…what happened? And who did that to your dad’s car, Riley?”

Riley made a disconcerting noise. He was still ashen. “It’s a long story”.

“Mom and Dad won’t be back until later tonight. I’ve got time, so please, tell it”.

Before anyone could even think of coming up with a lie, Marya sighed and gestured for her to come closer.

“It’d be easier to show you instead of explain”, she said. “And don’t give me that P.O.’d expression, Ruby. You’ve exerted yourself enough today as it is”.

Lily appeared incredibly suspicious, but nevertheless stood in front of Marya and allowed the other girl to place her hands on either side of her head.
She hadn’t tried to do something like this in ages. Her mother had showed her how a long time ago, and immediately cautioned against doing it with any reluctant parties.

Luckily, Marya supposed Lily didn’t count, so she opened up her mind.

Memories of the last few days- from scanning the sketches with Mel’s tech to what had transpired less than an hour ago -flooded through the mental link.

Lily’s pupils dilated, and she inhaled sharply. “Wow”.

When Marya had shown her all that needed to be seen, she removed her hands and allowed Christa to drag her to the couch.

“That was reckless”, she remarked, not unkindly.

“Yeah, whatever”, Marya replied, unhappily. “It worked”.

Forming a link like that had taken a lot of energy when she was a kid, and despite the difference in endurance, it was still draining. She felt pulled taut, like a rubber band, not unlike how Ruby felt after she over-exhausted her own powers.

Admittedly, Ruby did use them more, but the redhead still seemed to understand. She glided over to the pantry and brought her a protein bar.

Some of the color had disappeared from Lily’s cheeks, and she seemed less than pleased.

“All of you are nuts”, she said, disapprovingly. “I expect shit like this from Melody, but from you guys? Not in a million years”.

Noah fidgeted uneasily. “You’ll tell, then?”
“Oh, hell no. I have a feeling Ruby would make my brain explode, and it wouldn’t even be on purpose. Besides, I think you’re crazy, but you’re right”.

Marya blinked a few times; unsure if she’d heard that correctly. “…What?”

“I said”, Lily rolled her eyes, “I think you’re right. SHIELD’s stretched thin as it is with the latest powerhouse showing up a couple of weeks ago, and catching a freaking billboard. Deadpool, try as he might, can’t be away for too long. It’s above the Avengers’ paygrade altogether. We don’t have a lot of agents to spare for stuff like this. However, you deciding to do it yourselves with no training was really stupid”.

Marya tried very hard not look at Izzy, who hadn’t spoken since snapping at Ruby.

Alex hummed. “Thanks for the vote of confidence”.

“You’re welcome. Now, let me guess, you want me to fix that window?”

Riley managed a passable smile. “I’ll beg”.

His tone was beginning to sound strained, like he was close to reaching an unhealthy dose of chaos his mind couldn’t handle.

One corner of Lily’s lips quirked up into a sideways smirk. “While tempting, begging won’t be necessary. Drive it around back and I’ll see what I can do”.

In the Rhodes’ backyard, where one might normally have a swing-set or garden, Lily had built a toolshed with parts acquired (stolen) from Tony Stark’s failed projects. It was almost up to par with Melody’s lab, and Marya thought it a mystery how neither of her parents had said anything about it.

The toolshed was a tiny wooden building- at least on the outside. When entered, it was actually much bigger, and had a variety of items that could be used to fix the most complex of machines. Thankfully, Lily had built her own car when she was fifteen, so she knew how it worked. Meaning, she could probably fix the window if she set her mind to it.
Marya, who felt only slightly better after consuming the protein bar, sat on the steps to the patio and watched the others get to work.

“Just out of curiosity”, she called, “Where are your parents?”

Lily huffed as she pulled on a pair of work gloves. “Meeting with the poor soul in charge of SHIELD’s Avengers”, she said. “They're worried about me, of course. I could only convince them to let me join when I threatened to flunk my finals”.

“Seriously?”

“Of course, not! Honestly, I think they realized I would find a way to do it with or without their permission. Therefore, they picked the option in which they could keep a close eye on me and still have me home in time for dinner”.

The Starks’ argument came to mind, then. She supposed it was a good thing Lily didn’t know about that, or her vigilante group. Marya remembered Melody’s disappointment at being lied to about the opportunity and felt the urge to scurry off and hide.

“Do they ever mention any other candidates?” Alex asked, carefully.

She and Noah had set out to vacuum up at the broken glass on the floor, while Izzy and Riley helped dispose of any blood spots.

Lily frowned, confused. “Uh, no. Why?”

“I was curious if there were any runner-up’s who didn’t get chosen, but that doesn’t really matter. Do you legitimately like your teammates? I always figured working for SHIELD would be kind of…stuffy. Now I finally know someone who can test my theories”.

“Now’s obviously not the time”.

Noah poked her head out of the car and held up a tiny UBS drive in between her thumb and pointer finger. “Hey, quick question unrelated to SHIELD. Do you have a computer I could use? We found
Lily laughed derisively. “You want to plug in possibly classified information into an unprotected laptop I bought for a hundred bucks at a garage sale?”

“Well…when you put it that way…”

She waved a hand and snickered, genuinely that time. “Kidding, kidding. We can’t use my laptop, but I know someone who has protected software. We’ll pay them a visit after we finish fixing up this car. You’re lucky I’m so generous”.

Riley smiled weakly and gave her a thumbs-up. “We’d be lost without you”.

“Out of everything you’ve told me so far, that’s the most believable”.

They finished fixing the window in about thirty minutes, but Lily insisted they not drive it for another hour. When Marya asked why, she didn’t answer.

So, instead of taking Riley’s dad’s van, they took Uncle Rhodes’s Subaru.

The resident genius gave them directions to the closest SHIELD facility, and Wanda (who had borrowed a sweatshirt and some sweatpants), nearly jumped out of the window before Lily explained no one was getting turned in today.

“I can understand her hesitation”, Christa muttered, “This is where we found AJ”.

Marya pressed her lips into a thin line and nodded. “Yep”.

“Magnus knows I’m friends with you”, Lily continued, oblivious to their exchange. “He won’t
“Um”. Alex cleared her throat nervously. “Who’s Magnus?”

“He’s a former SHIELD agent. Fury put him in charge of the Initiative, probably because he’s got his hands full already with your guys’ families”.

Riley shrugged and pat her shoulder. “Thanks?”

“No problem”.

Making it past the guards went quicker than last time, after they left the Subaru in parking. Lily led them through the same twisted hallways to a very familiar room number.

“Oh, no”, said Wanda, with a sigh loud enough to pierce the veil.

Lily shot her a look and knocked on the door. “Hey, I need to borrow your computer! It’s an emergency! …I think”.

There was a moment of silence, before a voice echoed, “What do you mean, you think it’s an emergency!?"

“C’mon, man! Help me out here!”

Ruby coughed into her fist. “Maybe we should go somewhere else for help-”

The door opened and cut her off mid-sentence, to reveal a very disgruntled AJ Freeman, who took one look at them and said, “No”.

Lily pouted. “AJ, don’t be a jerk! They’ve got a flash drive from one of the Weapon X guys, and we need your laptop to see the data-”
AJ shoved them inside and locked them in before you could say, *split personality*.

The brunette wheeled on them with murder in her eyes. “Let me see it”.

Noah took a step back and crossed her arms over her chest. “Hell no. Laptop first”.

“The information on that drive could be-”

“Important?” Wanda guessed, from where she had already dug around for said laptop, and was pulling it out from underneath the bunk. “We guessed that”.

“Nice”. Christa grinned cheekily. “Do you know the password?”

“Christa!” Marya protested, exasperatedly. “Not helping”.

AJ’s cheeks flushed. “Get your fucking hands off my stuff!”

“AJ”, Lily protested, “They just need a secure device to look at the drive on!”

“I’m looking too. I gave them what they needed to find this guy, and it’s my shit, so consider it payment. Wouldn’t you agree?” Ajax’s daughter leveled her glower onto her teammate, and Lily’s face twisted into a scowl.

Marya groaned and leaned against the wall (she’d gained most of her energy back, but a headache had formed behind her eyes). “Guys! Fighting won’t get us anywhere. Boot up the damn laptop and let’s see what we got”.

AJ side-eyed her distrustfully, but nevertheless ripped the laptop out of Wanda’s hands and opened it. “I’m pretty sure this breaks that agreement we made”. She sat down cross-legged on the floor and began typing.

Lily sat down next to her and pulled her legs up to her chest. “Agreement?”
“We got sketches of the bad guys from AJ, and afterwards we made a deal. I think it was something along the lines of, *don’t ask her what it means, leave and deny we were here,* and then she questioned why we needed this”.

“Technically you never said we couldn’t come back”.

AJ rolled her eyes and motioned to Noah. “It should’ve been implied. Now, give me the flash drive and we can get this over with”.

Noah reluctantly handed it to her and AJ plugged it in and waited for it to download. Everyone else crowded around the two and watched with bated breath.

“If it’s useful, what are you going to do with it?” Lily whispered.

Marya slipped an arm around Christa’s shoulders. “Give it to SHIELD, anonymously. You can help with that too, right?”

Lily glanced at AJ and looked back at the screen. “Maybe”.

The other SHIELD agent seemed not to notice, and shushed them when it finished.

“It’s security camera footage”, she said.

Marya heard a murmur of *oh no* from the older teen’s mind, and felt dread start to build in her stomach. “Are we sure we should be watching this?”

“We have to”, Wanda replied. Surprisingly, her voice was steady.

*Please don’t let this have been for nothing.*

AJ clicked on the video.
POV CHANGE- AJ

AJ knew what was on the flash drive long before Noah handed it to her. She remembered it like it was yesterday.

They forced their way in while Clarissa Freeman was making dinner.

She’d been a thin, gaunt woman for as long as her daughters had been alive. She never talked much, didn’t have a lot of friends outside of work, and rarely left the apartment. But when she gave an order, you listened without question.

Sarah followed with no problem. It was always AJ with the rebellious side, which only served as a cruel irony when the doorbell rang, and the eldest daughter went to open it.

To this day, AJ doesn’t know how her mother knew.

Clarissa’s eyes widened to the size of saucers. “Don’t-!”

The door blew open directly after Sarah turned the second lock. Huge men in black suits exploded into the room, toting huge, automatic rifles.

AJ screamed and scrambled over the back of the couch (the TV was still playing an episode of House M.D.). She turned to run down the hall and one of the intruders grabbed her by the hair, pulling her violently backwards.

“Leave my children alone!” Clarissa was screeching. She grabbed a kitchen knife and lunged at the closest gunmen, and he took out her with a single shot.

Red seeped through the white skirt she was wearing.
Sarah had already been grabbed when they first entered, and was kicking and shrieking at the top of her lungs. The shooter slammed his fist into the back of her head and she went limp.

“MOM!” AJ shouted. She tried to struggle, and her own captor kicked out her legs. Pain shot through her ankles and the shouts turned to whimpers.

They began to drag her and Sarah out the front door, and AJ turned around in time to see three of the men force Clarissa onto her wounded knees.

They locked eyes right when they pressed the barrel to the back of her head and pulled the trigger, executioner style.

Blood and brain matter splattered on the carpet. AJ was close enough that some of it got onto her jeans, and she opened her mouth to scream again when they finally knocked her out.

Of course, that part hadn’t been on video.

The only footage had probably been the apartment building’s security cameras, and the Weapon X agents had shut them all off before taking her and Sarah captive.

But, the men had been unmasked. It’d been difficult describing them for the Wilson’s so-called mission of justice, but AJ still saw them every time she closed her eyes.

If there was even a small chance they could succeed- seventeen or not, she figured she had the right to want revenge.

AJ woke up with a bag over her head.

Her arms were bound behind her back and there were ties cutting into her ankles, but she could hear Sarah gasping for breath on her right.
By some small miracle, the agents had allowed them to sit so close their shoulders touched. Sarah must’ve sensed the change in her little sister’s breathing, because she shifted.

“Aje?” She whispered. “A-Are you awake?”

AJ shook like a leaf and swallowed. “Y-Yeah”.

“Do you know where Mom is?”

That part, despite all that’d come after it, had been the hardest. Sarah had been unconscious when they shot Clarissa.

She hadn’t known, so AJ had to tell.

“Mom’s dead. They- oh god, they killed her-”

“Hey! Quit your yapping!” A masculine voice pierced the air, interrupting her rapid descent into hysterics (all she could see was Clarissa on the ground, and the blood, there was so much blood-)

“AJ?” Sarah sounded terrified. “AJ!?”

“Dammit, shut them up!” The same man snapped, and a different voice hissed, “We can’t shut them up, the boss wants them both intact!”

Intact?

There was a sigh. AJ flinched and pressed closer to Sarah, who was shaking now, too.

“I get that they’re valuable”, the first guy said, “But why can’t we rough ‘em up a little? If they’re
anything like ol’ Francis, they can take it”.

“Did you see the way they reacted when we barged in? They may have fought like alley cats, but I don’t think they have an ounce of their daddy’s strength”.

At that, AJ’s blood had begun to run cold.

“Is this about our dad?” She blurted, before she could stop herself, and Sarah tensed.

There was a long pause. The men began to laugh.

“Oh, kid”, the second guy sneered, “There’s a whole lot more to this than just your daddy”.

The footage didn’t contain the car ride to the facility, either. There hadn’t been a need to film that, just like there hadn’t been a need to film the last time Sarah and AJ had seen each other. At least the men had taken off the hoods for it.

AJ had been sore, and so had Sarah, and they weren’t able to hug because they were still tied up. Instead they’d just sort of leaned on one another, until AJ was inevitably pulled away and dragged down a different hall.

Sarah’s screaming echoed off the walls for hours afterwards. AJ had done the same and tried even when her throat ached horribly.

And then the real nightmare started.

The employees all wore white lab coats, as if they were doctors or scientists.

AJ was strapped down to a hospital bed, they took her vitals, and brought her into a padded white room with glaring lights.
That was when the leader of the operation came in.

AJ lifted her head when the door opened, and a stocky man with a pointy mustache and beady gray eyes walked in. He wore the same get-up as everyone else, except there was a decidedly unhinged factor in the way he smiled, and there was a boy following him.

He looked nineteen, but he walked with his back hunched and he looked almost...younger. His hair was dark brown and spiky, and his eyes were mint green.

He was wearing a patient gown. Like she was. Yellow sparks flew from his fingertips and he was led away by a nurse.

Before they rounded the corner, he mouthed, “I’m sorry”.

The mustached man in front hadn’t seemed to notice any of this. Instead, he came over and bent over the table she was on.

“Miss Adriane Jeannette Freeman, yes?” He asked, conversationally. He pulled a scalpel out of his pocket and examined it. “You sister is being taken care of in the same branch that currently houses my son- the fellow with the green eyes. You did seem him a few seconds ago, correct? Plato’s the most promising subject we have so far”.

His son, AJ thought, with mounting fear. Why is he talking like we’re lab rats?

“Anyway, my dear, my name is Alistair Kane. I’m the leader of this little organization. It’s called Weapon X- and we deal with creating ‘superheroes’, as one might say. It used to be quite the slum, but after a slight hitch-” he cringed at that, “-we’ve rebuilt it to much higher standards. Tell me Adrianne, how much do you know about your father?”

AJ responded by spitting in his face. “You killed my mother!”

Kane looked hardly upset. The saliva began to drip down his chin. “Ah, so you’re a feisty one. That’s good. You see, Adrianne, your mother’s death was an unfortunate side-effect, but we’re fighting for the greater good here. Did you know your father used to run this place?”
Anger burned in AJ’s stomach, but that information gave her a pause. “...What?”

“That’s right. His name was Ajax. He had amazing abilities, but he was killed by a mercenary some years ago. I’m hoping you and your sister have the same amount of promise”.

“Y-You’re crazy!”

“Crazy, or a genius? You’ll believe what you like but personally I prefer the latter”.

“I’ll never do anything for you!” AJ yanked on the restraints and the table groaned, but didn’t budge. She could feel tears pressing at the back of her eyes. “Mom would’ve never involved herself with scum like you!”

Kane chuckled and twirled the scalpel. “There’s a lot you aren’t aware of, Adrianne. Clarissa was nothing more than a stripper who couldn’t afford good birth control when she met your father. Nothing more, nothing less. Now-”

He held the tip of the instrument over her stomach.

“Shall we begin?”

The footage had no audio. AJ was grateful for that.

He started with her nerves.

The electrocution was mostly numbing. When he used knives the pain was sharp. Sometimes he dunked her in freezing cold water and other times it was scalding hot.

The training, however, was the worst out of it all.
Almost every day Kane set her up in a large gym-like room in nothing but the hospital gown, and had an older woman teach her how to fight.

The “Teacher”, as she was told to call her, wasn’t gentle in the slightest. AJ was beaten in a thousand different ways, and then taught to do the same to another, with no breaks.

AJ got used to feeling sore. It was better than resisting- the one time she’d tried, Teacher had almost killed her because she refused to go on defense.

She didn’t know how Sarah was being treated. They weren’t allowed to see each other.

Eventually, it stopped hurting and aching altogether. Kane came back with the results and told AJ that the nerves in her body had been so damaged, that she could no longer feel pain.

Then it was just training. Nothing else.

Weapon X settled on overexerting her body until the “X-gene” activated, and most days AJ would faint in front of Teacher and wake up back on the table.

But it did happen. The other nurses and doctors had been making bets on which one of Ajax’s kids would mutate first. She never did find out if she won or not.

As far as AJ knew, it activated three months after she was captured, although time was hard to judge. It was during training, after perhaps days of zero sleep, and Teacher had been going at it like she planned on killing her for real.

AJ hadn’t been doing well. Her eyelids felt weighed down, her muscles felt tight, and whenever she tried to move it was sluggish and unwieldy.

AJ had been fighting with an axe- a big silver tomahawk. Teacher had a gun.

Her opponent had jumped back, pointed the weapon at her face, and pulled the trigger.
AJ almost let herself get shot, then. The look on Kane’s face (he always watched the matches) would’ve been amazing, but the memory of Clarissa’s death resurfaced and left a bitter taste in her mouth.

She hadn’t been able to fight back. They’d laid her down and killed her. And something shifted.

The bullet slowed down. AJ could see the smoke wisps coming out of the barrel, and Teacher, and Kane out of the corner of her eye looking out the big plexiglass mirror.

A rush of adrenaline surged through AJ’s limbs, and she ducked to the side out of the bullet’s path; prepared to slam the hilt of the tomahawk into Teacher’s head.

Knock her out, like those men knocked out her and Sarah.

Kill her, like those bastards did to Mom.

AJ twisted the weapon in her hands and brought the blade down on Teacher’s neck.

AJ discovered after her escape that “Teacher’s” real name had been Moira Smith. That women had been the first person the teen killed.

Unfortunately, she wouldn’t be the last.

Kane explained her powers as “heightened reflexes”, which was what her father Ajax developed, and “accelerated perception”.

AJ hadn’t cared much. She only stopped to think about it when they let her change out of the bloody gown and into a fresher one.
After she mutated, they stopped strapping her to the table. They put her in a tiny bunk-like room with an actual bed and some books. A couple were about the X-gene, and with nothing else to do, she read them. Others were about all known superpowers, and with some hesitation, she looked up accelerated perception.

“The user’s mind and senses process information at such speeds that time appears to have slowed down, allowing them to perceive what would normally be moving too fast to see and respond accordingly”, AJ read aloud- almost startling herself with her own voice. The room was too quiet compared to what’d been happening for so long.

She paused for a second, and swallowed. She considered the applications of what she could do now, and despite how tired and nauseous she was, she could’ve smiled.

“Cool”, AJ whispered.

AJ had escaped not long after she mutated.

Evidently, Kane had decided she needed to be moved somewhere. Another bag was put over her head, so she couldn’t see the outside of the facility, and it was kept on in the van.

Kane had taken a separate mode of transportation. The last thing he’d said to her was, “I’ll meet you there”.

AJ had never seen him again.

After what felt like hours, AJ guessed there was only one car.

There were more men, though. Three riding with her and one driving. All of them were armed. She’d been training non-stop for a long time before this moment. She could fight.

In other words, it was time to make an escape attempt.
AJ straightened and hesitantly cleared her throat. “I…I have to pee”.

There was a long moment of silence.

“Seriously?” The guard next to her said, unhappily. “You can’t hold it?”

“N-No”.

A hand struck her cheek and AJ’s head snapped back and hit the van wall.

“It’s not gonna do any good to hit her, she can’t feel anything!” The guard on her other side snapped, annoyed. “Just stop so she can piss in the grass”.

There was a loud, long groan. “Fine. Pull over!”

The engine rumbled and shut off. The vehicle gradually stopped and dipped like there was an incline. They were probably on an uneven curb in the middle of nowhere. Maybe a forest.

The three agents led her out the back and shoved her roughly away.

“Make it quick”, one said. He was behind her, a couple inches at most.

AJ nodded and gulped. “Got it”.

Make it quick.

She leapt up and kicked backwards; her feet connected with the closest enemy’s chest.

The crack of his ribs sounded like music to her ears.
AJ landed flat on her stomach and rolled, tearing the hood off her head when it caught on a rock. Light flooded her vision- a wooded area, like she thought -and AJ flipped onto her knees. The guard she hit was sprawled on the ground, unmoving. The remaining two were aiming their guns at her with murder in their eyes.

“Stand down, bitch”, the left guy spat, and cocked the weapon.

AJ threw herself forward. The guns went off. It was like fighting Teacher all over again.

She dodged both bullets and slammed into the man who insulted her, twisting the barrel in the direction of his “friend” and shooting him in the chest. He toppled like a domino and AJ broke the third’s wrist and tossed him into the nearest tree, where his cranium slammed into the bark.

For a second the only sound were the birds chirping and her own tired panting.

AJ inched backwards and sat down in front of the guard she’d shot; digging his knife out of his pocket and maneuvering it enough so she could cut the zip ties. When her hands were free she undid the ones on her ankles and shot the unconscious men dead.

She only felt a little bad about it.

AJ circled around the van, ready to confront the driver, only to find him waiting for her.

She got him in the forehead, but not before he got her in the thigh.

AJ dumped the bodies off the road, got the bullet out of her leg and bandaged it as best she could, and drove the van to the nearest gas station.

She was home free.

After AJ’s successful escape, she’d looked for Sarah, but after over a year of searching and more
than a few people claiming she was dead, she gave up and grieved.

The tape didn’t show her getting away. It stopped what looked like days after AJ murdered Teacher, and when she pulled the flash drive out Lily had a hand over her mouth.

“Oh, god”, she said. “W-Who was that?”

AJ resisted the urge to sigh out of relief. She’d known she looked different when thirteen- shorter, slighter, with long hair -but she hadn’t been sure if any of the other watchers would recognize her somehow.

But, they hadn’t.

*Small mercies.*

“I don’t know”, Noah said, carefully. “She was young, though. Thirteen?”

“If not fourteen”, Alex agreed. Her face had gone white. “That’s…that’s horrible”.

Marya reached over and patted her on the back. “We’re going to stop it. We’ll give the tape to SHIELD, and they’ll stop it”. She sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

AJ wished she could believe it, too. “Then go. I don’t know about you, but I’d like to be left alone for a while after seeing stuff like that”.

Wanda side-eyed her cautiously. Realization flitted across her face, and for a second AJ thought she was the only one who knew, but it was gone just as quickly.

“Yeah”, she said, as if nothing had happened. “Let’s get out of here”.

It wasn’t until Lily left as well that AJ opened up her duffel bag, and pulled out a long silver tomahawk. The same ones from the lab, taken from the van she drove off in.
“I hope they kill you, Kane”, she said, out loud. “I hope they make you *scream*”.

_I hope they make you scream like I did._
POV CHANGE- Riley

It was getting late, their parents were getting suspicious, and it was a unanimous vote to give the flash drive to SHIELD tomorrow morning.

“It’s been a long day”, Ruby had grumbled. “Let’s go home”.

They got back just in time for dinner, as promised. Riley had gotten Chinese food, which sparked an argument between his father and Uncle Bucky.

“You can’t cook”, Falcon had said, “It’s a known fact”.

“Like the known fact that your taste buds are shit?” The (former) Winter Soldier asked, almost innocently, and caused Katya and Mira to burst out laughing.

“C’mon, it’s not that big a deal”, Uncle Steve had complained, good-naturedly, and not doing anything else in his power to defuse the situation.

They were having such a good time that Riley could almost forget about the horrifying stuff he’d seen on that footage.

She was younger than Ruby, he thought, fighting down the urge to puke as he watched the redhead argue with Uncle Wade over which Voltron TV series was better.

Wade W. Wilson was hardly ever at the Compound (Vanessa was stuck at work), for many reasons, but it seemed tonight that everyone and their brother had decided to stop by. Until, of course, they got called down to SHIELD for an emergency meeting. The non-supers included, which Pepper definitely wasn’t happy about.

“We can’t leave them unsupervised!” She’d protested, ignoring how every teen in the room had squawked in protest.
Uncle Tony had found it hilarious. “I’m sure they’ll be fine. If they burn down the place while we’re gone, it’ll give you an excuse to redecorate”.

“Tony!”

Lizzie had grumbled about whether she had to come on the way out the door (Steve had laughed, but looked like he was thinking the same thing). Wade tagged along simply because no one trusted him alone with the kids, despite having three himself (maybe Uncle Tony thought he and Mel would be a bad combination). Soon it was just the Wilson siblings, Stark and her vigilantes, Joven and Penny, and a small handful of those that had simply decided not to walk home.

(Noah showed Melody the flash drive and promised to let her look at the information later. He’d hoped no one would ever see it again).

Riley had been nursing a diet coke on the couch when Ruby flopped down on his right, and gave him the best pair of puppy dog eyes he’d ever seen.

Riley sighed. Loudly. “What is it?”

“I think I left my phone in the car”, she confessed, sweetly. “Get it for me?”

“Why?”

“You have the keys! And it’s dark outside!”

Riley scowled, but got up nevertheless. “You won’t come with me, because…?”

Ruby grinned and winked. “Izzy and I are gonna play a kid friendly version of beer pong”.

“Well. Kick her ass for me”.
“Will do!”

Izzy, who had come out of her shell slightly after the Weapon X fiasco, made an indignant noise where she and Jessie were setting up a ping pong table.

He rolled his eyes, grabbed the keys (luckily his dad had chosen to carpool with Uncle Steve rather than take his own), and slunk outside to get the phone.

In hindsight, it was a crime that none of them noticed it.

Riley unlocked the car and knelt to feel around the floor for the phone, when a tiny flash caught his eye. He turned his head and frowned, confused and uneasy.

He twisted his head and bent to look at the underside of the van, only to find a small circular device stuck to the inside of one of the pipes.

Riley wondered briefly if Melody had anything to do with it, before realizing what it was.

* A tracking device.

His blood ran cold. “Oh god, no”.

Riley pried it off frantically and crushed it with his boot, crawling into the backseat and pulling out his own phone.

*Oh god, oh god, I have to warn them!*

Izzy picked up on the third ring. “Riley? Aren’t you outside?”

“Shut up and listen to me!” He hissed, wishing he could turn invisible. The silence suddenly felt too oppressing; the darkness felt too close. “The Weapon X operative put a tracker on our ride. I need you to get everyone out and call our parents, we have to go.”
A hand reached in and grabbed him by the hood of his jacket, cutting off his sentence.

Riley cried out as the phone clattered to the asphalt; Izzy’s voice buzzing in the speakers. The last thing he saw was the bright silver screen, before something hard slammed into the back of his head.

POV CHANGE- Izzy

The dial tone droned relentlessly but Izzy could’ve cared less. All of a sudden, the bad feelings she’d been getting all day made sense.

They’re here. They got Riley.

As if on cue, the alarm began to blare. The whole room stopped what they were doing and stared up at the ceiling in shock; faces morphing from surprise to fear.

“The Compound is under attack”, FRIDAY’s voice announced, “Please-”

The volume fluctuated and cut out entirely. The alarm stopped, and the lights went out. It took a second for the back-up power to hum to life, but no one seemed to care.

There was a moment of numb silence before Izzy’s reflexes kicked in.

“Weapon X is here”, she said. “Riley told me there was a tracker on the car before they grabbed him. We need to get to the bunker, now. Move!”

The bunker was a supposedly everything-proof room for them to hide in, in case the Compound was ever under attack by a supervillain. Uncle Tony had built it after Mel was born, and they’d never needed it- until now.

“Tracker?” A’yana piped up, followed closely by Penny’s, “Weapon X!?!”
Tem, who trusted Izzy the most, grabbed Brian’s jacket and gestured for the others to follow. “There’ll be an explanation later. Right now, we gotta go!”

Izzy’s heartbeat was so loud it was deafening, but she helped usher them into a pack and brought up the rear as they made a beeline to the Bunker.

Halfway there, she stopped and made eye-contact with Ruby.

“I’m going to get Riley”, she said. “What we saw on that video- I can’t let that happen to him. If there’s anything I can do, I need to know”.

*I’ve been there. I can’t watch the cycle continue.*

Ruby looked dumbstruck. “Are you crazy?”

“*Trust me. If I’m not back in ten minutes, close off the bunker. I’ll be fine*”.

“Izzy!”

She swallowed thickly and pushed her along; nodding when Tem hooked an arm around the younger girl’s waist and kept going.

*You always understood, didn’t you Tatiana?*

The two exchanged one last glance, and then they rounded the corner.

Izzy turned around just in time to get a taser to the stomach.

POV CHANGE- Ruby
Izzy wouldn’t last five minutes up against them.

Ruby understood that on a fundamental level, and it didn’t matter if they captured her minutes or seconds after they separated, she knew.

“Tem!” She struggled against the redhead’s grip; growing increasingly frustrated when it didn’t budge. “I need to go back!”

“We can’t!” She snapped, continuing to wrestle her forward. There was a brittle kind of tone to the words. “If we go back we’ll all be caught!”

“But Izzy-”

“Ruby”, Jace interrupted. He sounded like a strange mix of pissed off and sad. “Tem is right. We have to keep going- do you think Izzy would want us to go back and get ourselves in an even worse situation?”

Ruby’s lips pulled back into a sneer (she didn’t blame them, not really, but she needed Tem to release her). “Oh, as if you’re one to talk, with the whole next Avengers thing. If you were really serious about that then you would go help her and Riley!”

Melody froze further up in the huddle. Khari made a frightened noise when he and his twin bumped into her. Jace’s eyes widened and Tem’s grip faltered.

The younger girl tore free and ran in the opposite direction.

“Don’t!” Someone shouted, and Brian’s fingers closed in on her forearm when the Weapon X agents reached them. It was a whole squad of people, dressed in black suits and dark visors. They reminded her of demons, or perhaps actual devils.

Ruby caught a glimpse of Izzy slung over one of their shoulders, completely limp, before another fired their gun.

*BANG!*
The others screamed. Distantly, Ruby could hear Melody shouting, “Hurry, hurry!” But her voice sounded wrong and Tem was yelling, “Brian!”

The fourteen-year-old telekinetic looked down and saw Bruce Banner’s son curled up on the floor; blood soaking the fabric of his white t-shirt.

He looked her dead in the eyes and mouthed, *run.*

They’d shot Brian, but he wouldn’t stay down, and something else would get back up.

“GO!” Aiden ordered, and the redhead scrambled backwards with the half-formed idea of fighting, when the operatives leapt over Brian’s swelling body as if it were nothing.

Ruby’s last thought before they knocked her out was of the girl on the flash drive.

POV CHANGE- Marya

Marya didn’t see Ruby fall, so much as she felt it.

*No. No, it can’t be! She’s one of the most powerful telepaths I know!*

*And her powers were depleted*, the voice of reason, the voice she hated, clarified.

“We can’t leave them!” Marya cried. “Come on, we have to fight!”

*I can’t leave them to scream like the other victims of that organization did. I won’t.*

“Hellhound will rip us apart first!” Melody responded (there were tear tracks on her face and she was crying openly). “I can’t contain something like that for long! He’s too big!”
“But they’re family!”

“And I’ll be fucking useless, don’t you understand that!?"

Nightmare flashes flitted behind Marya’s eyelids. Deep down, she knew that her powers hadn’t recovered enough for her to stand a chance, but leaving them behind without trying felt terrible.

“They’re practically on top of us”, Christa interjected. She sounded deadly serious. “We’re never going to get away without a distraction”.

*Or a sacrifice.*

They were coming up on the bunker, now. Marya knew what her cousin was getting at.

“Go”, she said. “We’ll buy you time”.

Melody’s expression shifted. “What? At least let one of us do it, not you!”

*Better a radioactive genius, a badass redhead, a slightly less badass sharpshooter, a demigod princeling, a supersoldier, and a really big dog, than you.*

Marya swallowed thickly. “We know. But you’re the leader of your team- the Next Avengers, hell, the *Junior* Avengers since we’re all kids. You can’t do anything great if you die back there. Besides, it was *our* mistakes that brought them here. Not yours”.

Before anyone could protest, Christa had grabbed her cousin and whisked them to the back, where the Weapon X men waited.

Hellhound’s deafening roar shook the walls not seconds after the departure, and Marya was the first to fall.

POV CHANGE- Christa
It was their fault. There was no way around that- they hadn’t seen the damn tracking device, and hadn’t even thought to look for one.

Now Weapon X had infiltrated the Compound. Hellhound was on the loose (the same monster that could hold up a billboard like it was nothing was home free).

We got Brian shot, Christa thought, as Marya went down after landing exactly one punch to the underside of a guy’s chin.

She didn’t want to be that girl strapped to a table. But it seemed it was going to happen.

Christa moved faster than she ever had, but they must’ve known about her speed somehow, or maybe they were used to working with people like her.

Two were holding what looked like a portable generator. Before she could decide how dangerous it was, it’d fired an electromagnetic pulse and blasted her clean into a wall.

Christa’s head snapped back, and her vision tunneled.

Whiplash, a part of her mused, before the darkness won. Who would’ve guessed?

POV CHANGE- Alex

Their fault, and therefore their problem. If only her hands would stop shaking.

“I’m scared”, she said. “Noah, I’m scared”.

I’m only fourteen. Ruby’s my age and they already captured her.

Noah glanced down at the smaller blonde and slipped an arm around her shoulders. “I know. It’s gonna be okay, understand? Get inside the bunker”.
There was no guarantee the invaders couldn’t get inside the bunker, too, but Alex didn’t say that to her older sister.

The doors were open, and everyone was filing in one by one- just in time, it seemed, because even if Weapon X didn’t get to them, Hellhound was running around. She’d like to believe it wouldn’t hurt them, but a pessimist couldn’t make a personal 180 like that without concrete character growth.

Alex had gotten to the entrance when she made her decision.

“I’m gonna regret this”, she said, and ducked out of Noah’s grasp.

The elder yelped as Alex drew the switchblade she kept in her pocket and sprinted full-tilt towards the danger.

*I’m sorry.*

She plunged the blade into the nearest agent’s arm and kicked him the shin, but of course, playing dirty was a bad guy’s forte.

Turns out, Weapon X wasn’t above using a taser.

POV CHANGE- Noah

“ALEX!” Noah screamed; loud enough that several of her friends covered their ears.

“Oh no, this can’t be happening”, Joven whimpered, as Tem shoved him inside.

Almost the whole group was safe now. Wanda had paused in the opening with Penny’s fingers tangled in her sleeve.
“Noah?” She asked, near hysterical. “Noah, did they get Al?”

Noah felt like tearing her own hair out at the roots. “Get in”.

“Not without you!”

“I can’t lose both of you, now get inside and stay there!” The dirty blonde felt like crying (it was all she could to stay standing), but it was harder to ignore Wanda’s enraged shriek and bolt after the youngest Wilson.

Thankfully, she was faster than anyone’s reflexes- dimly she hoped the bunker could protect them from Hellhound, who would likely be a bigger problem.

When Noah turned she expected to at least get the drop on them. Instead, she managed to tackle the guy holding her baby sister before someone fired a round into the back of her head.

*Shit. It takes hours for those to heal.*

POV CHANGE- Wanda

Wanda felt like she was being ripped in half.

“Hey, Pen’?” She said, quietly (it all sounded quiet after the chaos and the yelling). “I, uh, I love you. A lot. You’re my best friend, right?”

Penny squinted at her for a second, as if she didn’t understand. “Of course, I’m your best friend”, she replied, honestly, and the window of opportunity was what Wanda needed to pull away and go after her sisters.

Strangely, Jessie- the last person besides the duo who hadn’t gone into the bunker -didn’t try and stop her. Maybe it was because she understood, in some way.

Wanda’s heart thudded in her ears and despite the fact she had no weapon, it seemed more than a
factor of fear. It was a lot like adrenaline, instead.

*I’m not scared. Not really.*

Wanda was *mad.*

These people had fucked with her dad, and fucked with so many others, including that girl on the footage- who was undoubtedly AJ Freeman, even if the girl hadn’t said so and no one else had noticed.

Wanda wanted *revenge.* She wanted to beat them into a bloody pulp until they couldn’t hurt anyone again, and as she came up on the danger she almost thought it could work.

They shot her in the head, just like they had with Noah.

It was the only thing that would keep them down long enough.

POV CHANGE- Melody

They weren’t coming back. None of them were.

The remaining teenagers (children) huddled in the bunker and clung to each other as well as hope, but Melody knew with unwavering certainty it wasn’t going to happen.

Outside, Hellhound roared and banged against the door. It was a miracle the monster hadn’t caught up with them before the Weapon X goons.

She entertained the notion it was dazed, but that didn’t feel right. Perhaps Brian had tried to wrestle it for control, and lost. Like it mattered.

“We should have fought”, she said. The words echoed in the darkness. “We should’ve gone out there and *fought*.  

None of her teammates disagreed. Not even Aiden, who always loved to pick a fight.

Melody wanted to say something else, but her phone rang.

Joven and A’yana jumped at the sound, but she couldn’t bring herself to care as she dug the device out and looked at the caller ID.

Melody didn’t put it on speaker. The others could still probably hear it.

“Kiddo?” Tony Stark’s voice buzzed. “Are you all okay? I got the message from FRIDAY about the break-in, we’ll be there in about five minutes. Did you make it to the bunker?”

She’d started crying again. “Yeah”.

*I can’t tell him. What do I say about Brian?*

As if it’d heard her, Hellhound roared again.

“Are all of you safe?”

In the corner, Penny’s own muffled sobs turned to heartbroken wails.

“No”.

“What happened? Who’s hurt?”

Melody curled her legs up to her chest and bit down on her tongue. “Riley. Izzy. Ruby. Marya and Christa. The Wilsons”.
There was the sound of the quinjet coming to life in the background. “Did they get hit?”

“No”. Melody’s composure shriveled up and died. “They were taken”.

They’re gone.
It was quiet after that.

The Avengers and the rest of the heroes reached the scene exactly three minutes—two less than Iron Man’s prediction—after the phone call.

_They must’ve really been in a hurry._

Brian changed back into his human form soon after Melody hung up. The brunette didn’t think she could move, so Jace and Aiden dragged the other boy into the bunker. Once he was inside, Tem curled around him; red curls hiding her eyes.

Melody didn’t doubt she was crying. At this point, everyone was.

“M’ sorry”, Brian mumbled. He shook like a leaf in a hurricane’s breeze. “I—I should’ve done something, I s-should’ve—”

Tem shushed him and huddled closer; although Melody supposed her own unspoken grief was what really got him to stop talking.

Brian was always naked after a transformation. She had no idea how they would justify that to their parents (maybe say that he was in the shower when the attack happened). At the moment it seemed completely unimportant.

No one reacted when The Avengers exploded inside, guns blazing. Light flooded from the hallway, nearly blinding Melody, but it made sense the power would come back at a time they didn’t need it. The Compound’s built-in defenses could’ve saved-

The lump in her throat expanded rapidly, but Pepper had already yanked her off the floor and into a hug. Tears that weren’t Mel’s soaked her hoodie and Tony wrapped both arms around them still incased in his armor.

_We should’ve fought._
Tem moved to make room for Betty and Bruce, who knelt down on the floor with their son. Brian’s mother kept firing off questions and his father had a terrible sort of look in his eyes; but there was relief that he was okay in there somewhere, too.

Natasha grabbed Tem’s shoulder and gave her a onceover (checking for injuries), and then Bucky and Katya had swooped in asking if it was true (if Izzy and Ruby were gone).

Tem only nodded. Melody looked away.

Penny was still sobbing in the corner. Peter was trying to calm her down with no success, and Wade was nowhere to be seen (a small part of her was glad she couldn’t see his reaction to losing all three of his children).

Mira and Sam were arguing in the doorway. They both looked upset, which was understandable, but it was a different kind of upset. Both looked like they were trying not to break down right there.

In the hallway, Scarlet Witch screamed. There was an undertone of Vision talking, and glass shattering. Melody could only imagine Pietro and Nadia’s reactions.

It was then, surrounded by her fractured family, that the genius realized Noah had been keeping the flash drive in her pocket.

Noah had been captured. The information was gone, as well.

“It was all for nothing”, Melody mumbled, to herself more than anyone else, but Brian made eye-contact with her and she knew he’d heard.

It was worse than that- he understood.

The next few months were solemn.
The Avengers were always gone, out looking for their missing children, and each time they came home with a dead lead Melody lost hope of finding them.

She and her vigilante team had yet to make another appearance. The public had forgotten about them all together.

“Do you think we could’ve stopped it?” Jessie asked, one Fall morning, sitting on the end of the other girl’s bed and staring at her shield.

Melody grunted and flopped back onto the pillows. Ruby’s words drove spikes into her skull on a daily basis. “Who knows?”

Jessie didn’t seem convinced, but there was no way she was saying what she really thought.

Penny’s visits to the Compound became few and far between. Apparently, Vanessa had caught her wrapped up in Wanda’s quilt in Noah’s room a couple days after their kidnapping; having snuck in through the fire escape.

As it turned out, she’d been feeding her best friend’s dog (Cable) and letting him out. Wanda’s mother didn’t have the heart to get rid of the animal.

It was almost a year before the search began to fizz out. There were other missions, and other attempts on the world or a country, and the Avengers were still the mightiest heroes despite their current obligations. Earth needed them.

There was never a funeral, though.

Melody didn’t know if they were dead or not, or if they were being tortured in a lab somewhere, but it hurt all the same.

The one time Tem acknowledged it, she’d been sitting in Izzy’s room at Bucky and Katya’s apartment: wearing her sister’s hoodie and staring vacantly at the wall.

“It’s like we’re mourning the living”, she’d said, and stopped talking for several hours. Natasha
couldn’t get her to speak, not even in their mother tongue.

Brian disappeared almost every day. Melody got the feeling he was practicing, like he wanted to be ready if it ever happened again, and she didn’t stop him.

She was practicing, too.

Strangely enough, it was Jace who finally said it.

The six had been sitting in a semicircle in the abandoned building (although, they hadn’t been using it collectively in a while. It was more of a hideout now than a makeshift gym). Most of the teens had been on their phones or reading before the demigod spoke up.

“We should look for them”.

No one asked him to clarify, and Melody glanced up from her laptop and met the blonde’s stormy gaze with cautious optimism.

“What do you mean?” She asked, after a period of silence. “I thought we weren’t ready. What’s to say the same thing won’t happen to us?”

Tem snorted, but the sound had no humor. “I know you want to look, Mel. Don’t bait us into telling you that we were wrong, because we weren’t. We aren’t ready, and they paid the price. We still should’ve done something”.

“Just because we didn’t do anything then doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do anything now”, Jace interrupted. There was a stiffness to his shoulders and a hard edge to his tone (for the first time, Melody could see him becoming king of Asgard). “If we’re not ready, we’ll train until we are. We say we’re a team? Then we have to act like it”.

Jessie’s expression was grim, but she looked determined. “This was a wake-up call. We can’t ignore it. Agreed?”
There was a pause.

Aiden blew air out of his cheeks and dragged a hand over his face. “You know, my Dad said once, that if you wanted to mope you went to high school; if you wanted to make amends, you got off your ass. So, yeah. Agreed”.

A smile began to tug on Tem’s lips. “Agreed. Let’s bring them home”.

Brian, who had been studying his shoes, bit his lip and nodded. “Agreed”.

The five looked to Melody, who closed the lid of her laptop. “Do you have to ask?”

“Then it’s settled”, said Jace. “I think we should come up with codenames as well. Half the confusion in the bank was due to the fact we were trying not to reveal our identities. We also need a group name”.

Jessie swallowed and folded her fingers together, as if she were praying. “Well, Izzy and Riley used to joke about how ‘patriotic I was…do you think Liberty would be a good?”

“I think it sounds badass and perfect”, Melody declared, ignoring the tugs on her heartstrings. “I’ll be Omnia, ‘cause that means everything in Latin, and I’m hella conceited. At least, that’s what Marya would say”.

Tem smiled. “If we’re going for symbolic, I’ll be Viper. Izzy always said I had excellent reflexes”.

Aiden reclined on a chunk of stone and folded his arms behind his head. “I’ll be Raptor, like the hawks and the eagles. Christa joked that my eyesight was better than my Dad’s, which was blatantly untrue, but nice to hear”.

“Noah said I should call myself ‘Hammer Time’, after the song, but since Wanda and Alex would slap me if I listened to her, I’ll go with Einherji”, Jace said, snickering. “Ruby loved to tease me with old Norse myths, because of how weird most of them are”.

It was nostalgic and sad to talk about them, but for once it didn’t feel like an open wound. Melody
made a note to tell them all about this when they were rescued.

“I, uh- already have a codename”, Brian said, sheepishly. “Sorry to disappoint. But what about the team name?”

“The Junior Avengers”, she blurted, without thinking.

Instantly, all eyes turned to look at her. Aiden arched a thin, disbelieving eyebrow.

“You want to give us a name that sounds like it belongs at a preschool?” He asked, belatedly. “Okay, then. Next?”

Melody sighed loudly. “No, it’s…it’s what Marya called us, before she and Christa went to go be the distractions. She told me, ‘you’re the leader of your team- the Next Avengers, hell, the Junior Avengers since we’re all kids. You can’t do anything great if you die back there’. Do you think she knew we would try to find them?”

“She must’ve”, Aiden mused, dejectedly. “Marya’s a smart cookie. You know, as childish as it sounds, I think it could grow on me. What about you guys?”

“I’ve never really cared for brandings much, but it’s got a nice ring to it”. Jace shrugged and looked at Jessie, who was almost grinning now.

“It fits”, she said. “Not sure how, and yet…it does”.

“It’s good”, Brian approved, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’s really good”.

Tem shook her head and smirked. “Not just good, I think”.

“Correct!” Melody announced, sweeping to her feet. “Training starts now, young Padawans. In the words of Uncle Wade, the Junior Avengers sounds like a fucking franchise!”

POV CHANGE- Penny
While the Junior Avengers was solidified, Penny sat in Wanda’s room at the Wilson’s apartment, and made up her mind.

She’d kept the stretchy red material from before, when this whole thing started. The brunette twisted the fabric in her hands and recalled the idea she hadn’t acted on then.

Penny missed her best friend horribly. In hindsight, Wanda had probably been achingly codependent, but the other girl hadn’t realized how much she relied on her until she was no longer there to provide support.

*She was my rock,* Penny thought, sadly. *I didn’t know it, but she was.*

Inseparable since they were seven. Eight- soon to be nine -years.

She knew that Melody and her team believed they weren’t dead. And perhaps they were correct, but Penny didn’t know whether she preferred them dead and at peace or alive and in pain. It didn’t change the fact she’d watched Wanda run down that hallway and not come back. She knew what she had to do to make sure that didn’t happen to anybody else.

“Hey, Penny”.

Penny flinched. Her grip on the material flexed. For a second, she thought Wanda’s parents had come home (Wade and Vanessa opted to stay away from the empty apartment, so, unlikely), until she realized Joven was shimmying through the window.

She blinked; surprised. “H-Hey, Joven”.

He offered a smile and sat down next to her on the bed.

Khari, A’yana, and Tasha followed him inside, and for a second Penny wondered if he’d enlisted their help in dragging her back to the Compound (she knew she hadn’t been visiting as often as she should be. They had a right to be worried).

Joven nudged her and gestured to the fabric. “What’s that?”
Penny swallowed and pulled it closer. “It’s, uh, old stuff left over from when Noah and her sisters ordered Melody’s supplies. I kept it, although I know where the rest of it is. Mel gave what remained to Alex”.

“What are you going to use it for?”

A’yana sat down in front of them and curled her legs up to her chest. “You are going to do what Peter did at your age, aren’t you?”

Penny was almost sixteen, not fifteen, but it seemed pointless to correct her. It was even more pointless to pretend the older girl was wrong.

“Yeah. Wanda would be off the walls right now if she were here”.

Tasha reached over and patted her hand. “She’d insist on coming with you, wouldn’t she?”

“Oh, definitely. Wanda insisted on coming with me everywhere”. Penny swallowed back a sob and fought the tears from her eyes.

*I’m sick of crying.*

Khari and Joven exchanged a look. Penny prepared to defend her decision (Khari wasn’t the most supportive when it came to vigilantism), but the rebukes never came.

Joven put an arm around her in a half-hug. “Well, since Wanda’s not here to come with you, we’ll just have to be her stand-in until she gets back. Right, guys?”

“Right”, said Khari. “A’yana?”

“Right. What about you, Tasha?”
Tasha rolled her eyes squared her shoulders. “Obviously. We’ll be quite the team”.

Penny didn’t know whether to yell or burst into tears. “What? Y-You can’t insert yourselves like that, this wasn’t a volunteer thing-”

“Oh, can it with the self-righteousness Park”, Joven scoffed. “We’re in. Melody’s always wanted to build a replica of the Ant-Man suit anyway. I’ll just be her guinea pig”.

“Seriously?”

“Of course”. A’yana beamed reassuringly. “You’re our friend, Penny. Wanda would never forgive us if we didn’t have your back- I barely knew her, and even I can tell that much. Now, what do you say?”

Penny managed a watery grin in return. “I’d say that sounds like a plan”.

Mel’s going to have a heart attack.

Melody didn’t have a heart attack, but she did jump up and down and scream.

“THANK YOU!” She shouted in Joven’s face. “THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU FOR THIS GLORIOUS OPPORTUNITY!”

Joven looked overwhelmed and grateful simultaneously. “I’m guessing that means you’ll let me go around in a suit that can grow and shrink?”

“HELL YES!”

“Melody”, Aiden protested, exasperated. “Tone it down!”

She gave him an affronted look. “’Tone it down’ is not in my vocabulary!”
Penny exhaled as she watched the two of them begin to argue.

Resolving to find their friends seemed to have put the spring back in their step, so to speak. They still missed them, of course, but now there was a feeling there would be no need to for that much longer.

Penny and her group had found the vigilantes (called the “Junior Avengers”, according to Tem, and no one dared question it) in the abandoned building they used.

They’d just finished a training session, if the sweat Jessie was toweling off her face was anything to go by. Brian wasn’t naked or changing his clothes, which meant he probably hadn’t shifted today, and Penny was more than okay with that.

The sound of Hellhound outside the bunker was going to give her continuous nightmares.

Khari sat on the dusty floor and looked around with vague curiosity. “Where’s Jace?”

“Outside”, Jessie said, shrugging. “His dad called him”.

“Thor has a phone?”

“Tony forced him to buy one. I keep forgetting you and A’yana weren’t there for that argument”.

Melody snickered. “The power went out for three blocks”.

Aiden opened his mouth as if to start another argument and Tem silenced him with a glare.

“Don’t be pissy just because you were finishing the last few episodes of Breaking Bad at the time”, she retorted, and Joven laughed nervously.

Penny was starting to think everything about Joven’s personality was nervous. She’d hung out with
him the most when Khari wasn’t around, and he was a flighty kind of guy.

_Hopefully he’ll be more confident when he wears a suit that can grow and shrink._

A metaphorical lightbulb went off inside her head. “Oh!”

She pulled the red fabric out of her bag and handed it to Melody, who examined it with a critical (and slightly confused) eye.

“I know it’s not my birthday”, she said, questioningly.

“I was thinking I could make my suit out of this”, she said. “If it’s not too much trouble, I could use some input”.

Melody pulled on the stuff experimentally and hummed when it didn’t rip. “It’s certainly strong enough. But you have to do my math homework for a year”.

“You’re homeschooled!”

“I rest my case”. She winked and passed it back carefully. “It would be pleasure. You guys plan on using the rest of the leftover stuff, right?”

“Yeah”.

“Then you’ll have to bring me that too. Unless any of you know how to sow, besides your leader?”

Joven raised his hand. “I can cross-stitch?”

“Perfect! You’ll be my helper”.

Tasha giggled at the look on his face when Jace came back in from outside, pale as a sheet and
sweating from not just the workout.

“Uh, guys?” He ran a hand through his hair. “We’ve got a situation. SHIELD called my dad and me in to meet a superpowered girl they apprehended”.

Tem straightened. “Superpowered girl? How old?”

“My age. I think that might be why they want me to come?”

Penny crossed her arms over her chest. “But, you said apprehended. Is she a criminal?”

Jace looked kind of nauseous. “I don’t think so, she may have been on the run. Mom said her name was Saleitha Grey”.

“Saleitha Grey?” Brian cocked his head to the side (Joven jumped when he spoke. For a kid that could turn into a giant predator, he was scarily soundless). “I’m guessing a mutant?”

He shook his head. “Not a mutant. Asgardian”.

“An Asgardian?” If Aiden was drinking something he probably would’ve spat it out. “How?”

Melody hummed unhappily. “I knew there was another demigod, in SHIELD’s Avengers. Katarina Paige. Her mother’s supposedly Amora the Enchantress”.

“Yeah, well, Saleitha’s not related to Amora the Enchantress”. Jace rocked back and forth on the heels of his feet, anxiously. “She’s Loki’s daughter”.

Chapter 23

POV CHANGE- Jace

Jace wasn’t sure of his expectations when he and his father arrived at the SHIELD-approved location, to meet his Uncle’s daughter. However, he wasn’t expecting her to be blue.

Saleitha Grey had been placed in an interrogation room; looking incredibly bored in the provided uncomfortable plastic chair. Through the two-way mirror, Jace could see his cousin’s mess of thick black hair, orange-red eyes, and, of course, blue skin. There were ridges on her face, as well (ancestral markings? He’d done a little bit of research on Jotuns when he was younger, but that had been a long time ago).

Thor stared at her with nothing but dumb shock. “Who is her mother?” He asked, finally, turning to Phil Coulson- the agent who escorted them.

“Uncle Phil”, as he was dubbed by a few members of the family, eyed Saleitha with an unreadable expression. “Ziva Grey, according to a few sources. Allegedly she and her mother lived in Alaska, but there’s no record of a Ziva Grey in that state. Much less one with an almost-seventeen-year-old”.

Jace was horrendously confused, but Thor only nodded thoughtfully.

“I should’ve guessed it would be her”, he said. “Ziva Grey is the alias of a childhood friend of Loki’s. Sigyn, I believe. She left Asgard soon after my brother’s first disappearance, and never returned. Everyone assumed her dead until we found her posing as a mortal”.

Phil frowned. “No one questioned her just…showing up?”

“Sigyn is a sorceress. She has her tricks”.

“Why did she leave Asgard?”

At that, Thor’s expression twisted. “She thought Loki alive, unlike the rest of us. She left with the
idea she could bring him home. After she found out what had become of him during the Battle of New York, she thought the shame too great to return”.

Jace crossed his arms over his chest and cleared his throat, to gain their attention. “Why didn’t you ever tell me about her?”

Thor smiled weakly, but there was a twinkle in his eye. “Sigyn loves her secrets. She’s a lot like my brother was, when we were younger”.

Phil nodded, troubled, before sighing. “Any idea where she could’ve gone?”

“Gone?”

“We contacted Alaskan police. The Grey household was nothing but ashes, and Ziva- or whatever she calls herself -was nowhere to be found”.

“Sigyn would not have abandoned her child without reason. Have you asked the girl what happened?”

“That’s the problem”, Phil snorted. “For a supposed silvertongue for a father, she won’t talk to us. Well, not without some well-placed insults, at least. She made fun of Eric’s tie. I think he threw it out afterwards”.

Jace spared another glance at Saleitha, who was now picking at a loose thread on her jeans, and turned back to the adults. “Why are we here?”

“Sigyn may have told her about you. We figured you have a better shot at getting answers”.

Thor met Jace’s eyes and exhaled, slowly. “You don’t have to join me”.

“No”, Jace muttered. “I think I do. Let’s get this over with”.
Phil accompanied them to the interrogation room, and Saleitha straightened when the trio filed inside one by one.

“I’m guessing it’s a no-show on that soda?” She asked, dejectedly. “Is that Thor?”

Phil sat in the chair across from her and folded his hands. “You know that your mother is Asgardian. We’d hoped she would’ve told you about him”.

Saleitha laughed derisively. “Mom didn’t talk about Asgard a lot. The only reason I know any of what I know is because I found all her old spell books, and she was forced to spill”.

“Spell books?” Thor perked up. “You’ve learned magic?”

“Well, from what I’ve been told, it’s kind of a family trait”. She gestured down at herself and blew air out of her cheeks. “For example, I don’t usually look like this. But these walls have an uncanny ability to block my Seidr”. She seemed mildly annoyed by that.

Jace must’ve furrowed his eyebrows, because Saleitha’s gaze flickered over to him. Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Norse magicky stuff”, she explained. “Also, who are you?”

“My son”, Thor declared, before he could so much as open his mouth, “Son of Coul thought he could be…helpful, in getting you to tell us what has befallen Sigyn- err, Ziva”.

Saleitha didn’t look convinced. “Did you think I would swoon at a pretty boy?”

“I’m not a boy, I’m a man!”

“Keep telling yourself that”.

“Enough”, Phil stressed, as if he were a parent, silencing them both. “Saleitha, you know who your dad is, correct? Did he have anything to do with her disappearance?”

The dark-haired girl scowled. “Mom told me who Dad was a couple weeks before… this hit the
fan. I’d doubt he’d use me or Mom for ‘evil purposes’ anyway- I’ve never met him, and she claimed she found out she was pregnant after he left”.

“We could help you find her a lot quicker if you would just cooperate with us-”

“Your mother is a friend, and a former shieldmate”, Thor interrupted, not unkindly. “I swear on the throne of Asgard I will do anything in my power to help you find her. Now, will you please tell us what happened?”

Jace was taken aback at the earnestness of his father’s tone, and judging by the looks of the others, he wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

Saleitha looked down at the floor for a minute. She swallowed. “I’m not talking because I don’t know. I was at school when it happened”.

“Why didn’t you go to the authorities?”

“I’m not…well-liked. I didn’t really know how to control my magic when I was younger, so a lot of people thought I was a mutant, and the town I live in definitely isn’t mutant friendly. The cops were more likely to believe I was covering something up than reporting a missing person”.

Phil’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t know how to control it?”

Saleitha glared at him. “I didn’t kill anyone, if that’s what you mean. I used to blow out lightbulbs when I was upset, stuff like that. When I was in Freshmen year of high school I had a panic attack at a party and destroyed the bathroom”.

“Destroyed?”

“Yes. I paid off the debt. Leave me alone”. There was a hint of defensiveness to her posture and tone now. “Speaking of the shitshow where I come from, when can I go home?”

Phil cringed at that. “I’m sorry Saleitha, but we can’t send you back to Alaska without adult supervision. You’re still a minor. Not to mention that if anything came for your mother, it could
come for you too. You can go back once we find her”.

Saleitha’s face contorted into a mixture of frustration and outrage. “Then where am I supposed to go, genius? There’s no way I’m staying here!”

“We can set something up temporarily-”

“What, like foster care? How-”

“Loki is my brother, and therefore Saleitha is my niece”, Thor interjected. The ceiling shook slightly, and thunder rumbled outside. “She can stay with us until Sigyn is found”.

There was a moment of silence. Jace felt his jaw drop in shock.

Saleitha looked stunned. “Seriously?”

“Are you sure about this?” Phil added, perplexed.

“She’s family”, Jace blurted, before he could stop himself. “Why wouldn’t he be sure?”

Saleitha was quiet. Coulson looked back and forth between the three and eventually sighed; rising to his feet to leave.

“I’ll discuss it with my superiors”, he said. “But it’s not a bad idea”.

The door shutting felt too loud.

SHIELD agreed to sign custody over to Thor, for the time being, although Saleitha didn’t seem on board with it until the God of Thunder said they could go to Asgard, and ask Heimdall if he’d seen what had happened to Ziva (Sigyn?) Grey.
Jace walked awkwardly next to her; gawking embarrassingly when they exited the facility and her appearance changed.

The blue skin was traded for a darker complexion, and the red eyes turned a vibrant shade of green. The only thing that remained unaltered was her hair.

“What?” Saleitha asked, smirking. “I did say I didn’t usually look like that”.

“Yeah”, Jace agreed, faintly, “You did”.

Thor didn’t look fazed at the display of magic. “We must go back to the Avengers Compound, so I can inform Viveca of what has transpired. Are you hungry, Saleitha? Mortal ‘fast food’ is arguably one of the best inventions of this planet”.

Saleitha glanced at Jace before focusing back on Thor. “Um. I guess I could eat? The agent back there tried to offer me a sandwich, but I thought it might’ve been poisoned with truth serum or something”.

“Nonsense! The Son of Coul is an honest man. He would not resort to such tactics”.

She looked skeptical, but shrugged. “Whatever. So, McDonalds?”

“McDonalds it is! Come, children”. Thor started off towards the car and Jace darted forward to catch up, grabbing Saleitha’s arm and pulling her along.

“Fair warning”, he said, under his breath, “My extended family is very, very strange”.

“Yeah”, she mumbled, escaping his grip and clinging to the straps of her duffel bag. “I gathered that much. Are you really the heir to throne of Asgard?”

“Technically? I’ve only been there, like, twice”.

“Twice?” Saleitha seemed to find the notion hilarious, and Jace flushed despite himself.

“Hey!” He snapped. “It’s not easy being half-mortal when you’re surrounded by a bunch of people who expect you to snap enemies in half like twigs”.

She hummed considerately and sidestepped a crack in the pavement. “Mom did say Asgardians could be a little…over the top. What’s the king like?”

_He is not ready. Have you even taught the boy to fight?_

“Odin? He’s, uh…interesting”.

“He doesn’t like you very much, does he?” Saleitha almost sounded sympathetic, which only made Jace want to punch (or possibly stab) something.

“No, he likes me just fine”, he said, too loudly, and cringed. “That wasn’t convincing, was it?”

“Do you want me to be nice or do you want me to be honest?”

“I’m amazed you even asked for a preference. Did you actually bully a guy into throwing out his tie?”

Saleitha snickered and kicked a stray pebble with one of her combat boots. “It was just a bit of fun. Now, back to you and your granddaddy issues. Odin doesn’t like you because you’re half-mortal, right?”

_He will most likely have a mortal lifespan._

_Is that a problem, father?_

“Yeah”. Jace sighed and focused on the ground; unwilling to look at her. “I guess you could say that. Most Asgardians don’t think very highly of humans”.
“It’s bullshit, if you ask me”.

“Says someone who isn’t even human to begin with”.

Saleitha grunted, unimpressed. “I’ve grown up around them, though. Asgard doesn’t give them nearly enough credit, and they don’t realize there’s more than meets the eye. For instance—” she grabbed his wrist and held it up; turning it towards him so the bracelet and the symbol on it was visible. “This, right here? Powerful magic. Where’d you get it?”

Jace tore his arm back and held it away from her, defensively. “Nowhere”.

“I can tell you’re lying, although that was better than your last attempt”.

He gritted his teeth and groaned. “It…I got it the last time I went to my other homeland. Listen, you can’t tell my Dad. Got it? Swear”.

She blinked. “Swear? Is it that important—”

“Swear”. He glowered; unflinchingly.

Saleitha seemed perplexed, but she relented (fear may have flashed momentarily in her eyes). “Alright, alright. Jeez. Don’t get your godly bits in a twist”.

“Never say that again”.

“Yeah, come to think of it, it sounded weird just coming out of my mouth. My bad”.

Jace chuckled and shoved his hands onto his pockets, concealing the bracelet and ignoring the bad taste in his mouth. “You don’t know what that symbol is, do you?”

He would’ve asked the others, but…he didn’t want to draw attention to the weapon.
Saleitha hummed. “I don’t think so”. There was no hint of a lie, but there was something troubled reflected back at him when she grinned.

“So”, she chirped, cheerfully, “Does your Dad know how to properly work a car, or are we about to die horribly when he drives that Toyota off a bridge?”

“Your dad threw my dad out a window”, Melody said, upon meeting Saleitha and being introduced (Thor’s booming voice rang around the room, inducing an awkward silence. It only worsened when he explained her present situation).

Saleitha examined the brunette, but didn’t react. “Yep”.

“If it makes you feel better, I’m not bitter about it anymore”, Uncle Tony put in, with the practiced ease of a man who was pretending everything was fine.

Melody nodded along with her father’s statement, and a smile spread across her face. She stuck out her hand as if expecting a handshake. “Awesome. You’ll fit right in”.

Saleitha took it. They shook. Joven made a small noise in the back of his throat in the corner of the Compound’s living area, in between Khari and A’yana.

The boy’s face was rapidly turning red.

Jace resisted the urge to giggle, despite the silence. Somebodys got a crush.

Penny, who was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of their resident lovebird, seemed to be thinking the same thing. It was the first time since their friends’ abductions that he’d seen her trying to hold in laughter.
“Uh, hi”, Aiden said next, probably because he couldn’t stand Mel to be the first to announce herself. “I’m Aiden”.

“His middle name is Anthony”, Tony said, clearly both proud and pleased. Stroking his ego was hardly a challenge.

“For the last time”, Clint moaned, tiredly, “I did not name him after you. It was an accident!”

“No offense, Clint”, Steve interjected, a smirk playing on his lips. “But you can’t just accidentally name your son after Tony Stark”.

“I can”, he said, stubbornly, “and I did”.

Aiden buried his face in his hands. “Yeah, thanks for that”.

Jace shot a look at Saleitha and found she was smirking, the same way she had in the parking lot- it was a little jittery though, less confident, like it wasn’t sure if it belonged on her face or not.

“Can you do magic, or is that an off-limits question?” A’yana asked curiously, digging a conspicuous elbow into Joven’s side (he was almost drooling).

T’Challa’s eyes widened. “A’yana”, he said, disapprovingly, but Saleitha didn’t seem shocked at the inquiry.

“No, it’s alright. I love showing off”, she said, cracking her knuckles, and that was around the time the adults started to get truly antsy.

Natasha stood from where she’d been sitting on the couch, next to Tem. “Maybe another time”, she interrupted (anyone else would’ve thought she was fine, while those who knew her knew she was unsettled).

Clint had straightened as well, but that was also understandable. His first encounter with Saleitha’s father had involved mind control, although that was pretty much all he would say to them about the subject.
She deflated, just enough to be noticeable. The smirk waned.

“I’d like to see it”, Joven blurted. He winced. “Uh, if that’s…cool?”

“Joven-”, his mother, Hope, started, but Jace had already said, “Me too”.

“Blow us out of the water, new girl”, said Melody, blatantly ignoring the looks of their parents. “How about you conjure up dinner? I’m hungry”.

Saleitha appeared taken aback, but she nodded.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea-” Uncle Tony began, cautiously, but before he could finish there was a tiny flash of green, and the empty vase on the island (Marya was the one who remembered to water the flowers, and without her, they died quickly) had shot across the room and landed in her hands.

There was a pause, before Melody whooped excitedly.

“Not bad”, she said, a certain gleam in her eye. “Not bad at all”.

Thor looked the most unruffled out of the rest of the Avengers, and he cleared his throat.

“I should take my leave to Asgard”, he said, calmly. “The Son of Coul has informed me that Katarina, the daughter of the Enchantress, will be joining me in order to assist in the search. We must ask Heimdall what has happened to Ziva Grey. We’ll be back tomorrow, at the latest. If someone could show Saleitha to her room while I’m gone-”

“Wait, wait, wait”, Saleitha cut in, irritated. “I’m not coming?”

Thor blanched, bewildered. “Did you want to?”
“I thought it was obvious!”

Jace was speaking before he was aware his mouth had opened. “If she’s going, then I want to go, too”.

Jessie choked on her own spit. His heart clenched unfamiliarly.

Thor’s expression changed from bewildered to grim. “Jace, the last time you went to Asgard, things did not exactly go as planned. It is not wise”.

The teenager forced a smile. “Third time’s the charm?”

He didn’t need an answer to know he was coming, permission or not.

Thankfully Thor gave in, so Jace didn’t have to sneak along like a stowaway on a ship.

*There’s gotta be information on Sumarbrander*, he thought; watching Saleitha fidget nervously (his father was talking to Viveca, before their departure).

Kat Paige was standing next to her- she was tall, pale, blonde, and green-eyed. Her hair was surprisingly puffy, and it kept blocking her vision, but she seemed abnormally nice.

Jessie, who had said goodbye, seemed to know exactly what he was going for.

*Be careful*, she’d warned, one hand wrapped tightly around his arm, as if she wanted to throttle him until he fully understood, *and for Christ’s sake, be subtle*.

*Careful and subtle. Two things I suck at, of course.*

“Going for info on the bracelet?” Saleitha asked, softly, so Kat wouldn’t hear (she was talking with someone on the phone). The Trickster’s child wasn’t making eye-contact with him. “Not a bad
“I’m not even gonna ask how you know that”.

“I’m a good guesser”.

Jace frowned as Viveca and Thor emerged from inside.

His mother hugged him and whispered, *be safe, understand?* And wasn’t satisfied until he murmured a reluctant, *yes, ma’am*, in return.

She took a step back, Jace inhaled to prepare himself, and Thor called out to Heimdall.

Traveling by Bifrost was always…messy. At the very least, it was terrifying. There was nothing but flickers of color, and the wind roaring in your ears. But, Saleitha and Kat didn’t share his fear. They were screaming elatedly the whole way up.

When they arrived, Heimdall had extracted the sword and was waiting expectantly.

Thor walked towards him and made to ask the sought-after question, when an explosion rocked the rainbow bridge.

*A guess a third try can end badly. In the words of old Norse mythology: aw, Hel.*
“What was that!?” Kat demanded (she was scared, obviously, and it showed), but Thor had already pushed past her to look out at the golden city of his home.

In the distance, there was a plume of smoke.

_Oh, no._

“The rebellion”, Jace realized; gripping the wrist that bore the bracelet. It seemed to whine uneasily beneath his touch. “That’s what it is, isn’t it?”

“Stay here”. Any trace of friendliness had vanished from his tone. There was only authority now—all their parents did it in times of stress, and Melody had nicknamed it “Avenger” mode when they were little.

This didn’t look like “Avenger” mode now. It seemed more like “God of Thunder” mode.

“What?” That was Kat again, and now she sounded outraged. “I’m an agent of SHIELD, I can’t stand here-”

“Have you ever been in a real battle, child?” Thor interrupted, clearly in no mood for an argument. He slammed his hammer (disguised as an umbrella) onto the ground, and with a blinding flash he was in his armor. “You have no experience, especially not against warriors like these. Stay here”. He glanced at Heimdall, and he nodded.

_Great, Jace thought, dizzily, a babysitter?_

Thor wasn’t looking at his son. He twirled his hammer and shot into the sky, flying towards the source of the attack and winking out of sight in less than a second.

At first, Jace could do nothing but stand there in a state of shock. “D-Dad—”
“Alright”, Saleitha interrupted, loudly. “He can’t seriously expect us to hide. Right?”

“He’s right”, Kat said, feebly (she still seemed slightly cowed by Thor’s lecture). “I’ve never been in a real fight before. We’ll be killed”.

“You literally said you were an agent! Act like it!”

“You are untrained”, Heimdall said calmly, inclining his head towards Asgard with no readable expression. “You came here to ask me what befell Sigyn. I saw”.

There was a long pause.

Jace tried not to squirm, heart in his throat. “You saw what happened to Ziva Grey?”

“My mother?” Saleitha eyes were wide. “Where is she?”

“She was taken, by men in black outfits. They were armed with Midgardian weapons”.

*Men in black outfits.*

Jace had a horrific flashback to the men who had taken the others, and shook his head to clear it. There could be an explanation later. Right now, Thor needed their help.

“I don’t know about you guys”, he said, “But I’m leaving”.

Saleitha nodded. Kat gulped, but zipped open her duffel bag to pull something out.

“Dad said this was a gift from Mom”, she explained, hesitantly, and pulled out a long silver and gold greatsword; with an emerald hovering in the rounded cross-guard. “It’s supposedly enchanted. I guess now’s the best time to use it”.

Jace’s fingers fiddled with Sumarbrander once more. It would be unwise to bring it out, especially if it was as valuable as Odin implied it to be.

Heimdall’s eyes followed the movement. “I question your ability to use that sword”, he said, almost thoughtfully. “It should only be possible for Frey, or a son of Frey to wield it. A spell binds you to the blade, and it is a spell that cannot be undone. That is the only reason I have chosen to keep your secret”.

Jace didn’t think he could speak, but Kat spluttered, “W-What!?"

Saleitha was staring at him with something akin to satisfaction.

“Nothing”, Jace forced himself to say. “It’s nothing. Come on, we gotta go”.

Kat tried to keep questioning him as they sprinted across the rainbow bridge, but every time he tried to speak his tongue felt like ash in his mouth.

He could sense Heimdall watching them go.

When they finally reached the fight, there were at least a hundred extremists forcing their way through the Einherji warriors (ironic, sort of, considering the name Jace had chosen hours ago).

The trio ducked behind an abandoned supply cart to avoid being seen, and peered over top of it to witness the fighting. It was like something out of a 3-D action movie.

*I can’t believe this is my life.*

“It doesn’t make any sense”, Saleitha hissed on his right, staring at the slaughter with a horrified rapture. “Odin’s guys should be better trained, so how are they-”

* Losing, he wanted to finish, for her. They’re losing.*
“Oh, god”. Kat’s startled shriek drew Jace’s attention away. She was looking at something near the head of the battle, and her hand was covering her mouth. “Oh god, oh god”.

He followed her gaze and felt vomit rise his throat.

*That’s way worse than ATM bank robbers.*

In the simplest of words, it was a monster of some kind.

Whatever beast the extremists had trained towered over the heads of everyone who attempted to fight it— it was at least as big as the Hulk, maybe larger. Its arms were huge, and so muscular they were disproportionate to the rest of its body (its legs worked in the same way). The head was a misshapen blob with a crease for a mouth, three lumps for a nose and ears, and piggish black eyes that reminded Jace of buttons. Its skin looked hard, like clay, and it glowed white in the sun.

“A golem”, Saleitha said, fascinated.

He scowled. “A what? This isn’t *Lord of The Rings!*”

“No, not Gollum, a golem! I read about it in one of my mother’s books— sorcerers and sorceress’ make them out of clay and use magic to bring it to life, and do their bidding”.

Jace glanced back at the creature, and saw blood staining its hands. He winced.

“Great”, he said. “How do we defeat it?”

Saleitha shook her head and no longer seemed at all excited to see one up close. “We can’t. Golems are forbidden because they’re indestructible, and can only be destroyed if the maker undoes the spell. Do you think the extremist will undo this anytime soon? He might already be dead, and in that case, it goes nuts. Instead of just killing the Einherji—”

“It’ll kill everything”, Kat finished. “There has to be something we can do!”
“Well, we could slow it down, but I don’t see how. We can’t tie it because it’ll break the ropes or chains; we can’t burn it because no heat spell is hot enough. We could freeze it, but spells like that weren’t in my Mom’s stuff. I don’t suppose you know a freezing spell, charm, etc.?”

Kat, looking utterly hopeless, shook her head. “I don’t”.

And then, Jace had what was possibly the worst idea of his life following, let’s become teenage vigilantes and wear costumes.

“I do”, he said. “But it’s really, really risky”.

“At this point, I’d take anything”.

Jace exhaled slowly. “Are you familiar with the Casket of Ancient Winters?”

Kat choked on her own spit. “Are you serious? The magical snow cone machine that spews the next Ice Age into your face?”

“First of all: love that description”, Saleitha said, wringing her hands, “Second of all: that’s great, but do you know where it is, and are you 100% sure giving me something like that is a good idea?”

“Yes, and no”. Jace straightened. “But, nobody has any other ideas and it’s the best plan we’ve got. The Casket is in Odin’s vault, but first we have to fight our way through without my dad seeing us”.

Saleitha and Kat exchanged a look, and the blonde girl adjusted her grip on her sword.

“If Saleitha’s going to use a thing like that, she’ll need to conserve her energy”, she said, matter-of-factly. “I’ll take care of the stealth. Ready?”

The answer was no. Not ready at all. But Asgard didn’t have time to waste, and neither of the girls were protesting, so Jace nodded.
When they leapt over their hiding place and into the fray, Sumarbrander sang to life in his hand without him even needing to call upon it.

Getting into Odin’s vault was surprisingly easy, probably because all of the guards were busy fending off an invasion outside.

He didn’t want to think about not being fast enough.

The vault itself was dark, and primarily made of black stone. The light was dim and eerie and half the artifacts inside made Jace want to jump out of his skin.

Kat, who was awkwardly holding her greatsword in front of them, whispered, “Quick question. Does anyone know what the Casket looks like?”

Jace shrugged (it’d taken five minutes to explain Sumarbrander after all, and make up a semi-convincing story, but they’d accepted it). “We’ll know when we see it”.

“That’s an awful strategy”, she muttered disapprovingly, and fell silent.

There were several more minutes of quiet. Jace began to fear they would never find their means to an end, when Saleitha spoke up.

“There”, she announced, and sounded surer of herself than Melody did after bragging about…well, pretty much anything.

Let’s take that as a positive sign.

Jace rounded the corner and found her already lifting a curved blue box, with odd markings scratched onto the sides. The corners were lined with smooth gray rock, and when he got within five feet it began to radiate pure cold (if he hadn’t been convinced at first sight, he was now). It wasn’t the most interesting thing in the collection, but it was definitely powerful, and hopefully strong enough to stop the golem.
Saleitha turned to face them with a grin; form rapidly changing to that of her Frost Giant self. “I’ve got it. Let’s hurry”.

The three set off running back down the hall, side by side.

“How did you know that was the Casket?” Kat asked curiously.

The line of her shoulders stiffened. “Do you see anything else in here that looks remotely like the Casket?”

“Uh…no?”

“Then there’s your answer”.

If Jace hadn’t been internally panicking, he may have requested she tell them the truth.

Outside, it was going as poorly as it had been when they first arrived on the scene.

Thor was fighting the golem, now, but no matter how many rounds he came at it with, it kept getting back up. Unfortunately, only one of the two could tire out.

Jace didn’t see Odin anywhere. His grandfather seemed to have skipped.

Kat turned them invisible again and they made their way towards the beast; slashing tendons and cutting sword hands as they went, ignoring the looks of surprise the Einherji wore when their enemies miraculously dropped.

“If this fails”, Saleitha warned, hoisting the Casket higher, “We’re colossally screwed. Can you keep me invisible when I fire this thing? I don’t want to draw attention”.

“Deal”, Kat agreed. “Attention is bad”.
Jace snorted. “We’d probably be thrown in prison for stealing that. You are putting it back afterwards, right?”

“Of course!”

“Hey”, Kat cut the arguing short, as she slammed the butt of the hilt into the back of somebody’s head. “We’re getting closer!”

Jace kicked out another’s legs and raised Sumarbrander, just as he focused back on the fight between the golem and his father.

Thor was half on one knee; hand outstretched for Mjolnir, and his opponent was seconds from bearing down on him like a freight train.

“Dad!” Jace screamed; electricity arcing down his arms and shocking every extremist in a five-foot radius. They dropped like flies, but whether they were dead or not was the farthest thing from his mind.

He finally understood why the Avengers forbade them from watching their missions on the news—when seeing Thor in trouble, all he wanted to do was jump in and intercept the blow, which would only get him killed or severely injured.

Unfortunately, since he was present this time, that was exactly what he did.

Kat shouted, taken off guard, and the invisibility spell around him vanished just as he threw himself into the golem’s path, knocking Thor out of the way.

The creature slammed its gigantic fists into his torso, knocking Jace twenty feet sideways and into an empty merchant stand.

Pain exploded in his lungs. When he tried to inhale it felt like nails were embedded in the flesh, and black spots danced across his vision. Jace gasped for breath and choked on oxygen that wasn’t there; barely registering Thor’s enraged cry.
The smell of ozone began to fill the air. If he weren’t rapidly losing consciousness, he would’ve been almost excited to finally see the summoning of a lightning bolt.

Jace was still trying to breath properly when the golem, unaffected by the storm, approached with the intent to finish him off.

Distantly, he reached for Sumarbrander, and found the sword had reverted back its bracelet form. It lay inert on the ground as if it were either spent or dead.

The golem was practically on top of him when a blast of white ice and snow hit it dead in the face. Even from where he was curled, injured, Jace could feel the intense cold numbing his face and burning every inch of exposed skin.

The golem stopped moving less than an inch from his body; encased in ice, but he had already succumbed to the pain.

Jace’s first thought when he woke up in his quarters were, *fuck*.

He lifted his head off the pillows, and saw that pretty much his entire upper-body was wrapped in pristine white gauze. Several ribs had probably been broken.

*So much for being careful and subtle.*

“You’re awake!” A loud, relieved voice said, on the left. Kat appeared in Jace’s line of sight, grinning ear-to-ear. “Eir tried her best to heal the wounds completely, but they might still… twinge”.

Jace groaned. He remembered the (brief) fight with the golem, and had a sinking feeling Thor was about to give him the lecture of his life. “I’m guessing our plan worked?”

“Oh, yeah”. Kat glanced around as if she feared someone was eavesdropping. “Saleitha went to put the Casket back before anyone notices it’s gone. The public have chalked up the spontaneous
freezing of the golem to a freak accident. I think Thor’s talking to Odin right now. They’re pretty worried about you”.

Jace huffed, irritably. “I’m sure Odin’s just worried about his heir”, he muttered. “He’s not incredibly fond of me. This can’t have improved his opinion of my mortal lineage. I lasted what, a second? A millisecond?”

Kat rolled her eyes dramatically. For a second Jace could’ve mistaken her for one of the Wilsons (it stung, and he studiously ignored the feeling). “Odin’s plenty fond of you. He had this look on his face while they were healing your ribs- four of them snapped, by the way. If you were fully human, you’d be dead”.

“And if I was fully Asgardian, I’d be out of this bed and doing jumping jacks”.

The blonde sighed exasperatedly. “Where did all this bad-mouthing come from?”

“I’ve been repressing it. It happens. Can you do me a favor and prop me up? I’m kind of afraid to move”.

Kat sort of laughed, and obliged. His ribs didn’t ache or anything, but she was right about the tiny, uncomfortable twinge. It was a small price to pay compared to actual peril.

Jace swallowed and looked down at his hands; pleased to find the bracelet had returned to its place. “Did anyone see my sword?”

Kat shrugged. “No. Saleitha held on to it while Eir did her thing. What’s so important about it, anyway? I didn’t know it could turn into a bracelet, and I can sense some pretty strong magic radiating off it. You said you stole it off an extremist you knocked out, but after what Heimdall said, I knew that was bull. It’s not true, is it?”

Jace grimaced. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not talk about it”.

There was blatant suspicion in the way that she looked at him, but before Kat could start a full-blown interrogation, Thor burst into the room followed by Odin.
“Jace”, the God of Thunder seemed to teleport, he was moving so quickly, “How are you feeling?”

He shot a helpless glance at Kat, and swallowed. “Fine. I’m…fine”.

“I told you to wait with Heimdall”, he said, anger seeping into the words. “You could’ve been killed. Do you understand that?”

He stiffened. “We wanted to help. You taught me how to fight for a reason, and despite how you claim we can’t handle ourselves, Jessie and I defeated those extremists at the armory with no problem. You’ve said it yourself I’m the heir to the throne. I have a right to defend this place, especially if I’m going to rule it one day”.

However Thor would’ve responded to that come back, they would never know, because Odin intervened.

“The boy is right”, the king said (was that pride? Jace was freaking out if that was genuine pride), “If he is to be king, he is to protect Asgard. He has done well”.

Thor seemed as though he desperately wanted to argue, but before anyone could say a word Saleitha melted out of the shadows and startled Kat out of her chair.

“Hey”, she said, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. “Uh…what’s up?”

In the end, Thor agreed to let Viveca have her way with their son when they went back to Earth (Jace foresaw despair in his future).

As it turned out, while he was recovering, Saleitha had gone back and asked Heimdall more questions about Ziva; although the gatekeeper wouldn’t tell them where she was, or who specifically had kidnapped her.

Heimdall claimed he didn’t know anything else. Jace suspected he wouldn’t spill, for unknown reasons.
“Maybe it has to do with the balance of the universe”, Kat said, on the way back (this time there was no running, and they were riding horses). “Like, if he tells, something big will be thrown out of motion”.

“Bullshit”, Saleitha declared, pissed off about the withholding of information.

Thor, who had regained some of his previous cheer, sent his niece a glare over his shoulder. “Language”, he scolded, and Jace snickered when she stuck her tongue out.

The bindings for his ribs had been removed before they left the castle, and the goodbye said to Odin was less forced and tense as the last one. The fact that his grandfather had a soft-spot for him after all sat warm in Jace’s stomach, like maybe he was doing something right.

When they reached the end of the rainbow bridge Heimdall was waiting for them, of course. He looked as statue-like as ever, but he didn’t stop staring at Saleitha, even when he was inserting the sword to send them home.

Right before the Bifrost opened, Jace leaned over and whispered, “What did you steal?” in her ear, vaguely accusing.

Saleitha grunted, unhindered. “Nothing of importance”.

When they got back, there was no space in between the flurry of explanations to ask what exactly that meant. By the time Jessie found out about the golem and punched him, Jace had forgotten about it entirely.

“I was thinking we could start the search for the others by revisiting the house they went to”, Melody said, after the adults, Kat, and Saleitha dispersed. “We should find some clues”.

“Good idea”, Penny nodded, lips pressed into a thin line. “We’ll have them home in no time. I can feel, it ya know, like a sixth sense- they’re not dead”.

Jace had to admit he felt the same, whether she was being truthful or not. They weren’t dead.
POV CHANGE- Wanda

Wanda wanted to die.

It would’ve been a pleasure, at least, to watch the looks on the scientists’ faces when she flatlined. To take away one of their most “promising” test subjects.

Unfortunately, that moment never came. Wanda had never disliked her regenerative abilities, but now she wanted nothing more than for them to fail.

She wasn’t sure what the point was of experimenting on someone who was already a mutant—maybe it had to do with revenge, because Deadpool had destroyed the old program, and everyone still seemed kind of bitter about it.

The bitterest of the bunch was unquestionably Alistair Kane, the leader that Wanda had seen in the video with AJ. Same place, same torture, and the same bad guy.

Ironic, that they would watch those horrors only to experience it for themselves.

Ajax sends his regards from hell, Kane had said, upon their first meeting (Wanda had died in the Compound and woken up on the operating table, and she was so, so scared).

The fear had dulled, slightly, since then. Unlike AJ and the other girl, a presumed sister, Wanda hadn’t been separated from her friends and siblings. Instead, Kane put them all in the same room and forced them to listen to one another scream.

Alex- fierce, stubborn Alex, who had always been secretly jealous of her and Noah -was the first to mutate. Wanda hadn’t been able to see it well, but it’d involved electricity, and the shrieking had nearly broken her eardrums.

Afterwards, Alex was moved to a different room. Kane proudly informed his coworkers that she’d developed an ability called “psychic regeneration”, which meant she could heal different parts of
her body with her mind.

The Maximoff were next, although their powers had just been…enhanced.

Then went Ruby, Izabela, and Riley (he and Izzy hadn’t changed, but Wanda could hear the doctors talking about prepping him for surgery).

Eventually, she mutated further too.

Kane had put her in an oxygen deprivation tank because he was frustrated with her lack of progress. The chamber was something Wanda’s parents still had nightmares about, and now she understood them, and all she wanted to do was end it, but her father’s genes wouldn’t let her.

Wanda gasped for breath until her skin felt as if it was bubbling and churning. All she wanted was her family, and Penny, despite the fact she wouldn’t wish this hell on anyone.

When Wanda saw her reflection in the glass, her best friend’s face was staring back at her.

Kane dubbed it “shapeshifting”. He had her transferred to the same white room AJ had lived in, except while the SHIELD agent had been alone, she had a “roommate”.

The “roommate” was a pale-faced girl the same age as Melody. She had a shock of curly white hair, feathery wings the same color, and friendly brown eyes.

She calmed Wanda down enough to help her shift out of Penny’s appearance, and introduced herself as Kara Kendall- an orphan from Ohio who’d been taken off the streets while ravaging through a dumpster.

“I heard from the nurses that Kane acquired eight more specimens”, Kara tittered nervously, proceeding Wanda’s story. “I didn’t know they were related to the Avengers”.

There was a hint of hope in her tone, but the other girl didn’t have the heart to say if they hadn’t been found already, they probably weren’t being found at all.
Kara was sweet. She answered pretty much any question Wanda asked, most of them involving the other people that were here.

She claimed there were six others that’d been brought in with her.

The youngest were a trio of teenaged boys, two of which were a year older than Ruby (Angie Remendado, an immigrant from Mexico, who developed the power to slow, stop, and speed up time, and Dante Underwood, a Hispanic boy from Jersey whom they were experimenting on with magic). There was another who was two years older than Ruby: Rafe Jackson, from Cuba, who could turn invisible. The other three were all as old as Kara- black-haired and blue-eyed Jake Andrews; who could throw and manipulate sound waves, a brunette with brown eyes named Dan Jewels; who could open up black holes and pockets in space, and Dan’s black-haired, sea-green-eyed boyfriend, Levi Jacobs, who could breathe underwater, control water, and even echolocate.

“They’re good people”, Kara said, weakly. “Really good people”.

“Yeah”, Wanda muttered, in agreement. “My people are, too”.

About what must’ve been a day later, the nurses brought them out for “training”.

Wanda almost cried when Izzy was shoved into the ring, to be their teacher. Judging by the hardened look in her eyes she’d been doing it since they removed her from experimentation, and while it took weeks for her to submit to the workout, she did.

“They’re training us to be killers”, Izzy whispered in her ear, after the tenth session.

I know, Wanda had wanted to say, but all she could muster was a whimper.

Ever since the move she hadn’t seen the others much, and Kara had explained it as, “Kane wants to keep us apart, so we can’t come up with an escape plan”.

Wanda asked if Kara and her friends had ever tried to form one, and the look in her eyes convinced her not to ask again.
“Don’t move too much”, the brunette warned, grabbing Joven’s chin and forcing him to look her in the eyes. “There’s a chance this could end badly”.

Joven, otherwise known as the test subject, had whitened considerably in the time it’d taken her to finish that sentence. He gulped. “Okay”, he squeaked, holding as still as possible while probably having a panic attack.

Melody had finished the suit a few days ago, about three weeks proceeding their plan to find the others and bring them home.

The search hadn’t been going well, and the look for Saleitha’s mother wasn’t going at all. SHIELD seemed a little too preoccupied with their own thing than looking for a random, kidnapped Asgardian. The Avengers weren’t having any luck with either party, too.

An idea was itching at the back of Mel’s skull, but for now, it was time to see if any adjustments needed to be made to her latest pride and joy- she was thinking about calling it “Yellowjacket”, as sort of a rebranding.

The suit’s design was loosely based off her own father’s Iron Man armor, in the sense that it was bulletproof and extremely hard to break. The colors were a blend of black and bright yellow, the helmet greatly resembled Ant-Man’s, and the wings were a product of the Wasp. It’d taken Melody hours to sneak into Pym’s house and get a good look at the mechanics behind the growing and shrinking, but living with the equivalent of a teenaged superspy had perks. Tem could get in and out of anything like a pro.

The other members of his team had gotten outfits as well- Penny’s used the red fabric and paid homage to her father’s own homemade suit, before Tony’s upgrade. It consisted of a red sleeveless hoodie with a black spider design on the front and a blue long-sleeved shirt underneath, blue pants, red fingerless gloves, filters on her wrists for the webs, and a red cowl-like mask with goggles built in to help with sensory overload.

Khari had gotten a black catsuit made of the remaining prototype vibranium, with thick-soled boots, gloves with retractable claws, an eye mask, and a bow staff. A’yana’s apparel resembled the Dora Milaje’s armor, but with her brother’s color scheme and mask, while Tasha had received a black and purple leather tunic with one sleeve, arm guards and finger tabs on her dominant hand,
Right now, the Junior Avengers (and Penny’s team) were gathered in the abandoned building, which they’d fondly started calling “HQ”.

It was time to test out the machinery.

“This is scary”, Joven confessed, nervously. “This is very, very scary”.

The Yellowjacket suit fit like a charm. Melody wasn’t sure why he was freaking out (maybe because she said something could go wrong), but then again, shrinking down to the size of a bug wasn’t what most people would consider an everyday Saturday night.

Penny- beautifully tolerant Penny -offered their friend a smile. “There’s no need to be scared”, she said, almost cheerfully. “Think about it this way: after you shrink, you can smash a few cinderblocks and test out your strength”.

“And fly”, Khari added, excitedly. “You can also fly”.

“I can?” Joven’s voice shook, “Yeah, I totally can”.

A’yana, who’s lips were pressed into a thin line, cleared her throat. “You don’t have to do this”, she said, calmly. “We’re vigilantes, now. If you don’t think-”

“I can handle it”, he interrupted, louder than what he probably intended, and Melody watched proudly as his shaking shoulders stilled. “Show me which button to press”.

The prodigy brightened and rubbed her hands together. There would be time to address his self-esteem later. “Perfect! Tap the panel on the chest plate and it should work”.

“Should?”
“No time for second thoughts!”

Joven groaned and made an awkward fist, pounding it against the indicated pressure plate. The last sound he made before he abruptly shrunk was a startled yelp. There were a few cries of alarm behind her, but Melody ignored them and got down on her belly.

Her eyes scanned the pavement until she found tiny Joven, who was sitting on his ass and more than slightly dazed.

“Perfect!” She cried. “Everyone keep back. I don’t want him to get stepped on”. She tapped on the ear pierce she wore and cleared her throat. “Hey, Jove? Can you hear me?”

“What the fuck”, came his exclamation, high-pitched and terrified. “What the fuck”.

Melody smirked. “He’s good”, she confirmed, and ignored the sigh of relief from basically half of Penny’s teammates. And a few of her own.

Thanks for the vote of confidence, guys.

Joven was still mumbling incomprehensibly, and she sighed.

“Joven”, she said, calmly. “Listen to me. Everything is fine”.

“I’m tiny!”

“I know. That was the point”.

“This is so cool!”

There was a long pause, in which Melody honestly didn’t know how to answer that. “…Great. How ‘bout you try smashing some of those cinderblocks?”
She’d barely finished the sentence when the closest one, roughly five feet away, exploded into chunks of smaller rubble and gray dust.

Penny shrieked, surprised, as Joven made quick work of the rest (he was cheering the whole time. Melody thought she might go deaf).

“Alright”, she said, after he was done, “The suit is a success! Can you grow back? Fair warning, though, it might make you sick until your body gets used to it”.

Strangely, there was no complaining at the mention of expelling bodily fluids. Instead, Joven pressed the pressure plate again and practically burst back into regular size.

Just like he had when he first shrunk, he was sitting on his ass again.

“Whoa”. Khari grinned and started forward to help him. “Joven, that was amazing!”

Joven, the newest vigilante of NYC, made a terrible gurgling sound. He ripped off the helmet and promptly vomited all over the floor, much to the others’ disgust.

Melody cringed, and felt the urge to purge herself. “Told ya”.

Joven moaned and flopped onto his back, next to the puddle of what had once been bacon and eggs. He blew air out of his cheeks.

“Does anyone have any orange slices?” He croaked.

POV CHANGE- Saleitha

The Junior Avengers were an enigma- and painfully, painfully obvious. The self-proclaimed sorceress had been watching footage of a street fight involving the vigilantes, only to focus on the one in golden armor’s weapon (the public was calling him Einherji, or something, that was difficult to pronounce and all the more an identity reveal).
Einhерji’s sword was the same sword that Jace Foster/Thorson had fought with back when they stopped the extremists from invading Asgard. Saleitha wasn’t an expert on forgery, but she was pretty sure you couldn’t replicate a thing like that.

“Oh, nice”, she’d blurted, upon putting two and two together.

Bruce Banner, who was sitting on the other side of the couch, shot her a funny look. His hand stilled from where it hovered over the popcorn bowl.

She held up her phone and said, “Daily crossword”.

Wow, sometimes I really suck at lying.

However, either Banner didn’t want to deal with it right now, or didn’t care, because he went back to watching the screen with a troubled expression.

Saleitha was 90% sure the Avengers were assigning people to watch her like hawks, because of her father. She was only a little bit bitter about it- after all, considering what she’d stolen from Odin’s vault, the distrust was understandable.

“Nothing of importance”. I’m lucky Jace forgot about that.

Unfortunately, now was not the time to reflect on that particular trip. The Gatekeeper withholding information still made her furious, but what was perhaps the most worrying was that he let her leave with the goods and hadn’t said a word.

Saleitha had hunches, sure. But hunches didn’t get you anywhere. Besides, now that she had some leverage over her cousin, she had a way to get exactly what she needed.

The dark-haired girl left a convincing (if not dull) illusion in her place, and turned invisible. Out of all the magic she’d learned from Ziva’s arsenal, stealth charms were her favorite, probably because she was so good at them. Thinking about her mother stung, though.
Thinking about whoever had taken her hurt even worse.

Saleitha gritted her teeth and raised her hands; setting aside a small reserve to keep up the invisibility spell, while she worked on the real magic.

A tracking spell, to be precise. As long as she pictured her cousin the Seidr would point her right to him, providing she had the strength.

It felt kind of like hide and seek.

*Ready or not, here I come.*

Saleitha was out of breath when she found them hiding in an abandoned building.

She let both spells fizz out and ducked underneath the caution tape—there was evidence they’d been here before, the place was littered with soda cans, old furniture they’d probably taken, and even a salmon ladder from god knows where.

It was a little hideout for their business. Saleitha couldn’t deny being impressed that they’d managed to hide all this from their parents.

*Either they’re super oblivious,* she thought, *or they just don’t have enough time to pay a lot of attention to their children.*

The sad thing was, Saleitha didn’t know which one was worse.

She was about to announce her presence just as the redhead—Tem Romanoff, if memory served—leapt over a chunk of rubble and kicked her in the stomach.

If Saleitha were human, it would’ve knocked the breath out of her lungs and potentially broken a rib. Instead, she lost her balance and hit the ground with a thud. Before she had the time to regain her bearings there was a long-serrated knife pressed against her throat.

Tem’s eyes narrowed. She was wearing the same gear as the Black Widow copycat the civilians were calling “Viper”.

Eventually, she sighed, put the blade away, and called, “Guys, we’ve got company!” Over her shoulder.

Saleitha stood and mumbled, “Gee, I’m company. I’m flattered”.

Jace rounded the piece of rubble his friend had been hiding behind, saw her, and groaned. “What are you doing here?” He demanded, clearly upset.

“I saw your sword on TV. Vigilantism, huh?”

Melody Stark hovered- hovered? That was new -down from the ceiling, and crossed her arms over her chest. The genius had looked semi-friendly when Saleitha first met her, but now she looked ready to throw her through a wall.

“Lovely”, she sighed. “You’ve figured it out. What do you want?”

“I’ve got a proposition for you. A deal”.

Jessie clambered up onto a piece of what used to be part of the floor, and huffed. “A deal with the devil?” She asked, skeptically. “Because that’s what this feels like”.

“Hey! I thought you guys liked me!”

Brian, who looked less than pleased to see her too, rolled his eyes. “What do you want, Saleitha? We’re kind of busy”.
Saleitha arched an eyebrow. “Busy?”

Penny, the king of Wakanda’s heirs, Aiden Barton, and his sister arrived on scene. Khari had something riding on his shoulder, which upon closer inspection, was revealed to be small Joven.

“Oh, Ant-Man suit? Coolio”.

“Cut to the chase”, Jace stressed, running a hand over his face. “Preferably before Tem stabs you, and before Aiden shoots you with an arrow”.

Saleitha hummed and put her hands on her hips. “Fine. Look, I need a favor. In exchange for me keeping quiet about your extracurricular activities, I need your help to find my mother”.

There was a moment of silence. She could feel her stomach souring.

A’yana was frowning, uneasily. “Isn’t SHIELD helping you to find your mother?”

Oddly enough, it was Melody who answered. “SHIELD doesn’t do shit. Their Avengers are dealing with stuff they’ve deemed more important, which also includes not focusing their time and energy on finding our friends”.

The prodigy looked and sounded bitter.

Saleitha had heard bits and pieces about kids in question- a lot of them were about her age, and they’d been taken by Weapon X during a raid on the Compound. They’d been missing for at least six months.

“Well, maybe I can help with that, too”, she said, finally. “A quid pro quo. You help me find Mom, I’ll help you find your friends”.

Melody examined her, and hummed considerately. “As long as you don’t turn anyone into a rat, that would be acceptable. I assume you still aren’t telling?”
“What would I gain from that? Personally, I think you guys have got a good thing going”.

Jessie cleared her throat, and offered a wan smile. “Okay, so that’s settled. But the Junior Avengers are kind of…full”.

Penny, who looked wary at best, shrugged. “She can join us, if she wants to. Although we don’t have a name yet”.

Tasha clasped her hands together, cheerfully. “I vote the Secret Avengers”.

“That sounds copyrighted!”

Saleitha watched as they started to bicker, and grinned to herself. “I’m in”.

_I think this could work._

Melody gave her a thumbs-up, just as Tem’s phone rang. The arguing simmered down to whispering as she hit the answer button and held it up to her ear.

“Yeah?” She asked, evidently bored. There was a buzz as whoever was on the other line said something, and then all of the color drained from her face. “What!”

Brian had sat up straight, like he could hear the conversation. If Saleitha’s guess that he was the Hellhound was right, he most likely could.

No one spoke even after Tem hung up. She looked sick.

“That was my Mom”, she said. “They’ve got a lead on the Weapon X program. They’re making their move now”.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Uhhh there's some descriptions of torture/gore in this chapter, so reader beware. I don't think it's too graphic, but you can never be sure.

POV CHANGE- Wanda

On the day their parents came to rescue them, Izzy killed someone.

The “someone” turned out to be one of the handlers that brought her into the training room, each day. There was always a taser pressed against her back, so perhaps that was why she hadn’t done it earlier. Or, maybe she’d just finally snapped.

There was no prior warning, at least. Izzy simply twisted around at the last minute and plunged the end of the bow staff into the woman’s neck.

That in itself would’ve been highly improbable, but the brunette was armed with a cybernetic death appendage capable of bench-pressing a ton. The handler tried to scream, but all that came out was a sickening gargle. Blood squirted out of the wound and her mouth, and she dropped like a stone.

Wanda was almost too stunned to speak. There were guards on the other side of the door, and any second now they would come through and try to subdue them. They needed to move quickly. Kara howled, outraged, when she turned to grab her arm.

“Come on”, she snapped. “This is our chance!”

“You don’t get it”, the hysterical girl sobbed, allowing herself to be pulled forward nonetheless. “We’ll all be killed!”

Izzy ignored them both and pulled the bow staff out of the body. “Be ready. We’ll have to fight to get out”.

Kara tangled her fingers in the back of Wanda’s loose cotton shirt. Her hands were shaking.

“Keep behind me”, She managed, swallowing. She snapped her own staff into two separate halves- Weapon X hadn’t given them real weapons, at least not yet, but there were still bones to break and concussions to be had.

As if on cue, the operatives came through the doorway- men in black Kevlar, armed with huge assault rifles. Each one was met with Izzy’s fury.

The guns went off, and Wanda intercepted each bullet with her body, barely feeling the metal tearing through her flesh. She darted forward and smashed in a man’s kneecap.

Kara, who was still holding on, flapped her wings and took out two at once. The feathers didn’t look like much, but apparently, they packed quite the punch.

All in all, there were about ten attackers. They were all beaten pretty easily, but Wanda could never forget the image of Izzy plunging her right arm through an enemy’s torso.

The alarms had started to finally blare. The lights flashed on and off and bathed their personal hell in red.

Kara was still crying. Wanda knew something bad had happened during her last escape attempt, but she seemed to be holding it partially together now.

“I-I know the way to the others”, she stammered. “We can’t stay in one spot for long”.

Izzy wiped a fair amount of gore off her chrome limb and picked up one of the scientist’s guns. “Let’s go. Wanda, bring up the rear”.

Half-sure this was a dream, she snapped a salute and muttered, “Aye, aye captain”.

The backroom where they watched the sparring, a place she’d never been in, was (predictably) small and white. There was a computer that presumably contained data, and Kara smashed it in
with Izzy’s staff. It seemed she’d been waiting a long time to do that.

There was a small chest of weapons in the corner, filled with guns, knives, an axe like AJ had used, and a pair of twin katanas. Wanda grabbed the swords and a few other knickknacks without hesitation, and watched Izzy arm herself with as many as she could carry. The third party, after finishing vanquishing the computer, took some as well and ushered them forward.

“It’s close”, she said, “Very close”.

There were only three guards in the hall. Wanda ran them through with an animalistic scream, while the pair worked on opening the first prison door.

Inside was the blue-eyed boy Kara had described- Jake -and a redhead curled on the bed.

“Ruby!” Wanda cried, alarmed. The mutant looked terrible.

Izzy rushed forward and wrapped her arms around her little sister, clutching her to her chest. The younger girl had her hands clamped on either side of her head, and both were crying; whether it was out of sheer happiness or pain was unclear.

Jake hugged Kara without hesitation. The look on his face was gaunt, but he seemed to understand what was happening, and was willing to go along.

“Her head hurts”, he explained, weakly. “She said the voices were too loud”.

Izzy muttered a vicious insult in Russian and made to pull her across her shoulders, but Kara cleared her throat and stepped forward. She kept one hand on Jake’s arm.

“L-Let him carry her”, she said, hesitantly. “You’re probably the best fighter out of all of us. You can’t help her if you can’t get us out of here”.

As much as Wanda knew why Izzy was unwilling, she was right. Judging by Izzy’s expression, the younger of the two didn’t need to say it either. The brunette looked awfully torn, but she reluctantly lifted Ruby off the bed and passed her to Jake, who scooped her up bridal style.
“We have to hurry”, he said. “We gotta release everyone else”.

Wanda badly wanted to find her sisters, but if she left anyone behind she would never forgive herself. “Izzy, go see if you can locate Riley. He should be in one of the surgical rooms”.

That is, if they haven’t moved him yet.

Jake looked at Kara, and she nodded and gulped. “I’ll come with”.

Izzy nodded, spared one more glance at Ruby, and bolted with Kara hot on her heels.

Wanda held her swords out in front of her and turned to her new allies. “Nice to meet you. I’m Wanda Wilson, daughter of Deadpool, and I really do not want to die here”.

“Likewise,”, said Jake. “Kara probably already told you about me”.

“That she did. Can I trust you to blast these guys?”

“It would be my utmost pleasure”. Something dangerous creeped into his tone, and despite the circumstances Wanda almost felt like they’d known each other for years.

One doesn’t go through batshit evil without making a few friends along the way. Is that a proverb? I feel like that could be a proverb.

They were almost to the next door when Ruby screamed. Most of it was unintelligible as she flailed in Jake’s arms, but Wanda got the gist.

“Targets approaching!” She shouted. “Brace yourself!”

Jake wrestled to keep hold of his precious cargo, and he took a step back.
“Cover your ears!” He ordered, and Wanda had just enough time to do so before the door flew off its hinges and smacked into the opposite wall.

Two boys who could only be Rafe and Angie stumbled out.

“Jake!” Rafe yelled, relief coating his tone. “How did you-”

“No time!” Wanda interrupted. She pulled two pistols from her stash and held them out to him. “Can you shoot?”

Rafe blinked, taken aback, before his face set in determination. “I was damn good with a BB gun”, he admitted, accepting the firearms. “Who’re you?”

“Look out!” Angie interjected, throwing up an arm and squeezing his eyes shut.

Five bullets, all fired from the same machine gun, slowed to a crawl a few feet from where the group stood. They clattered harmlessly to the floor, and the culprit soon found out what it was like to have a sound wave burst his eardrums and send him flying twenty feet.

Wanda, undeniably, was impressed. “Time-boy, you’re with me. Jake, stay in the middle. Rafe, cover our backs. Oh- and I’m Wanda, by the way”.

Rafe forced a semi-charming smile. “Pleasure”. He twirled the pistols while Wanda headed towards the next doorway.

“I should warn you”, Jake said, almost off-handedly, “There’s a reason we didn’t get out of here the first time. Kara didn’t tell you because she can barely talk about it”.

“Talk about what?”

“It’s not the guards, the machine guns, and the alarms you have to watch out for. It’s Kane’s goddamn dog”.

Foolishly, the thought conjured up an image of Hellhound. “What, is it a Pitbull? Because I happen to own a Pitbull, and~”

Jake shook his head, stricken. To his left and at his back, Rafe and Angie were avoiding her eyes. Neither of them made a move to put in their own two cents.

“Kane’s dog isn’t actually a dog”, he explained. “It’s a person. The first successful supersoldier they made, to be precise. When we first tried to get out of here, she was waiting for us at the front door. The scientists call her Scythe. We call her Zookeeper. She supposedly has a partner, but we’ve never seen him”.

A partner?

Wanda frowned deeply- she didn’t like the sound of a final boss level. “She beat all of you? Even when you had your powers?”

“Yeah. She- she was just so fast. We knew how to fight, but…it wasn’t enough. She beat us and let Kane drag away the older experiments. They were the ones that were here, before us. I think they got moved to a separate facility”.

He said separate facility like one would say went to live on a farm upstate.

Wanda felt as though she might be sick. “Are you certain we won’t be able to kill her?”

“I-I’m not sure. You guys seem pretty crazy”.

“Thanks”.

Angie hummed and glanced nervously at Ruby (who had gone rigid again). “True. What’s wrong with her?”

“Enhanced telepathy”, Wanda elaborated, unhappily. “Everything is too loud. If we make it out of
here, we’ll get her a pair of earmuffs”.

Rafe fired his guns, causing the other three escapees to jump.

He pretended to blow on the barrels and gulped, appearing kind of sheepish. “Sorry. There were two guys on our tail”.

“Nice job, sharpshooter”.

Jake opened his mouth to speak, but his eyes focused on something in front of them.

“Hey! Noah!” He called, and Wanda’s blood froze.

Sure enough, it was Noah, staggering across the floor in a bloody hospital gown. She was clinging to a limping Alex, and Wanda ran forward and didn’t stop to think. “Al! Noah!”

The three collided in a mess of tangled limbs. She barely avoided stabbing them with her swords, and then there were tears streaming down her cheeks, and Noah had pulled them to her like they were still children.

“Oh, god”, the older girl’s voice broke, “Oh, god, Wanda”.

She choked a sob and withdrew, tightening her grip on the handles. “Are you two okay? How did you get here?”

Alex whimpered, hanging off Noah’s arm. “They were going to bring us into surgery when the alarm went off”, she said. “Then Izzy burst in with Christa and Marya and cut us loose, saying we were leaving, but she had to go and find Riley-”

“Riley wasn’t in the surgical room?”

The blonde paused. “W-What do you mean?”
“He should’ve been in the surgical room! I mean- maybe not, he would’ve already had the surgery, but then where-”

Jake shuffled forward, stiffly. “I don’t mean to intrude, but-”

“Jake? Thank god!” Noah relaxed slightly when she saw him, and tensed back up when she noticed Ruby. “Is she alright? What happened?”

“Headache”.

“Guys”, Angie said, anxiously.

Unfortunately, they really did need to keep going. They grouped together in a way that could sort of be classified as a formation, and set off once more. The silence was occasionally punctuated by Rafe’s gun or Wanda making use of the katanas. They met up with the others not too far away from the exit, according to Jake. The place was like a maze, but his gut feeling was the best they had, so Wanda tried not to question it.

Izzy almost took off her head when the gaggle of survivors collided, before realizing who they were. Christa and Marya were behind her. Marya’s hands were sparking with blue energy and both of the cousins looked haggard, but Wanda had never been happier to see them.

A boy who must’ve been Dante was with them, and he was supporting Riley, whose back was protruding oddly. His face was pinched with pain. The last two were Levi and Dan, who were holding hands, and looked as though they would kill anyone who tried to drag them apart- Wanda could relate.

“Exit”, Kara announced, terrified (she must’ve been picturing their last attempt at breaking out, that’d ended in being captured by the zookeeper).

Wanda looked from her sisters to her friends, and exhaled. “Lead the way”.

“Be careful”, Dan added. “Zookeeper will be there. We’ll have to be ready for her”.
Rafe peeked around everyone. “How? The last time-”

“This time we go on offense”, Levi said, mercilessly. “This time we strike first”.

This time we strike first.

“Yeah”, Wanda agreed. “Sounds like a plan”.

When Wanda saw Zookeeper, AKA Scythe, everything made sense. She remembered that AJ hadn’t been alone in the video footage: there had been an older girl with her, someone named Sarah, that was her older sister.

It’d been years since then. AJ was almost seventeen now, which meant Sarah would’ve been in her early twenties. But the pieces didn’t fall together fully until they were face-to-face, and the whole picture could be seen. When they found the exit- it was like a hangar, almost, with huge iron double doors -Zookeeper was waiting.

Scythe was a young adult woman, with straight light brown hair and blue/brown eyes. She wore a black leather catsuit with only one sleeve- the uncovered arm was crudely-made metal, with a long blade jutting out at the elbow, and she had no mask.

Everyone else got into battle stances, expecting a fight, but Wanda was so shocked she didn’t think she could move.

“Sarah?” She blurted, and the name rang around the room and hung off her tongue.

The rest of the experiments looked at her with, WTF? expressions.

Scythe- who was truly Sarah Freeman -froze. What little color left in her cheeks drained away, and she held up the weaponized arm threateningly.
“How do you know that name?” She demanded, voice husky with disuse.

Wanda could feel her resolve waver. “T-That is your name, isn’t it? Your sister-”

“My sister?” Scythe looked appalled. “You know AJ?”

Well, “know” maybe not be the best choice of words.

“AJ?” Noah hissed, “That girl has a crazy sister!?”

“Shhh!” Alex shushed, pulled taut with stress.

Wanda tried not to acknowledge them. “Y-Yeah. She’s the leader of SHIELD’s Avengers-”

“SHIELD? Kane said-” Whatever Sarah had been planning to say cut off abruptly, and all emotion cleared from her face faster than Christa could run.

Wanda’s heart dropped into her shoes. Jake had said she was fast, and she could picture those legs being artificial too, and watching her slit the throats of her friends all in one fatal blow. There wouldn’t even be time to blink.

But, Sarah did none of those things. She simply side-stepped the door and said, “Go”.

There was a moment of silence.

“It’s a trick”, Kara said, “It has to be!”

“It’s not”. Sarah sounded angry. “Go, before I change my mind. Tell AJ-” her face contorted for a second, “-tell AJ the only reason I stayed was because I thought she was in danger”.

The last thing Wanda wanted to do was run past the cyborg that was the daughter of her Dad’s dead
enemy, but she also wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Come on”, she said. “Hurry!”

Without waiting for a reply, Wanda broke into a sprint, praying they would follow. There was a terrible second when she thought she was alone, but then Noah and Alex caught up, the rest of the pseudo-team close behind.

Sarah didn’t say a word, but she got the sense she was watching them go.

The double doors opened as the Weapon X crew exploded out into daylight. The ground was covered in crystalline white powder and the cold air stung, but even though they were in the mountains in the middle of nowhere she felt amazing.

Wanda didn’t slow down and neither did anyone else, until Kara cried, “Look!”

The human mutate was pointing at something in the sky, and it took her a minute to realize what it was.

“Oh, my god”, Noah said, knees buckling. She collapsed in the snow and covered her mouth with her hand. “That’s the quinjet”.

“The quinjet?” Dante’s knees knocked together like he might collapse. “You mean-”

“Our parents found us”, Riley said, arms wrapped around his torso. “They found us”.

Wanda couldn’t believe it.

The jet landed, and the Avengers piled out- Iron Man, Black Widow, Hawkeye, Falcon, it seemed everyone had come just for a rescue mission.

*It just took a little longer than planned for them to pinpoint us.*
Wanda didn’t see Deadpool until Noah’s voice sliced through the air.

“Dad!”

They piled onto their ride after a quick sweep of the base.

Most of the occupants were dead, and the remaining scientists and operatives had abandoned ship. Scythe was nowhere to be found, and Wanda wasn’t inclined to mention her to anyone. Except maybe AJ, when they got back to New York.

Tell AJ the only reason I stayed was because I thought she was in danger.

Kane had vanished into the wind, as well. Wanda had never hated anyone so much in her entire life, but there was a first time for everything.

Deep down, she wanted to make him pay.

Jake, Kara, Angie, Rafe, Dante, Levi, and Dan were huddled on the floor, clinging to each other in silence. Kara’s wings were wrapped around them all.

Izzy was pressed into Bucky’s side with his flesh arm wrapped around her shoulders; Ruby in his lap (Tony had given her a mild sedative for the pain. They could come up with a more permanent solution when they got back to the Compound, but she was more alert, though, if not drowsy. It was an extremely welcome change).

Sam had both arms around Riley, who was cushioning his head on his father’s shoulder. Christa and Pietro were on the floor; Christa lying on her side with her head in his lap. Marya’s parents had sandwiched her in between them (she didn’t seem to mind).

Noah and Wanda were sitting on either side of Deadpool, his arms around them, and Alex was sitting on the ground, leaning back against his legs.
No one talked. They seemed to be drinking in the fact they were all here.

It was Ruby who eventually spoke- although telepathically. She must’ve really been feeling better if she was able to do that. It wasn’t the action that surprised Wanda, but the words itself that were uttered.

They all took turns looking at each other, and coming to a subtle agreement. Judging by the lack of reactions from the adults, only the teens (not excluding their new buddies) heard the almost nonchalant remark.

Let’s kill Kane.
POV CHANGE- A’yana

It was a tearful reunion.

The anxious teens weren’t allowed to see their friends until after they were examined in the Compound’s infirmary, and the wait felt like hours upon hours. Penny sat closest to the door, bouncing up and down slightly; Peter’s hand on her shoulder in an attempt to be calming. It was unsuccessful.

A’yana was worried about the brunette. She got the feeling everyone was, in the state of disarray they’d fallen into, whether they were focusing on their own issues or not.

It was Vision who eventually said they could go in. No one paused to decipher the look on his face, and no one thought about what they might find if they ran in half-cocked.

In the simplest of terms, the others were…gaunt.

Ruby was hooked up to an IV in the corner, with no visible injuries. A’yana could tell she was on pain meds though, and Katya was sitting next to her, hand combing through her daughter’s knotted hair. Izzy’s bed was next to the redhead’s (the bags under her eyes looked like bruises), and Tem immediately launched herself onto the mattress and crushed her in a hug. She rarely looked anything less than stable, but cracks were running along the thin lines of her composure.

Bucky, who sat vigilant in a chair between his kids, put one of his arms around the girls. Natasha came up behind them and stood there like she was keeping guard.

The Wilsons were clustered together, and Wanda, who was so skinny her cheekbones protruded like knives, held out her arms and shouted, “Pen’!”

Her voice was hoarse, as if she hadn’t used it in a while. A’yana briefly wondered if it was because she’d been screaming, and felt sick.

Meanwhile, Wanda’s best friend tackled her without reservations. The embrace looked like it
should’ve been able to break ribs, but neither of them were keen on letting go anytime soon. Both were blubbering and talking over each other, A’yana caught a few apologies and muffled reassurances before she looked away.

Riley was sitting up in bed, grinning. He was hooked up to an IV too, and the back of his hospital gown was open. The liquid being pumped into his veins was the same stuff Ruby was taking. Sam was standing with his body angled strangely, as though to hide Riley’s bare back from view. Mira was squeezed onto the edge of the bed and holding her son gingerly, as though she thought she might break him.

Unfortunately, A’yana’s curiosity got the better of her. She peered around them, and wasn’t sure what she was looking at for a good couple seconds. It looked almost like the jetpack Falcon used to fly, when the wings were folded in, but it would make no sense for Riley to be wearing one while recovering. A’yana’s eyes widened with mounting horror.

He wasn’t wearing it. It was attached to him.

Khari tugged on her arm and pulled her away from the sight. Judging by the look on his face, he’d seen it to, and wasn’t planning on mentioning it.

“Those bastards”, he hissed, quietly.

A’yana gritted her teeth and nodded in agreement. “Monsters”.

Besides their friends, there were other kids in the room. One girl and six guys, all in various states of emaciation and illness. The princess supposed they were the other survivors of the Weapon X program, every single one around their own ages, if not younger.

One of the boys was being tended to by a man and a woman A’yana didn’t recognize, who were fawning over him and crying loudly. His parents, probably. She didn’t focus on the fact that no one had come for the rest.

“I can’t believe they’re really home”, said Joven, weakly, bracing himself on the doorway and observing with watery eyes.

“Neither can I”, Noah agreed, and A’yana didn’t miss the darkness in her tone. She looked like
someone had run her over with a truck, several times.

Tony, who had his hand on Melody’s shoulder, cleared his throat. He eyed Penny and Wanda warily, like what he was about to say would cause a riot.

“It’s been a long day”, he said. “How about we give ‘em some space to recover, and you can come back in the morning. We still have to figure out dinner, anyway”.

Penny’s grip tightened. Wanda made a sound of displeasure and did the same.

Tony sighed in the long suffering way that Steve sometimes did. “Or, we could all just stay here”, he offered, hesitantly, and the cheering was so loud that he winced.

Sam’s lips quirked up at the corners. “Jury’s out on this one, Tony”, he said, not unkindly. “But, ordering a pizza wouldn’t hurt. You mind?”

The billionaire rolled his eyes and went to step outside the infirmary. “No, ‘course not. Anyone want toppings? If not, you’re sucking it up and getting plain cheese”.

Alex looked awfully hopeful. “Onions?”

(They’d most likely been feeding her god-knew-what. The bad taste was steadily returning to A’yana’s mouth, and Tony’s expression was similar).

However, at a pointed glance from Wade, he covered it up with a smile. “Sorry, kiddo. It’s gonna be nothing but hospital jello for the next couple weeks”.

She deflated like a popped balloon, and the female refugee cleared her throat.

“Um”, she stammered, uncertainly, “M-Mr. Stark? Thank you so much for your…hospitality, but…where are we going to go?” Her voice cracked around the end of the question.

Iron Man’s face went blank and the adults looked at each other, back and forth.
It was Ruby who spoke. Her words were slow, but understandable, and Katya’s grip on her hand faltered like she hadn’t been anticipating it.

“You can stay with us, Kara”, she said, blinking owlishly. “She can, right?”

“For a little while, until we find a more permanent solution”, Steve amended, carefully as always, “The Compound’s a little too crowded as it is”.

Kara, as her name seemed to be, straightened as if she was steeling her nerves. “C-Could we stay together? It just…it feels wrong to separate. It’s possible, right?”

“Over my dead body, it isn’t”, said a boy, with startlingly light blue eyes. His face had drawn into one of defiance, a trait that A’yana could respect.

Tem looked him up and down from her place with Izzy. It seemed the vigilante respected it too, but the haunted gleam that accompanied it didn’t sit well with her.

Steve’s gaze softened. “I’m sure we can arrange that, too”.

“Really?”

“Why not?”

Tony huffed a laugh, good-naturedly. “Before Muscle-Man adopts any more of you, I’m going to go and order that pizza. FRIDAY?”

Yes, sir? The disembodied voice rang around the room, oddly cheerful (A’yana wondered if the AI was happy that they were all safe and under one roof, as well).

“Page Dr. Cho. See if she can bring up some of that jello for our resident patients”.

Of course.

The mood had improved, if slightly. A’yana could see worry lines receding and certain breaks mending, but there was a difference in the way that Wanda smirked, even when Penny laced their fingers together and squeezed.

There was a darkness in all of them, that hadn’t been there prior to the kidnapping. A’yana just couldn’t put her finger on what it was.

POV CHANGE: Penny

Wanda was the first one allowed out of the infirmary, not because of health itself (most likely), but because of sheer willpower alone.

That, and because she bothered the crap out of the nurses.

“They’re only trying to help”, Penny insisted, the second day after her return, when Wanda had tried to get out of bed. The attempt had ended when a pair of nurses wrestled her back into it, over Noah’s threats of getting up and doing it herself.

The other girl had pouted. “I’d feel better if I could move around!”

Their new friends from the program- Kara, Rafe, Dante, Dan, Levi, and Jake - gave her a look that strongly suggested they disagreed. Penny was beginning to like them, and she hadn’t even had a conversation with the group.

“Staying in bed is the reason you’re still alive right now”, Jake said, skeptically, and Wanda squawked while she cackled; unabashedly.

“Seconded”, Kara acquiesced, and the feathers jutting from her shoulder blades ruffled.

The wings really were gorgeous. Penny didn’t whether she’d had them already when the operatives had kidnapped her, but she wished whatever process there had been in getting them hadn’t been painful.
“God, they’re turning into you”, Wanda complained, flailing her arms and almost pulling out the IV (she muttered an oh, shit and groped for the call button that summoned the nurses that annoyed her so much. The feeling was extremely mutual).

Penny grinned and threw her legs over the mutant’s, leaning over to help readjust the needle. Blood leaked slightly from the jarred puncture wound.

“You need to be more careful”, she chastised, disapprovingly.

Wanda huffed indignantly. “I’ve had worse”.

*Penny heard the gunshot from the panic room; imagined her childhood friend slipping through her fingers, and saw her dried blood and brain matter crusted on the floors and walls when their parents led them out-*

“Yeah”, she said, a chill running down her spine. “I know”.

Whenever Penny thought about that faithful night, she looked at Wanda and tried to think, *she’s here, she’s here, I could lean over and hug her, and she wouldn’t vanish into thin air.*

Peter and MJ were visiting when she took her back to the apartment, so they couldn’t talk aloud about what’d been happening lately (he had amazing hearing). So, she settled with pulling up a bunch of articles about the Junior Avengers and handing Wanda her tablet to read them. It was the best she could do; besides, the journalists did a pretty good job of describing their heroic exploits.

Upon seeing the latest headline- *The Self-Proclaimed “Junior Avengers” Save 5 People from a Burning Building* - Wanda’s eyes widened, and she beamed.

Penny scrambled off the bed, spared a glance at the door (locked, but it never hurt to check), and opened the closet. There had always been a loose panel behind the racks of sweaters, and since she’d started her own team she finally had a use for it. Penny removed the panel and pulled out her suit; holding it up for Wanda to take in.

“No way”, she exclaimed, loudly, the tablet sliding off her lap. The articles were long forgotten,
and the shock on her face was apparent. “That’s awesome! Do you-” at this point, she scribbled something onto the brunette’s sketchpad with a gel pen, and held it up for her to read: *Do you have a codename?*

Penny frowned. Truth be told, she hadn’t thought much about codenames. Melody and her merry band of misfits had them, sure, but that didn’t mean they had to be just like them. Besides, she’d been too busy trying to find a lead on Wanda’s location and stopping muggings when the opportunity arose.

*No*, she mimed back, and Wanda choked on her own spit.

*Blasphemy*, she wrote, in her slanted handwriting. *I think it should be Spider-Queen. That way, my nickname will be accurate.*

Penny put the suit back carefully, closed the door, and jumped back onto the mattress. “*No*”.

*What about Arachnid-Girl?*

“No!” (She hoped Peter would think they were bickering. That happened a lot).

There was a pause. Wanda’s tongue poked out of the corner of her mouth, something she did when deep in thought.

Finally, there was the telltale *scritch-scratch* of the pen: *Spider-Girl?*

Penny almost shot her down again, but there was a hint of melancholy in the other girl’s stare that made her pause. Instead, she examined the words carefully, and groaned.

*Yeah,* she mouthed, giving in. *Spider-Girl.*

POV CHANGE- Wanda

Wanda felt kind of bad about lying to her. Emphases on the *kind of*, as evil as that was.
Then again, Penny never asked, so it was more like withholding information than anything else. It was a need-to-know only, basis.

(At least that’s what she liked to tell herself).

But, Wanda had confided in Penny about everything since they were little—about her regenerative powers, about getting Cable the dog, and anything in between. She wasn’t surprised that the brunette let her in on the whole vigilante thing.

Pride (as well as a healthy amount of worry for her best friend) arose, when she lifted the red fabric from forever ago and grinned happily.

My little baby, off to destroy people, Wanda’s traitor brain thought.

Melody must’ve made the suit for her. Penny was shit with a needle and thread.

“You know”, the curly-haired dork remarked, on the fire escape outside her window (out of earshot of her super-boss, since writing stuff down and miming didn’t do much as far as communication went), “You could help”.

Wanda arched an eyebrow. “Join the boyband?”

Does it still count as a boyband, or is that an Avengers VIP joke? Wait…is Spider-Man an Avenger? Did he ever get that promotion my Dad always made fun of a lot?

“Well, yeah. Mel can make that red and black suit you joked about”.

That was the sad thing. Months ago, it’d been just that— a joke.

Let’s kill Kane.
Wanda internally grimaced and played it off with a smirk. “Nah, I think I’ll pass. I’ve had my fill of people coming at me with stuff”.

Penny’s expression faltered enough to be noticeable, and she wanted to kick herself. Whenever she referenced Weapon X she looked like she wanted to start crying.

“Sorry”, Penny said, and Wanda elbowed her in the side.

“Don’t apologize”, she retorted, derisively. “I can be your guy in the chair. Uncle Petey had one of those, didn’t he?”

The tears didn’t quite go away, but she snickered. “Oh, yeah. Ned. He and Peter had some pretty good times, when Uncle Tony wasn’t trying to babysit them”.

Wanda hummed and let her legs dangle over the streets of New York. The Park’s apartment was in a much less seedy part of the city than where the Wilsons lived, and for a second she let herself get lost in the sight of taxis and cars going by. Wanda didn’t realize how much she’d missed the constant hustle and bustle until there was only cold, depressing silence.

*That’s behind you.*

“Uncle Tony tried to babysit a lot of things, sometimes without realizing it”, she said, eventually. “It took him *forever* to warm up to my parents”.

Penny twisted to glare at her; scandalized. “It did *not*”.

“It did too. He may have liked my Mom, but Dad was a different story”.

Wanda thought of the red and black suit again, and wondered how quickly Spider-Girl would figure it out if she saw someone wearing it on the streets. She wouldn’t care about that, though, it was the stabbing people that would be frowned upon. But, generally, if you go on a revenge spree, the stabbing is a given.

Wanda’s fingers twitched, and the memory of holding the katanas resurfaced.

She side-eyed the other and prayed it didn’t seem too cagey. “I’m fine. Just tired. It’s been a long six months”.

“Yeah. Have you met Loki’s daughter, yet?”

In truth, Wanda hadn’t seen the mysterious Saleitha Grey. Jace had told her and the rest of the experiments about his cousin a few days after their arrival.

She’d probably stayed away. Either that, or she could turn invisible, which would be awesome. Magic could come in handy.

“I haven’t met her”, Wanda said. “Her mom is missing?”

Penny’s face darkened. “She is. SHIELD hasn’t found a trace, and I don’t what their Avengers are doing right now, but whatever it is they’ve deemed it more important”.

Tell AJ the only reason I stayed was because I thought she was in danger.

“I’m sure it isn’t”. Wanda’s forced herself to swallow. Telling the leader of Fury’s recent pet project that her supposedly dead sister was alive could wait, at least a little while longer.

Penny seemed confused by the tension in her tone, but she didn’t call her out on it. “I haven’t talked to Saleitha a lot. She seems…nice, I guess. My spidey senses don’t go off when I’m near her, so that means she’s not a threat”.

Wanda laughed. “That’s what we need more of. People who aren’t threats”.

“If only. Jace has been hanging out with her, though. She found about the whole Junior Avengers thing a while back, and agreed to keep the secret if they helped her with finding her mother. I let her join my group”.
At that, she paused. “You invited Loki’s offspring into your squad?”

“At least there we can stop her if she tries anything”.

“Do you think she will? You said your spidey senses deemed her safe to be around”.

Wanda’s skin prickled uncomfortably, but Penny didn’t look concerned.

“I’m not sure”, she answered, truthfully. “We’ll see. Just because she’s not a threat now doesn’t mean she couldn’t become one later”.

“That’s not comforting at all”.

“I know, I know. I-”

Whatever Penny was about to say was cut off by her mother, Yumi, opening up the window and sticking her head into the evening air.

“Mr. Parker needs your help in the kitchen”, she said, tiredly, and Wanda noticed she was covered in flour. “There’s been a bit of an…emergency”. The older woman turned her gaze to their guest, and smiled. “Would you like to stay for dinner? Assuming it survives”.

Wanda smiled back, carefully. “I’ll hang around for a bit, but I should head home. Mom’s ordering takeout”.

Penny groaned and followed Yumi back through the opening, only leaving Wanda alone when she promised she’d come inside soon. For a minute she sat on the fire escape, before pulling out her phone and scrolling through the contacts.

Noah had saved the number of the guy they bought the weapons off of, and she hit the call button and pinned the device between her shoulder and ear.
Their father’s source answered on the third ring. “’Ello?”

Wanda pulled a notebook from her hoodie and examined the list, created by Alex and fine-tuned by Izzy and Kara (who made a surprisingly impressive duo).

“Hey”, she said, simply. “I need to buy a few things”.

“ICERs, and the like? What would you need more of those for?” He sounded disappointed, possibly because the nonlethal stuff didn’t cost as much, and Wanda was willing to bet he would try jacking up the price if her goal was to order more.

Fortunately for him, it wasn’t.

“Nah”, Wanda said. “I need another shipment of the same materials, but different arms. Handheld guns, katanas, knives. Everything that’s either pointy or explosive will also do”.

There was a long silence. “Seriously?”

“Yep. Put it on the same tab”.

“You plannin’ some kind of hit, girly?”

She pictured Kane’s smug, malevolent face, and dug her nails into her palms.

“Something like that”, she assented, and the image was all the reminder she needed on why not to tell Penny. “So. How fast can you get it to our location?”
POV CHANGE- Jessie

“I’m gonna give it horns”, Melody announced, disregarding Saleitha’s confused look.

Jessie rolled her eyes and twirled the earbud cord around her finger, as the last few notes of *American Idiot* fading off into silence.

She, the genius, and the sorceress were at HQ early this morning, so Melody could work on the Secret Avenger’s last crime fighting outfit. As far as Jessie could tell, it was going to have the same color scheme as Loki’s armor, and Saleitha looked peeved about it.

It was clear the Asgardian didn’t like her father. Jessie could relate to the sentiment- everyone who lived in the Compound had heard horror stories about the God of Mischief, and it was hard to believe his *daughter* was now living with them.

“It would look badass”, the blonde admitted, sighing. “But won’t our parents figure it out the moment they lay eyes on her?”

“You would think that would’ve happened with the rest of us, but it hasn’t, so I think we’re good”, Mel grumbled, and Jessie could detect the hint of bitterness in her tone.

It was understandable. Their parents did their best, but they were often too busy saving the world to notice their kids for any given period of time.

“I guess my assumption about them unintentionally ignoring you was correct?” Saleitha asked, hesitantly. Her arms were crossed defensively over her chest, but when Melody huffed in agreement she slowly lowered them.

Jessie hit pause on the IPod and pulled the earbud out of her ear. “*Definitely* correct”.

Saleitha frowned. “Isn’t that…well, doesn’t that bother you?”
She sounded uncomfortable. The vigilante wondered if she was thinking about her own mother, or perhaps remembering something unpleasant about her.

“Of course, but it’s hard to complain when said parents are one of the only reasons the world we live in is still spinning”, Melody snorted, amiably enough. “On the bright side, it leaves us plenty of opportunities to do fun stuff like this. I finished the sketch of your outfit, wanna see?”

The godling brightened a fraction and scurried over to the other girl’s makeshift worktable. Jessie, who was undeniably curious as to what Mel had come up with, hopped off the chair she’d been perched on and went to take a look.

“Whoa”, Saleitha said, appreciatively, when she leaned over Melody’s shoulder to take in the rough draft. “That looks badass”.

“Nice work”, she agreed, (slightly unwillingly, because it would feed their friend’s ego).

The third generation Stark bristled with justified pride. The ego was already full.

The rest of the outfits were great, no question, but this one really took the cake- it looked like Loki’s armor alright, but transformed into a shorter (more functional) tunic, with black leather leggings and knee-high boots. There was a leather coat that went over top of it, the collar cinched with a gilded band, and it flared at the waist. The helmet was a circlet of gold, and as promised, two horns jutted from it.

“It’ll be even more awesome when it’s off paper”, Melody promised, flipping the sketchbook shut and eyeing the materials laid out in front of her. “It may take a few weeks, though”.

“What if I buy you a coffee machine and put a spell on it so it refills itself every few hours?”

There was a moment of silence. Mel’s eyes narrowed. “Make it every thirty minutes, and it’ll be done in three days”.

“Deal”. Saleitha grinned, and they shook.
Jessie glared at the engineer (and tailor, it seemed), disapprovingly. “You’re going to work yourself into a coma”, she said.

“Sounds festive!” Aiden called from the entrance; backpack filled with gear bouncing between his shoulder blades. “Hey, guys”.

“Hey, sharpshooter”. Jessie reluctantly turned away from the scolding she’d been about to give, and waved in greeting. Aiden rarely entered rooms noisily anymore, which meant he’d probably picked up on some tricks from Tem.

Saleitha nodded in his direction, but didn’t say a word. She got kind of tense around him, and around Tasha. Maybe she knew about Loki and Clint’s history.

Melody’s mood dimmed, as it always did when Aiden was present. It was no secret the pair didn’t like each other, which Jessie secretly thought was utter bull.

“I think we should go on patrol tonight”, she said, at the very least to distract herself from her current train of thought. “Scout out a few things for safety’s sake. I’m worried about Weapon X following us to the Compound again”.

“Wouldn’t they have done it by now?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. They could be biding time”.

Saleitha tapped her finger against her chin, thoughtfully. “Hmmm. Well, there has to a reason why they would bide time, right?”

Melody pulled out her phone and began tapping, probably texting Izzy (it’d been a few weeks now since their safe return, and everyone had been allowed out of the infirmary. Their parents were still sticking around more, though, probably because they were afraid to leave them alone again). “I’ll ask Iz what she thinks. It’s kind of weird, how unaffected she seems to have been by all this”.

“She never leaves Ruby’s side, though”, Jessie pointed out, cringing at the thought of her surrogate sister lying prone in a hospital bed. “It’s like she’s scared she’ll disappear”.
It seemed all of their friends were playing off how badly they’d been affected. Even Wanda, who was usually unashamed, no matter what.

Aiden emerged wearing his gear, halting the conversation, and he gestured with one end of his bow. “I’m sure they’ll be fine”, he said. “If they need help, they’ll ask for it”.

Jessie nodded and shook off the feeling of unease. “Up for a sparring match, Raptor?”

“Only if you are, Liberty”.

She grinned and went to go change into her gear, just as a gunshot pierced the air.

POV CHANGE- Izzy

“No”, Izzy said.

By the cracked windows, Kara sighed and ran a hand over her face. It was pointedly ignored, and Christa dragged the winged girl out of the room to search the hallways.

Riley scowled; not even sparing them a glance. He’d been released from the infirmary last, and there was still some color missing from his cheeks, but the newfound stubbornness was upfront and present.

“Iz”, he snapped, patience thin, “I have to try. What’s the point of these things on my back if I can’t use them to get the guys responsible?”

The brunette grimaced. She’d been on edge ever since the escape, and the plan to kill Kane wasn’t helping. “You could hurt yourself. Have you done it before?”

“Yeah. They used to make me practice no matter how bad it was”. Riley’s eyes burned with an anger not entirely directed at her.
The wing pack, upon examination by trusted doctors, was revealed to be attached to his spinal cord, the nerves in his back and shoulder blades, and his brain. Riley had said that removing it could cause severe damage to any one of those, resulting in paralyzation, loss of feeling, or possible brain injury. Therefore, he’d convinced his parents that he was alright with keeping it for the rest of his life.

He wanted to actually fly, though. Izzy, however, had a very different perspective.

They’d been arguing about it for hours now, and Alex had already finished categorizing the gear they’d received from Deadpool’s source. It’d arrived a few days ago, while Wade and Vanessa were at work.

The weapons cemented their goal, but no one expressed doubt or regret.

Jake, oblivious to their bickering, yelled, “Wow, that’s a big spider!”

Izzy paused in the start of another protest, and exhaled loudly through her nose. Riley, for all his pent-up rage, looked like he wanted to snort. Jake was possibly the sweetest person on Earth, when he wasn’t blasting Weapon X operatives into walls. Yet, he could be painfully unobservant.

_I think Noah thinks it’s cute._

He did have his moments. Setting up keep in a building that’d been scheduled for demolition back in the 90s, that’d never actually been torn down, had been his idea. The floor was littered with old mice skeletons and dust, but it was better than nothing.

Apparently, it was also infested with big spiders.

“Izzy”, Ruby said, tiredly, from where she was spinning around in an old office wheelie chair. “Let him go. You can’t protect all of us”.

_Don’t remind me._

She flinched back, even though she knew it was true. “I…I know. But it’s risky”. 
“So’s this”, Riley muttered, “What else is new?”

“True”, Wanda piped up, unhelpfully. “We could be arrested”. Noah whapped her upside the head, and she shrieked. “Hey! What’d I say!?"

Alex picked up a handgun and eyed it carefully as she spoke. “Ruby’s right. We need all of our cards on the table”.

Izzy, who knew a losing battle when she saw one, groaned and allowed defeat. “Fine. But if he gets himself killed I’m not cleaning it up”.

“No”, Riley was sort of smiling now, “That’s what we have Jake for”.

Jake, who still hadn’t been listening, looked up at the mention of his name. “Uh…what?”

The big spider fell on his head, eliciting a loud scream and laughter from any bystanders.

“Lovely”, Ruby said (the noise in her head had been dulled, slightly, with practice, but she was still sore). “Is there anywhere here spacious enough?”

“Front lobby”, said Jake, face flushed with embarrassment (he hadn’t stopped frantically running his fingers through his hair). “If we clear out the old desk, it should be fine”.

Izzy couldn’t quite get rid of the twisting sensation in her guts, but she managed to make it look less severe than it really was. “Alright, then. Let’s go”.

Dante had super strength, as a result of his time in the program, so moving the desk was no problem at all. He simply grabbed it and lifted; tearing up the linoleum from where it’d been bolted to the floor. The Maximoffs cheered and clapped.

Wanda shook her head and sighed. “It’s a good thing this place was already slotted for destruction.”
Property damage is a bitch”.

Izzy rolled her eyes and shooed her further away from Riley, who was in the middle of shedding his upper layers in the middle of the room.

The rest of the experiments had gathered to watch, a few pairing off into twos and threes, and Noah kept whispering to her sisters and Jake. Most of the time he didn’t reply, but he’d shrugged twice, and his mouth had tightened once.

“Don’t worry”, Rafe said, reassuringly. He mumbled something else in Spanish, but it was directed more towards himself. Speaking in his mother tongue seemed to be relaxing for him, kind of like how speaking Russian was easier for Izzy.

The thought of her old life made her chest hurt. The port for her metal arm throbbed dully.

(Hold still for Mommy, okay? I promise this won’t hurt).

It was odd. Izzy hadn’t thought about her biological family in a long time, but memories had been resurfacing ever since she returned, like a reoccurring nightmare. It was once in a bluer moon when she looked back on getting her prosthetic, as well.

I haven’t even told Dad about that.

Ruby’s elbow firmly planted in her side shook Izzy out of her own head, and when she looked down the redhead was staring at her funny.

You okay? She mouthed, and tapped her temple with her index finger.

Izzy hummed. “I’m fine”.

Before her sibling could call her out on that tidbit of bullshit, Riley cleared his throat, effectively gaining their attention. He looked stripped bare and small for some reason, with the metal pack exposed. As if he was an exoskeleton.
You could see the outline of his ribs, and Izzy made a note to make sure they’d taught him combat training, instead of letting him waste away while they took notes.

The area around the wings themselves was the worst part— it was still red in some places, and the scar tissue was thick and ropy. Riley kept rolling his shoulders, like they were stiff, and she entertained the notion that it pulled on the skin.

Kara, who had most likely been born with her wings, looked like she wanted to throw up just looking at it. She mumbled something that might’ve been, “Oh no, oh no, oh no”.

“Take it slow”, Izzy warned, reaching up with her flesh hand and rubbing where the iron met flesh and bone. It was really beginning to ache, slowly but surely.

Ruby was watching again. The pinch of her forehead was unhappy.

Riley bobbed back and forth on the heels of his feet, before he activated the device. They all knew how it worked, but there were still hushed gasps when it began to unfold without pressing a button.

It opened like Falcon’s did too, at least…almost. The center seemed to split in half, and the wings—huge, grey monstrosities—unfolded like paper. The total span had to have been fifteen feet, or more. There was a small pair of rocket boosters’ underneath that were supposed to help with speed, and several supports extending from the pack, connecting it to certain parts of the wings that Falcon would’ve needed to use his arms to control. The joints had even smaller boosters on them.

“They look heavy”, Angie said, mystified. “How does that work?”

Riley shrugged and fidgeted uncomfortably. All the people observing probably reminded him of the tests the doctors and scientists had put him through.

“I’m not sure”, he admitted, hesitantly. “One of the surgeons who attached them mentioned that the metal was a Magnesium based alloy, which is supposedly very strong and very light. It must be new technology, one that they invented themselves. They—uh, they…used to fire bullets at it. To see if it would hold. Never left so much as a scratch”.
“Assholes”, Alex declared, and Riley brightened a fraction.

“Definitely”, he agreed. “If I remember correctly, if I concentrate-” The end of the sentence was cut off with a yelp, as the rocket boosters activated, and he ascended with a jerk. Soon he was hovering a good ten feet off the ground.

“That’s perfect”, Wanda said, solemnly. “You’ll be unstoppable”.

“Definitely, канарейка”, Izzy added, the Russian word slipping from her tongue as easy as breathing. She wasn’t aware she’d said it until Riley squinted, curiously.

“Uh”, he started, uneasily, “Did you just insult me in another language?”

The brunette stopped a blush in its tracks and shook her head no, feeling suddenly crowded with all the eyes on her. “No, it’s… I called you canary”.

“Canary?”

“Yeah, canary, as in the songbird”, Dante interjected. “Did ya know miners used to bring them down into the mines with them? When the canary stopped singing, they knew they had to get out. It was like an alarm that signaled DANGER, DANGER”.

Ruby was smirking, like she knew something no one else did. It was an expression Izzy hadn’t seen in a while. “That wouldn’t be a bad codename, either. Canary”.

“Oh, we’re picking codenames now?” Riley didn’t look upset, in fact, he seemed more amused. “Canary’s fine with me, but what are you going to be called?”

“I was planning on Khione”, Izzy supplied, helpfully. It was an idea she’d been toying with for days now, when it was clear no one was backing out. “She’s a winter goddess”.

“Seraph would be good for me”, Kara chimed in. “Like an angel”. As if to further prove her point, she ruffled her feathers proudly, nearly whacking Rafe upside the head.
“Hey”, he complained, loudly. “Watch where you swing those! I can’t have a codename like *Peacemaker* if I’m angry all the time!”

“Isn’t peacemaker another name for a gun?”

“Well, yeah! I’m a *marksman*”.

“If we’re being literal, I should be Sonic”, Jake said. If not for the serious gleam in his eyes, Izzy would’ve thought he was joking, and she made a second mental note to give him pointers on how not to be an open book.

One by one, they went around systematically and rattled off their chosen names. Angie chose Kronos, the Greek Titan of time, and Dante chose the name Wendigo for reasons he refused to disclose. Alex decided on Shockwave just because it was badass, Noah wanted to be called Mercury after the Roman messenger god (and perhaps the toxic element), and Wanda pegged Deadlock to be her own name. Dan chose Chasm and Levi chose Leviathan, both of which were obvious choices, and Ruby named herself Lethe after the river of forgetfulness. Christa was Kinetic and Marya was Lamia (a sorceress, also from mythology).


Izzy listed each name in her head, and decided that it sounded like they knew what they were doing, to some extent.

The phone rang as Riley began to speak again. He stalled at the sound, startled, and the iron things on his back trembled accordingly.

She cringed and dug around in her pocket for the cell. Melody had texted her around twenty minutes ago, and she doubted it was anything important, but the interruption had been jarringly unexpected.

“It’s Mel”, Izzy announced. “Sorry, I gotta take this”. She hit the answer button and held it up to her ear, adopting a casual tone. “Hey. What’s up?”
“Hey, Izabela”, Saleitha’s voice said. Coming from Melody’s phone, it sounded weird. “I bet you’re wondering why I’m calling you. Well, you see- shit has gone sideways”.

Izzy’s stomach bottomed out. “What? How?”

“Well, you see, we were at HQ when there was a gunshot. Naturally, your little friends decided to investigate. They stopped an attempted murder. Fine and dandy. The problem is the Avengers must’ve been in town, and they intercepted, and now them and their kids are having a lovely stand-off directly outside the building I’m hiding in”.

Ruby, who had heard the whole explanation, looked horrified. “Oh, my”, she said. “Guys, we’ve got a family emergency. We gotta reconvene at a later time”.

The others, who had already successfully guessed the identities of the Junior and Secret Avengers, nodded in (confused) understanding.

Riley landed, folding his wings back in and pulling on his shirt. “What happened?”

“The Avengers cornered them”.

“Oh, shit”.

“Izabela? Are you still there?” Saleitha. She was beginning to sound anxious.

Izzy glanced back down at the receiver. “I am, sorry. We’re on our way. How many superheroes are present, adult or otherwise?”

Saleitha groaned into the speaker. “Only half of the Junior, and all of the adult”.

“Oh shit. Do you think I should get the others there? Is it bad enough?”

“I think they’re just talking, but it doesn’t look friendly. My suggestion is to call the rest of the squad and get a fucking extraction going”. 
Izzy accepted her coat when Rafe passed it to her and was still talking to the godling when they tumbled out the back way of their new hideout. “Is the HQ hidden?”

“Not hidden, but they aren’t paying attention to it. I’d hurry up if I were you- oh, jeez-”

With that ominous statement, Saleitha hung up, and Izzy cursed and began dialing Tem’s number. Ruby grabbed her arm and steered her away from a lamppost.

“Bad?” Marya asked, breathlessly, jogging up to the right and keeping pace.

Christa speed-walked with the elegance of a track and field and cross-country runner, took one look at their faces, and answered her cousin’s question. “Bad”. 
POV CHANGE- Aiden

“Going somewhere?”

The amplified voice had all three of them stopping in their tracks.

“Oh, no”, Melody whispered, horrified, and Aiden tried not to make a habit of sympathizing with her, but today he could relate. The brunette spared a glance back at the building they’d just stopped an attempted murder in, as if she was considering doubling back and hiding.

It was an apartment. Plenty of rooms that offered cover.

Unfortunately, the street they were on had none of that, save for a few parked cars, a couple alleyways, and a trashcan. HQ was less than twenty feet away, but they couldn’t risk it.

Their personal effects were there, not to mention Loki’s daughter, and their identities would be outed before Saleitha could dial for help.

Aiden really, really hoped she was dialing for help.

The Avengers- the whole squad, right down to Spider-Man -arrived on scene, Iron Man (the original speaker) at the head. They reminded Aiden of executioners. Melody’s father hadn’t removed the faceplate, but he guessed his expression was less than pleased.

The leader steeled herself and turned around. “I heard there was a good Chinese place close by”, she said, the modulator she’d finished days ago disguising her tone.

“I prefer the shawarma joint”, Uncle Tony replied, almost pleasantly. “You know, they say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery- and I’ve seen a lot worse than this -but I don’t feel very flattered”.

Chapter 29
Aiden’s fingers itched to draw his bow, despite the guilt the feeling brought. It’d become a reflex whenever he felt threatened to reach for it.

If Melody had any ticks, she was better at hiding them. “Sorry to hear that. Look, we just want to do our part for the city—”

“By running around in costumes and putting yourselves at risk?” That was Steve speaking, and he had on the self-righteous gaze that Aiden had only seen on television.

Jessie’s hands were white-knuckling the straps of her shield. She looked like she badly wanted to say something, but was choosing to hold her tongue.

“Isn’t that how Spidey over there started out?” Melody asked (they were actually older than he was when he became a vigilante, so her words had meaning).

“It took me years to admit it, but I got in over my head a couple of times”, Uncle Peter said, practically oozing earnestness. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if I hadn’t had help. It’ll happen to you, too, eventually”.

“Understood. What exactly do you want us to do?”

As if it weren’t obvious.

“Stop”, said Vision, placatingly, “Before someone gets injured, or worse”.

Melody’s stance was defensive; expecting a fight that wouldn’t be in their favor. They were outnumbered and unwilling. “Duly noted. We’ll think about it”.

Uncle Tony sighed. It was a sigh he often did when regularly arguing with Mel. “It wasn’t a request. Stand down and leave this to the professionals”.

There was a pause.
The prodigy swallowed thickly. “And if we…refuse?”

The urge to arm himself grew, but the last thing they needed was to be threatening. Jessie angled her body, so it was closer to Mel, like if the other girl lunged she intended to intercept. The likelier option was that she was ready to block if they fired on them.

Melody had a rocky relationship with her dad, but she didn’t want to hurt him, and she didn’t want it the other way around either.

“Then we’ll be forced to take you in”, Uncle Steve said, tiredly. “Where’s the rest of your team?”

“Not here”.

“Really?”

“Yep”. She popped the p and dug her heels into the asphalt. “If it’s all the same to you, we both want to help people. There’s no reason we should be on opposite sides”.

“We’ve been doing this for years. You’ve been doing this for months. I saw the footage from the bank robbery you stopped, and you didn’t know what you were doing. There were slip-ups. Miscalculations. Lack of communication. I don’t think helping people is your goal here”.

That stung more than Aiden ever wanted to admit. Hurt flashed momentarily across Melody’s features, and then her expression was stony and cold again.

She’s super pissed.

Aiden found he wasn’t too upset by that. At all. Especially when he was, too.

Only I’m allowed to make her that mad.

“Nice of you to assume”, she said, the words coated in frost, “but I’m afraid stopping isn’t anywhere in the agenda. If you’ll excuse us, we’ll be going now”.
Uncle Sam, who’s patience seemed to be wearing thin, took a step forward. “Look, we don’t want this to come to a fight. A couple of kids—”

“Kids!?” The exclamation was out before Aiden could stop it, then everyone’s eyes were placed on him. His stomach shriveled into a ball.

Oh, fuck me.

“Yeah, kids”, Uncle Tony agreed, and he got a feeling his eyes were narrowing behind the helmet. “How old are you, exactly?”

Melody shot him a half-hearted glare and opened her mouth to reply, just as a low growl split the air, silencing any attempts at diffusing the situation.

Aiden knew who it was before he looked- Hellhound stood in the middle of the road, larger than usual; ears pulled back and fangs showing. Tem was riding on its back in full gear, lips pursed, and Jace landed next to them (his sword was thankfully sheathed).

“Look, I don’t know what’s happening right now”, Tem said, crisply and clearly, with an authority that Aiden hadn’t known she possessed. “But unless you intend to destroy half the block to take us in…”

It was a threat. Perhaps an empty one, but a threat nonetheless, and the Avengers knew it.

Melody didn’t look behind them, but some tension went out of her shoulders. The fact they were all together did wonders for her confidence levels. There was safety in numbers.

“Viper”, she said, by way of greeting. “No need to rile up the ‘adults’”.

Hellhound snarled. The redhead stroked a hand over its forehead and it quieted, at least slightly. The thing was out for blood and the palatable anxiety made it worse.
“Oh, please-” Tony sounded angry, but Thor didn’t give him a chance to finish.

“You”, he said, deadly serious, and it took Aiden a minute to realize he was looking past the three of them and at Jace. “The one they call Einherji. Where did you get that sword?”

The demigod put a hand on the golden pommel. “What are you talking about?”

_Uh oh. Didn’t they steal that from an Asgardian vault?_

The pallor of Jessie’s complexion was all the _yes_, he needed. She looked like she might puke.

“Liar”, Thor spat. “A son of Frey or Frey himself is the rightful owner of that weapon. I ask again— _how did you come upon it?_”

“Thor-” Hawkeye took a step forward and Aiden cringed at the sight of his father.

_Aw, Dad…_

“This is of utmost importance, Hawk. That weapon was stolen from my father’s armory!”

“Oh, come on”, Tem said, exasperated, and it all exploded into chaos.

It happened so quickly not even Aiden’s sharp eyes (a thing that he prided himself on) caught who fired the first shot. One minute they were having a less than amiable stand-off, the next Melody’s shields were deflecting bullets and Thor was going straight for Jace.

_He’s gonna attack his own son without realizing it_, a dizzying part of the archer’s brain thought, and then he was yelling, “Omnia, cover me!”

The haze of red obscuring Aiden’s vision dissipated, and he drew an arrow just in time for Mjolnir to glance off the half-drawn blade of Sumarbrander.
The force was enough to knock a clearly taken aback Jace onto his ass. Aiden could see the terror in his eyes through the slits of the helmet and felt a surge of helplessness.

Thor twirled the hammer and raised it again, ignoring the startled shout coming from one of the other Avengers (the accent suggested it was Aunt Wanda).

*Sorry, Uncle Thor, but you’re kinda about to kill your kid.*

Aiden aimed at the god’s hand and shot off a chunk of the skin. The surprised shout of pain made his chest tight, but Thor was stunned, and they had an opening.

“*Go!*” Melody ordered. She twisted in the air and turned to take off, when Iron Man tackled her when her back was turned. They both went spiraling into the side of a building.

Jace had gotten to his feet and was holding the sword fully out now, breathing hard. Thor charged with blood still dripping from the deep gash, and he blocked properly and stood his ground. But, he wouldn’t last long just playing offense.

“*Raptor!*”

Tem’s voice shattered the haze of shock Aiden had been trapped in. He dodged a net arrow fired from his father’s bow and rolled behind the safety of one of the parked vehicles.

*Oh no, oh no, oh shit.*

The redhead, having dismounted the wolf, skidded into the picture next to him. Both of her ICERs were drawn and she looked pissed, but overall alright.

“You with me?” She asked, tersely.

Aiden gulped, nodded, and pulled back another arrow. “*Hell yeah*”. He jumped up and returned fire, trying his best not to cause any actual damage, while simultaneously trying to avoid actual damage himself.
Jessie had hidden behind a Subaru, and was taking cover from Aunt Wanda’s attempts at tossing projectiles at her. She yelped as her shield was ripped from her hands, and scrambled after it as it skittered across the pavement.

Tem hissed under her breath and opened fire; drawing attention away from the blonde so she could retrieve her weapon and find a better spot to avoid attacks.

“We’re still outnumbered”, she said, when she knelt back down. Her fingers were already reloading while she talked, deftly and expertly. “We won’t last long”.

Aiden opened his mouth to reply when a shadow fell over them. “Shit- duck!”

He grabbed her arm and dragged her away from the car, narrowly avoiding being crushed by the hurricane that was the two Banners fighting.

He’d heard the wolf’s yowls and destruction outside the panic room, on the night the Compound was attacked. But it was a lot different than seeing it- even in semi-control, Hellhound was savage. It kept trying to go for the throat.

“Falcon’s in the air”, Tem said, breathlessly. Out of their peripheral vision, Jace yelled in either outrage or hurt. “We can’t let him get the drop on us. Where the hell is Ant-Man?”

They never did find out where Ant-Man was, because they never got the chance. A roar from Hulk caused both sides to stop in their tracks.

The sound, instead of its angry or victorious nature, was one of surprise and agony. Aiden looked up to find that Hellhound had gouged three long claw-marks into his side.

Cuts that were deep, and bleeding green blood.

“О мой Бог”, Tem said, in awe and horror. “It broke the skin!”
Aiden had seen videos of bullets and missiles not so much as making a dent, and yet…

“Yeah”, he agreed, weakly, “and it might do it in a fatal place. We gotta go now”.

As if some sort of being had answered his prayer, all of the streetlamps on the block exploded at once. Sparks and glass rained down on the inhabitants, and every car window shattered, alarms blaring loud enough to deafen him.

“That’s our cue!” Tem practically screamed, in his ear.

Aiden didn’t need any further prompting. He followed his teammates and ran.

They waited a long time to double back and grab their stuff. A part of Aiden thought the Avengers would still be there, but they were long gone.

There was a thorough search for any trackers before they started relaxing. Everyone had learned a little something after Weapon X.

Saleitha was waiting when they snuck in, three shades paler and holding a steaming cup of unidentified substances in her hands.

“Hey”, she said. “Congrats on not dying”.

Jace snorted (he looked shaken), and sat down, armor and all. He pulled off the helmet and let it bounce away; watching it come to a rest a foot from Mel’s worktable. “Thanks. That was you, wasn’t it? The streetlamps and the windows and the alarms?”

Saleitha seemed to puff with pride. “Well, once it was clear you all needed the help I did what I could to cause a nice distraction. You’re welcome, by the way”.

“Thanks”, said Melody, with what might have been actual sincerity. “We needed it. Anyone in favor of going through that again?”
“No”, they chorused, and Aiden wondered if they’d make a good singing group if they spoke in unison all the time. It’d be hilarious to watch peoples’ reactions.

*If we sang during fights, it’d be like a Broadway musical.*

The genius nodded. Hopefully she hadn’t heard that particularly embarrassing thought. “Me too. We’ll have to be more careful”.

Jace looked down at his boots and said, “My Dad tried to kill me”.

There was a tremor on the word *dad*.

“Maybe not *kill*”, Jessie said. She was clutching her shield as though she thought it would fly away a second time. Her words didn’t seem to improve his mood.

“If it makes you feel any better, I shot him”, Aiden offered, and then the implication hit and it all crashed down at once. “Oh god, I *shot him*”. He curled his knees up to his chest and buried his face in his hands.

*I shot my own uncle. My family.*

“Aw, Aiden”, Tem mumbled, and she came up to sit beside him. Their shoulders were touching. “You did what you had to. He was going after Jace- who knows what would’ve happened if one of them got badly wounded, and he realized who he was fighting?”

“Even before the real fighting started, I wanted to draw my bow! I’m used to it, when I feel like I’m in danger I grab it, and until then I’ve never felt in danger around our parents. Sure, I saved Jace, but that doesn’t make it okay”.

There was a long pause. “No, it doesn’t”. Tem sounded like she knew more about that than any of them did. About certain things, despite their necessity, not being *okay*.
Melody hummed and glanced at Saleitha. Whatever message was sent between them, the other girl seemed to understand, because she said, “Catch ya later”, and left the six of them alone on the floor. HQ was quieter without her there. It was strange.

The prodigy studied Tem for so long, Aiden took his face out of his hands to watch.

“I haven’t asked for months”, she said, after a good five minutes. “But I gotta know. I know Aunt Natasha didn’t teach you to shoot. I know she didn’t teach you that level of self-defense. I know that bow staff isn’t something you picked up at the dollar store and SHIELD doesn’t have anything like it in the vaults. So. What’s your deal?”

That was the clincher.

The forbidden question: Tem’s home life, before she came to live with them. Their parents had told them not to ask back when they were kids, and despite the fact they were teenagers now, no one had mentioned the mystery surrounding it. Essentially, all they knew was that Nat and Bucky had gone on a mission, and come back with two kids who were supposed to be their new cousins.

Tem didn’t answer for a while. When she finally moved, it was to shift a couple inches away from Aiden. She snapped the buckle off her belt and began turning it over in her hands.

“You really want to know?” There was no hint of a joke in the question.

Melody nodded. Brian, who had changed back, looked nervous but didn’t protest. If he remembered cutting the Hulk, he wasn’t saying anything.

He probably knew something they didn’t. Aiden filed that information away for later.

Tem inhaled deeply, then exhaled. Her fists clenched. “My parents…they raised my siblings and I to be super spies and soldiers”.

Aiden’s stomach did a funny flip.

What?
“I mean full-on training. Since we were old enough to walk and talk. My mother language is Russian because we’re from Russia, but by the time I was five I knew three other languages by heart. They shaved our heads into buzz-cuts. We slept in bunks and ate military food and were given military punishments if we did something wrong. They taught us how to blend in, they taught us basic medicine, they taught us how to fire a gun and how to fight with anything imaginable. Mom told me once that they were involved with Hydra or the Red Room in the past, and that’s how they knew so much about the conditioning they put us through. They even gave us nicknames”.

Jessie was looking green around the gills, but she managed. “…Nicknames?”

Tem nodded. “Irina was Angel, because she was the most well-behaved. Anastasia was Vendetta because my father wanted to use her on old colleagues, when she was older. Elisabet was Invidia, which is Latin for envy. She was always jealous of the attention we got and tried to fight for it. Izabela was Khione because of how coldly she acted during assignments. I was Viper because I was the fastest”.

What little color Brian had left drained from his cheeks. “That’s why you chose that name?”

She didn’t answer, and continued. “They trained us to kill, to maim, and to ignore all sorts of pain. We were only treated like children in public. The reason we weren’t completely brainwashed is because of my aunt, on my mother’s side. She helped us plan to run away- she got us over the border into the US, notified SHIELD, and my parents followed with some old friends”.

“‘Notified SHIELD’”, Aiden echoed, “and they sent Aunt Nat and Uncle Bucky”.

It was all coming together in a singular, hideous picture.

Tem almost smirked as if to say, now you’re getting it. “In the end, my parents were arrested for a list of crimes that goes on and on. Mom and Uncle Bucky took us in and the rest of our sisters were sent to live with retired SHIELD agents. Secretly, I think they wanted to separate us because we’re more dangerous as a whole”.

If she was phased by what she’d shared, she didn’t show it. In fact, she looked calm.

Melody swallowed thickly. “Do you still talk to your aunt?”
Tem shrugged. “We lost contact. Last, I heard she still lives in Russia. I think she wanted to take us in, but didn’t know how to raise us right”.

“I think she did a pretty good job”.

That earned a genuine smile. “Thanks. Sometimes I think so, too. Her and Mom, both”.

“…What was her name?”

“Vyra. Vyra Aleksandr. I have her hair, actually. It skipped a generation”.

The name rung a dim bell, but Aiden couldn’t place it. The information she’d unloaded was heavy, there was no questioning it, but a part of him that’d wondered why she hid so many things felt curiously sated. It made him feel terrible.

“Wait”. Jessie ran a hand through her hair and bit her lip. “Izzy’s arm-”

“Not my story to tell”. The way Tem said it implied she wasn’t going to argue about it, and the implications sent chills down Aiden’s spine.

Melody looked contemplative, but instead of continuing the conversation she shook her head and hid behind a piece of rubble to change. He pondered if she would listen if he suggested they install actual stalls for each of them.

“That’s enough of tragic backstories”, she said, falsely light-hearted, “We gotta get home and make sure our parents are…okay”.

There was a hesitation they all shared. Their parents were probably fine- Thor’s hand hadn’t been too badly cut and Hulk healed quickly, but the fight hadn’t improved their opinions on the Junior Avengers. It’d only made them worse.

Tem stood and dusted herself off, as if nothing had happened. Her expression was scarily
unreadable. “We’ll be watched a helluva lot more closely. We have to move bases. I already called Izzy and told her we’re okay, and she’s agreed to help us look if need be”.

“Move bases? Where would we go?” Jace had begun to undo the straps on his armor, but he’d paused and had gone rigid. “We don’t have anywhere else”.

“One has to wonder why we’re so committed to this”, Aiden muttered, half to himself, bemusedly. “We started to help Mel prove a point to her dad”.

“A point that has yet to be proved”, she added. “The Avengers see us as a threat. The sooner we prove that we aren’t one, the sooner we get into their good graces. And, the sooner I can convince my dad that little girl I used to be doesn’t have a placemat anymore”.

Jessie nodded and got to her feet. She hadn’t had the same idea at the start of this, but now Aiden thought there was an endgame for her as well.

Surprisingly, there was one for him too.

*I don’t think helping people is your goal here.*

“We may have things we want to show them we can do”, he said. “But helping people is a really, really awesome bonus”.

Slowly, the others began to smile in agreement.

*God, I hope this isn’t a rebellious teen phase.*
Chapter 30

POV CHANGE- Wanda

As promised, Wanda was given a red and black suit, same as her father’s.

Was it recognizable? Yes. Was it badass? Absolutely. Disguising it wasn’t too hard, anyway. Wade Wilson had an unexpected number of huge fans and copycats.

The final touch were several handheld guns, two katanas in sheaths on her back, and a pair of smaller knives strapped to the boots. The mask, unlike Deadpool’s, only covered her face, and she kept it in place with black straps that clipped around her ponytail.

Those who wanted nothing customized had basic black Kevlar jumpsuits, with weapons galore. The exceptions included Izzy (who exposed her metal arm), and Riley (who chose to expose his wing pack). The pair had also requested sniper rifles, and Noah let them have at it in the way of arming themselves. The basic masks were specially made to cover their mouths and noses, like Melody had designed for Tem, and nobody opted out of those.

Kara had slits in the back of her outfit for her own wings, but that was it in the realm of modifications. Rafe, as well as modern firearms, bought a sleek pair of revolvers that he claimed made him feel like he was in an old Western movie. Marya had made an outfit that looked like her mother’s Scarlet Witch gear, no guns and knives needed, and it was black and not red. She had a hood to go with the ensemble.

Noah’s jumpsuit was black and accented red with a cowl, and a pair of katanas like hers strapped to her back. Her favorite weapon, besides those and the guns, was a slim dagger called a misericord- it’d been used in medieval times to get in the chinks of armor.

She looked kind of an assassin from the Dark Brotherhood. It was terrifying.

Alex had a belt with push knives hanging from it. Evidently, she’d become adept at throwing them, and there were other, different blades stashed in different parts of her outfit. Instead of the flashier garb she had a specially made black leather jacket, black leather pants, thick heeled boots with silver buckles, and a red tank top. She looked frustratingly casual.
“You need something heavier”, Noah said, upon seeing what the youngest Wilson had planned. “You aren’t as indestructible as the rest of us”.

Alex rolled her eyes in response. “Keep telling yourself that”.

“Look out!”

“Shit- fuck”, Wanda snarled, dodging to one side and narrowly avoiding a spray of bullets.

The man who’d fired on her yelled in outrage, started to reload, and was instantly shoved off the catwalk he’d been standing on. The gun clattered to the warehouse floor thirty feet below and Dante held the operative by the ankle, dangling him like a cat dangles a mouse.

The middle child straightened and twirled the sword in her hand. The other was among the rows and rows of boxes, and she’d have to find it before they cleared out.

Their first official strike on the program had been to hit an old warehouse Kara had heard a nurse mention, when they thought she was drugged. It hadn’t been teeming with enemies like Wanda had initially hoped, just a few armed guards on the outside and a few armed guards on the inside. But, the attack had at least gone without a hitch.

Besides her missing weapon, of course.

Dante shook the man’s leg, eliciting a shriek and a curse. “Alright, fuckface”, he said, loud enough so everyone else could hear. “Where’s your boss?”

“I don’t know! Put me down!” Panic laced the agent’s tone, and if Wanda hadn’t been so angry she almost would’ve felt sorry for the guy. Almost.

Noah was marching across the catwalk with Ruby in tow. Even from floor-level she could see her sister was less than pleased.

“No lies”, she said. “Where’s Alistair Kane?”
“I said I *don’t know!*”

Dante looked like he wanted to jostle him again, but instead hoisted him up higher so Ruby could look him dead in the eyes.

For a second, there was only the sound of his frantic breathing, before she sighed.

“He really doesn’t know”, she announced, and Wanda swallowed back her disappointment.

The man twisted in Dante’s grip, which in hindsight, wasn’t the best idea. “I told you what I know, and I don’t know anything! Now let me go!”

The redhead grinned a grin that shot chills down Wanda’s spine. “That’s not quite true, is it? You may not know where Kane is, but you know a lot of other places where there are people who might. Thanks for the info”.

Dante’s eyebrows furrowed, and he spared Noah a cursory glance. “*Should* I drop him?”

“No!” The operative screamed.

“Eh”, said the blonde, disinterestedly.

He screamed somehow higher and started to really struggle, and Dante yelped in surprise when he twisted right out of his hand and fell like a stone.

“Idiot”. Alex said, coming up next to Wanda with an armful of retrieved push knives. She glanced away from the body as it went *splat* on the ground, next to his gun. “Who tries to get free when they know they’ll fall to their death?”

“*Guys*”, Jake called, drawing attention away from the interrogation spectacle.
The blue-eyed mutate was elbow deep in one of the crates, having pried it open to look at the contents. Inside were hundreds and hundreds of files, and he was holding one of them and waving it like a flag.

“These are records”, he said. “Records on all the experiments!”

“Really?” Alex was off like a shot to join him, and Wanda followed close behind.

If they could find out where the other experiments were being held, they could stage rescue missions- something, admittedly, they had thought about before.

Noah, Dante, and Ruby joined them on the ground. The oldest of the unofficial leaders (in order it went Noah, Wanda, then Ruby despite her age), glanced around cagily. Any guards left in the warehouse were dead, but she was fidgety.

“Grab what you can carry and let’s get out of here”, Noah ordered. “I don’t want to attract any attention”.

Wanda examined the massacre as they left, and decided that when SHIELD found the mess, it would be too late to worry about not attracting any attention.

POV CHANGE- AJ

“Did you hear about what happened?”

AJ raised an eyebrow and stirred her onion rings. She was tired and sweaty from training, and gossip was the last thing she wanted to be in on. “What?”

Emma looked too exasperated at that answer, if you asked her. “Don’t you ever read anything Magnus sends us? Police were sent to investigate gunshots at a warehouse three nights ago, and when they saw the place they contacted SHIELD”.

“Fascinating. Why?”
The telepath pouted. “Because it was a Weapon X facility, and someone had practically destroyed it! It wasn’t us and it wasn’t the Avengers!”

AJ frowned. She felt a brief urge to ask Emma if she was sure, but when you were a powerful mind-reader you had a way of knowing what was true and what wasn’t.

“Seriously?” Josh sat down next to her with his own tray, wincing from where their team leader had probably hit him a little too hard. The rest of the cafeteria was completely oblivious to the conversation. “Was it that other vigilante team that’s been running wild?”

His sister scoffed and reached for some of his food, yelping when her hand was promptly slapped away. “No, I don’t think so. Those guys are always super careful not to kill anyone, at least on TV, and every person inside and out had been murdered”.

AJ thought they deserved it after what they’d done to her, her sister, and even the Avengers’ precious children a few months back, not to mention anyone else who’d ever been caught by it. However, she didn’t dare say so in front of her holier-than-thou teammates.

“Do you think we’ll be assigned to look into it?” Clara asked, a gleam of excitement in her eyes (damn it all if AJ wasn’t starting to like the girl).

“Ugh, I hope not”, Anael said, unhappily. “I don’t want to get wrapped up in a conspiracy theory, which is what this sounds like”.

“You don’t like conspiracy theories?” That was Alec, and he sounded disappointed.

“They’re ridiculous”.

“But what about the whole lizard people thing? I bet they’re really Skrulls”.

AJ had no idea what Skrulls were, but Anael seemed to, so she let the pair hash it out and went back to her lunch.
Lily was squinting hard at her burger. The troubled look on her face was reminiscent of a little kid who wasn’t sure if knew something they shouldn’t.

AJ sipped from her thermos (filled to the brim with black coffee), and made eye-contact with her across the table. “Something wrong?”

The engineer jumped a foot in the air and settled when she realized who’d spoken. She managed a smile, and shook her head. “No, I’m fine”.

Sure, you are.

AJ’s best guess was that Lily was thinking about the footage they’d watched so long ago- footage of her own torture and experimentation. Maybe she thought that the mystery girl on tape was still alive, and was going on a revenge kick.

AJ wasn’t going to pretend like she hadn’t thought about it before. A mixture of cowardice (she was petrified of getting caught again) and reality (she was alone) kept her from it.

Of course, she wasn’t exactly alone anymore. AJ didn’t hate her colleagues as much as she thought she would, and they never questioned her decisions during battle simulations. Even Maggie, who should’ve been the one in charge, followed orders- not that her calls were “orders”, they were more like “suggestions”. Orders were for soldiers.

AJ figured that was kind of what they were, but she wasn’t about to start acting like a drill sergeant. Rebelling in small ways was her style.

“Agent Freeman?”

Her last name, whether people knew its origins or not, was usually said with a varying amount of unease or contempt. This time was no different.

AJ turned to find a young SHIELD agent (older than her, but still young) standing there. He was noticeably sweating and when he spoke, the others’ conversation died down.
An unidentified fear began to churn in her stomach. “What do you want?”

The agent cleared his throat. He looked like he didn’t know if he should salute or not, and would’ve been more comfortable with shooting himself in the foot.

“You have a visitor”, he said, slightly rushed. “In the lobby”.

AJ didn’t get visitors. That in itself would’ve been a cause for alarm. “I think there’s been a mistake”.

“No, she was very specific”.

“Well, then who is she?”

“I’m not at liberty to say”.

AJ huffed and turned back to the rest of the squad, who were all watching her with expressions ranging from confusion to worry.

“I’ll be back”, she said, finally. “I guess”. The brunette stood and paused to grab a handful of onion rings, stuffing them into her jacket pocket. “Anyone who touches my stuff while I’m gone is getting their ass kicked when training starts again. Mmm’kay?”

No one replied, but Clara nodded her head. Even she looked nervous, and the scientist was rarely nervous about anything. Excited, yes. Wary, no.

AJ spared them one last glance and followed the messenger out of the room.

“Oh”, Wanda Wilson said, upon seeing her enter, “You actually came”.

Out of all the people AJ hadn’t been expecting, one of Deadpool’s children had been pretty high up
on the list. “What the fuck do you want?”

“To pass on something. Any place we can talk that doesn’t have a bunch of adults milling around? I don’t much fancy getting detention, or whatever”.

The two glared at each other, and in that moment AJ realized just how different the other girl looked- she was an inch taller, and thinner. The lines of her cheekbones were showing, and she’d lost some color. Wanda’s hands were planted deep in the pockets of her hoodie and her body language was stiff and tight.

She was aware the other girl had been captured by the Weapon X program, along with her sisters and a couple of their friends. AJ hadn’t gotten a lot of time to reflect on the irony before Magnus threw them deeper into training, and the only other time she’d thought about the kidnapping was when they were found, a couple of weeks ago.

AJ looked at her, and wondered if that was what she herself looked like, after escaping.

“Yeah”, she agreed. “Let’s find somewhere more private”.

She turned and marched back down the hallway, trusting her to follow. A second later there was the sound of quick footsteps, and Wanda matched her pace.

AJ looked at the fluorescent lights on the ceiling instead of her guest. “Did you threaten that SHIELD agent with a knife or something? He seemed petrified”.

Wanda shrugged, a smirk playing on her lips. “He wouldn’t let me see you. There was minimal threatening involved”.

*Minimal?*

“Was seeing me that important?”

The smile, if it was going to become a smile, vanished. She looked at her sneakered feet and there seemed to be resignation in the tilt of her head. “Yeah. It’s important”.
AJ was tempted to shake the answers out of her (Wanda may have looked glassy, but by no means did she look breakable), but she restrained the impulse. Deadpool’s daughter glowered, like she knew what she was thinking.

“You have a punchy look”, she said, heatedly.

“It’s called a resting bitchface. Look it up”. AJ was still staring ahead when she said it, and was vaguely surprised to get an eye-roll and a snort of laughter.

The pair ended up back at her room, and she locked the door just in case. Antione and Ella, while they were fantastic at what they did (fighting people), could be nosy. It was a good thing the room was soundproofed otherwise the lock wouldn’t have been enough.

The first thing Wanda said when she hopped onto the bed was, “I know that was you in the footage we watched six months ago”.

AJ froze in front of the door, because wow, that was a terrible icebreaker. Wanda could be horribly blunt when she wanted to be, even if she’d suspected the truth all along.

She forced her muscles to unfreeze and crossed her arms over her chest. “I figured. Get the fuck off my bunk”.

Wanda cringed, and made no move to do as asked. “Sorry, that was out of the blue. As far as I know no one else figured it out- except maybe for Izzy, because she’s got a scary way of knowing things. Not like Ruby, because telepathy doesn’t count, but still”.

AJ considered grabbing her by the arm and throwing her off the bed, by force. “Did you have a point or are you just going to ramble? And get off my bed”.

Wanda promptly stuck out her tongue. “Make me. Anyway, I did have a point- hey!”

She yelped in surprise when AJ marched over and yanked her up and off the mattress, depositing her on the floor with a dull thud.
“In all honesty”, the brunette said, dryly, “I gave you a warning”.

She growled, explanation forgotten, and kicked the legs out from under her. AJ crashed into the frame and slammed her forehead against the post, which would’ve made any normal person see stars. The ringing in her ears was certainly annoying, though.

“Ashole”, Wanda griped, and AJ righted her balance, fully prepared to start a real fight when she held up her hands in mock-surrender.

“As much as I want to kick your ass right now”, she said, “What I have to say takes precedence. Then, ya know, we can fight if you’re still up to it”.

AJ hummed and (reluctantly) dropped her stance. “What is it? And, fair warning, but I think I’d always be up for fighting you”.

“Same. Anyway, while I was in Weapon X, I met a girl named Kara. She left with us. During the escape, she said the last time they tried to break out they were stopped by a super soldier the scientists created. The first successful one. Her official nickname is Scythe, but the other experiments called her Zookeeper”.

AJ clasped her hands together, an old nervous habit. “Really? I’m guessing you had to beat her, right? How’d you do that if she was so good?”

Wanda’s expression was near unreadable. “That’s the thing. Scythe took out Kara and over ten other powered individuals all by herself, but she let us go”.

“She let you go?” AJ was fully prepared to call bull, but Wanda wasn’t finished.

“The other girl in the video was your sister, right? You called her Sarah”.

Always, at the reminder of Sarah, her heart clenched painfully. There was also a sneaky, terrible feeling that everything was about to get a whole lot more complicated.
“My older sister, if you must know. She is- was -Ajax’s biological daughter, too”. There was a pause, and AJ felt sick. “…Why?”

Wanda’s eyes held nothing but sympathy. “I recognized her just like I recognized you. Your sister is still alive”.

“My sister would never work for the same organization that killed our mother!” AJ was dimly aware that she was shouting, and didn’t care.

Her ears were ringing for an entirely different reason, now.

“She would if you were in trouble, and that’s exactly what she thought”, Wanda pushed on, no hint of a false truth in her tone. She never seemed to shut up. “They told her that you were still there. Still captive. And that if she didn’t listen they would kill you”.

“That’s not possible. I looked everywhere for her!”

“And they told you she was dead because to them, she was! Sarah-”

“Don’t you fucking say her name!” AJ’s voice rose. Her eyes burned.

The whole reason she joined up with SHIELD was both for protection, and because of her mother and sister. That was real, but Sarah had been alive all along, and must’ve believed she’d abandoned her.

This can’t be happening.

Wanda’s mouth slammed shut. It was a good minute before she spoke again, and it was quieter. Subdued. “She told me to tell you the only reason she stayed was because she thought you were in danger. It’s the truth, AJ”.

AJ knew full well it was the truth. That was what made it hard to accept.
“Get out”.

I’m gonna have a fucking breakdown, I need-

“Wait—”

Get out, get out, get out-

“GET THE HELL OUT!” She screeched, and realized she was crying.

I haven’t cried in three years.

Wanda staggered to her feet and threw open the door; running like she expected a tomahawk in her back, for her troubles.

AJ, one half of Ajax’s legacy, curled her knees up to her chest and bawled like a baby.
Chapter 31

POV CHANGE- Sarah

Their names were Mave Lloyd, Kilo Ketch, Orion Garrett, Rio Alexandra, and Zu Li.

Sarah also had a faint recollection of an experimental little girl with questionable parentage. The rumors were never proved true or false by anyone, and besides, she’d been too busy with her missions to care.

What Sarah remembered of Mave was a snappy teenager. He’d been scrawny, with brown skin, curly black hair that hadn’t been washed in days, and freckles. His eyes were the most notable-heterochromia. One was blue, and the other was gray.

Mave’s powers were what the “doctors” called water bomb generation, which meant he could create and explode bombs made of water. If Sarah’s math was right, Mave was nineteen. She’d never seen him use those explosions in action.

Kilo had been the yin to Mave’s yang. He was quiet and hardly said a word when being mistreated, and hadn’t even screamed during the torture. He’d been older, too, with coppery skin, straight black hair, and brown eyes. Kilo must be over twenty by now, perhaps a year younger than herself. His powers had been the ability to project his emotions and alter the ones around him. They hadn’t had a name for it.

Sarah and Plato called it empathy. They used to joke about it together, on the days where they felt more human than monster.

Rio had been a lively kid. Just by looking at him (amber skin, wavy brown hair, and warm brown eyes), Sarah could tell he was a generally cheerful person. When he mutated, his irises turned yellow and he gained the power to heal. He was probably eighteen.

Orion was the most powerful, and seventeen nowadays. He’d been a mouthy one, but not nearly as bad as Mave, and had green eyes, tan skin, and ginger hair. Orion’s gift was exceedingly rare, and one of the reasons Kane had ordered Sarah not to kill him- he could heal people, even fatal injuries, something they hadn’t found out until he accidently stabbed his trainer in the chest and resurrected her.
Zu was last, at sixteen. He was withdrawn and took beatings with barely any complaint, like Kilo, and had beige skin, straight black hair, and brown eyes. As if to show off his resilient nature he gained the ability to control nature itself.

During Sarah’s briefing, when Kane assigned her and his son to watch over the facility, he’d explained portions of this. She’d done her own digging later on.

They were the first group of experiments captured that had successfully mutated—some were immigrants who’d been nabbed off the streets, others were simply runaways. When they tried to escape, it was easy to take them down. They hadn’t fully understood their powers yet, or how to use them, and the dead weight wasn’t helping.

No, not dead weight. The other kids.

Plato had been busy during that particular break-out. His father normally had him running jobs that were the equivalent of paperwork, and hunting down new “recruits”. He’d been off doing something or other. When Sarah asked, he said he couldn’t tell.

The work she’d done for the last however many years was despicable. She knew that, and accepted it; the whole time telling herself that it was to protect AJ.

But AJ hadn’t been in the program, for who knew how long.

“You’re brooding again”. That was Mave, in the backseat, whom they’d taken to listening to like his word held divine prophecy. Through the rearview mirror, Sarah could see his eyes glittering dangerously at her.

Breaking in to rescue them had been a spur of the moment decision. She’d stolen a jeep after allowing the teenagers to escape, and driven it down the other side of the mountain, utterly alone and confused. Sarah had known she wouldn’t be able to evade the program alone, and those people she locked away all those years ago? At the time, she’d believed it was a step closer to redemption.

Convincing them to help, though…that had been a battle in itself. There were trust issues.

Sarah didn’t respond and stared straight ahead; white-knuckling the wheel. At the moment they were somewhere in the middle of Bumfuck, Arizona, having been driving for hours. She didn’t
have the first clue exactly what those scientists had done besides turn her into a cyborg, but she didn’t need to sleep as much.

That was good. Sarah could do without nightmares.

“Hey”. Mave shifted, careful not to wake up his dozing allies (friends, her brain supplied, you don’t go through something like they went through without becoming friends). “Where the hell are we going? Normally I wouldn’t be complaining about the silence, but you haven’t responded to any of our questions”.

Kilo, the only one brave enough to sit in the passenger’s seat, cracked open one eye.

“We’re going to meet with a mercenary group”, he mumbled. “At least, I think that’s what they’re calling themselves. I heard Scythe on the burn phone earlier”.

Sarah flinched. “That’s not my name”.

“Good luck dropping it”, Mave retorted (he and Rio were by far the most bitter about their ordeal). “And what mercenary group?”

“They’re the same people who slaughtered the warehouse on the News. It’s a team, I think, that most likely consists of the children I let go”.

Both of Kilo’s eyes opened and a hint of distress started to creep into his tone. “You mean the younger ones that were in with us? Are they okay?”

“I assume so. The Avengers took them”.

“Thank fuck”, Mave hissed. His shoulders slumped slightly. “Are they really going around attacking random warehouses, though? I never pegged those guys as bloodthirsty”.

Sarah exhaled and glanced around for other cars. When she saw none, she pressed down on the gas a little more (the silence around them was making her antsy). “The warehouse was a unit for Weapon X. Wanda Wilson contacted me with the help of their telepath two days ago- apparently,
they want our help”.

“Help? Help with what?”

“I’m not sure. We’ll have to wait and see”. Sarah thought of the promise Wanda had made and wondered if it had been kept. She probably had gone through with it, if not to see what would happen, but pondering AJ’s reaction was enough to change the subject.

“We’ll be at the rendezvous in five hours”, she said, ignoring the slight hitch in her tone (Kilo gave her a funny look). “Be ready”.

The rendezvous was a rundown old house just on the border between Arizona and Nevada.

“How lovely”, Rio said dryly, eliciting a smack upside the head from Orion. “Hey!”

“Guys”, Mave said, impatiently. “Focus”.

They seemed nervous, not that Sarah could blame or fault them. A part of her had started to believe this might be a trap, although it wasn’t like Wanda’s ragtag misfits would gain anything by capturing her- she didn’t know where Kane was.

The house, a two-story building with a dilapidated porch that had once been white, was leaning threateningly to one side. The shade of blue it was painted was long-faded.

“Charming”, Sarah said, and put one foot on the first step. The second she did, the little white-haired girl with wings rocketed outside.

“Mave!” She shrieked joyously, tackling him and the others to the ground.

He grinned wide enough to split his cheeks. “Kara? Kara, holy shit!”
A chorus of questions erupted, followed by even less answers, and the rest of the experiments they’d known came tumbling out to join the pile.

Wanda poked her head out the door last, observing the reunion with a weary smile. She looked better than the last time Sarah had seen her, but the info she held probably wasn’t good. Judging by her expression, it was worse than previously expected.

“Let’s give them a minute”, Wanda said. “Come on in”.

Not knowing what else to do, Sarah followed.

The rest of the squad was waiting inside- the girl with the metal arm, the boy with the metal wings, Wanda’s steely-eyed sisters, the cousins, and the telepath.

Izabela, Riley, Noah and Alex, Marya and Christa, and Ruby.

Christa offered a wave, but everyone else looked at her with vague distrust.

“Gather ‘round”, Noah declared, placing both hands on a rounded table dragged to the center of the abandoned room. Files that conjured the barest glimmer of recognition in Sarah’s mind were placed neatly into separate piles.

“What are these?” She asked, accepting a paper that Ruby passed to her. She skimmed it quickly and frowned at what was written.

Noah’s posture was tense. “Old stuff, or maybe not. That’s why we called you”.

“Well, you’re wrong about it being outdated. Warehouse?”

“Warehouse”, Alex confirmed. “Ever been?”

Her tone was accusing, and Sarah studiously didn’t mention it. It wasn’t as though she didn’t deserve any of the comments. “No. Plato probably has, but not me”.
Riley’s hand drifted towards the gun holstered to his thigh. All of them were dressed in civilian clothes, but armed all the same. “Plato?”

“Plato Kane”. Sarah carefully kept her expression passive. “My…partner. He’s the boss’s son. We’ve worked together since I was kidnapped”.

“Is he a threat?”

“Undoubtedly. I’ll deal with him, though. He’ll come after me, not you”.

Wanda pulled a knife from her belt and twirled it absent-mindedly, furrowed brow betraying her concern. “How sure are you of that?”

“Very. He’s the only one Kane will trust to retrieve me”.

“And can you take him?”

“I can”. Sarah wasn’t sure why they were talking like they were all in this together. “Is that all you wanted to tell me?”

“Nope. We’ve got a couple more things to discuss- I’m skipping curfew, do you think we came all this way for ten minutes?”

The incredulousness- as if Sarah was a complete idiot for suggesting such a thing -almost made her laugh out loud, an action she hadn’t done in a long, long time.

“What else?” She asked. “And, if you don’t mind me asking, how the hell did you sneak out this far without anyone noticing?”

“We do mind you asking that, actually”, answered Riley, who’s hand was still resting on his firearm. Izabela shot him a look and he reluctantly let it drop to his side.
Wanda didn’t give either of them her attention. “It’s not important”, she dismissed. “But *this* is”. She slid a picture across the table for Sarah to study.

The brunette picked it up gingerly- it was a shot of a black girl, at least thirteen (possibly a little older), who was strapped to a table. There were long stitched up lines going up her bare arms and legs, and her mouth was open in a silent scream. The photo reminded Sarah briefly of the last time she’d seen AJ, and she quickly looked down at the test subject’s information.

“*Belladonna Howle*”, she read, and frowned. “A prototype adamantium skeleton? They only ever succeeded in doing this to-”

“Wolverine”, Ruby confirmed, with no discernable opinion. It made sense that someone who could read people as well as she could, would have a stellar poker face. “Logan runs with the X-Men now, but I’ve seen his claws a few times. This kid isn’t his daughter or anything but they used what was left of his DNA to make her”.

All the stories Sarah had heard over the years had begun to swirl in her mind. A headache was forming behind her eyes. “Alright. It says here that they gave her two claws instead of six or four. Is that significant?”

Wanda shrugged. “How the fuck should we know? All we did was read the file. We want to rescue her, but sneaking out without getting caught is one thing. We’d have to go oversees for this, and I’ll admit that even meeting you was a stretch”.

There was a long pause. Sarah’s fingers had started to bend the edges of the picture. She set it down carefully and straightened, trying to look taller than she really was. “Are you telling me that you want me and my… *group*, to rescue Belladonna?”

“Well… yeah”.

“Are you insane? We’d be on their radar, and if they really succeeded with the prototype then she’s heavily guarded. We’ll be captured or killed”.

Ruby didn’t look fazed by her argument. “Ye of little faith”, she said, in a way that could be mistaken for good-naturedly. “We have a back-up plan”.
“Oh? And what’s that?” Sarah was starting to think that coming all this way had been a mistake. For all they knew, people in those horrible black suits and those awful guns had already surrounded the house. Mave and his friends had probably been shot dead with silencers and any second now the whole place would be overrun-

“Hey”, Noah interrupted, voice surprisingly soft. “You look pretty pale”.

“Nobody’s going to find us here”, Wanda added, and Sarah was briefly stunned that she knew what she was thinking, when her powers weren’t related to the mind. “Ruby made sure that anything within five miles of us gets a message to turn back. If you know what I’m saying”. She followed up with an exaggerated wink, and the redhead snorted.

The former soldier didn’t know whether to be grateful or flustered, but then again, they’d done it for their own benefit as well as theirs. There was no need to be weepy. “I’m fine. What back-up plan are you talking about?”

“We’ve got someone with the resources to provide an extraction if things go south”. Ruby rolled her eyes. She seemed absurdly proud, but Wanda was looking at the floor, and Sarah’s blood had started to turn to ice in her veins.

“Who would that ‘someone’ be?” She was unable to keep a tremor from entering her voice, clenching and unclenched her fists. The metal joints ground together, and Riley cringed (he creaked whenever he moved. Sarah remembered the wings that’d been sawdered to his back, and realized why his jacket looked a couple of sizes too big. She forced herself to stay still after that, and wondered if there would be a point when she could stop being sorry).

“They’ll be here soon”, Marya supplied. The witch had angled herself closer to her cousin, like she was suspecting a fight. “It was harder for them to get away”.

As if on cue, the sound of a motorcycle split the air. A few alarmed shouts came from the front yard, and then stopped quickly. The engine cut off, as well.

Sarah told herself it was because Kara had explained, and not for another reason.

Wanda had paled. She muttered something to Noah, and the blonde nodded grimly, as the door creaked open. The newcomer, a seventeen-year-old, walked in.
She wore an impressive amount of black leather. The jacket had a symbol emblazoned on the front and her light hair was short, and partially shaved. A single tomahawk was slung over her back on a strap, and the girl’s eyes were brown, and crueler than Sarah’s last recollection of them. It felt like forever ago.

Her heart sped up, stuttered, then seemed to stop. She could barely breathe.

“Addy?”

AJ - it was AJ, an older and tougher version of her little sister -flinched. She glanced at Wanda, and the mercenary (if that’s what you could call her), started herding everyone out. On the way, she slung an arm around Noah and Alex’s shoulders.

When they were finally alone, Sarah forced herself to exhale.

“I didn’t know you’d escaped”, she blurted, and it was probably the most honest thing she ever could’ve said at that moment. It was a flimsy excuse at best, but it’s not like it would be beneficial to feed her lies about what she’d been up to.

AJ’s face twisted. For a second, it looked as though she would cry, scream, or possibly chop the furniture to bits. “Yeah. I know. That’s what Wanda told me”.

Are you okay? Sarah wanted to ask, as redundant as it was. Neither of them had been okay in a long time, and now that they were reunited, it was nearly worse than being alone.

Instead of digging up old skeletons, all that came out was, “Your hair”.

AJ blinked, then flushed like she had at twelve, when a trim was a part of the world’s horrors. “Um. I guess it does look pretty different”. She cupped the bald spot with one hand self-consciously, then gulped.

Sarah willed herself not to burst into tears (she hadn’t cried since their mother died, after the men in black had thrown her onto the operating table). “I like it”.


There was a smile—the barest hint of one. AJ crossed her arms over her chest and straightened. “You look pretty different, too”.

She imagined that was true, not that she’d had ample time to look in a mirror lately.

“I never would’ve done it if I’d known you were safe”, she said.

AJ managed a scowl, her anger exhausted. “I wished you hadn’t done it all, but I’m not one to talk. They told me you were dead when I looked for you”.

“You looked for me?”

“Of course!” Her shoulders were quivering. “I looked everywhere, but I couldn’t find you. I figured those bastards had been telling the truth”.

Sarah had never wanted to slice Alistair Kane’s throat more than she had in that exact moment. “I guess they were, in a way. I can’t say the ‘old me’ still exists”.

“You could say the same about me, too. When I escaped, I killed the guards who were on transport duty. I’d like to think it wasn’t the torture, or the training, or the loss that really changed me. I think it was taking a life and not breaking a sweat afterwards”.

Funny. Sarah had done that so often, it didn’t feel like “taking a life”, anymore.

_We hardly recognized one another, and we have still have enough in common to talk about murder like we’re talking about the fucking weather._

There was a long silence. AJ gradually stopped trembling.

Sarah leaned against the table, barely noticing when it dug uncomfortably into her hip. Pain wasn’t a factor in her body’s functions anymore, and it’d taken a while to get used to. “I was told you have the resources to supply an extraction?”
AJ hesitated, then nodded. “I…kind of joined up with SHIELD, in the hopes I could avenge you. I think their priorities were to keep an eye on me. Maybe get some insider knowledge about the new program. Fat lot of luck that did”.

“You didn’t tell them anything?”

“Fuck, no. Save for what I confessed to Wanda and her pals. She’s a pistol”.

Sarah could tell they didn’t like each other, but there was a grudging respect, and she chose not to push it. Whatever relationships AJ had today could be examined later, when their relationship wasn’t as fragile. “I agree. We didn’t deserve the shit they did to us, did we?”

“Hell no”.

“You’re not gonna stay out of this, are you?”

“Damn straight”. A gleam entered her eye. “I’m coming on that rescue. So’s my team. They’ve agreed to shut their mouths because they trust my judgement, and I trust you. Lily knows how to hotwire anything under the sun, and then some. I doubt they’ll notice a missing jet for a couple hours”.

“Is this about revenge?”

“Partly. That, and because I just got you back, and I’m not letting you out of my sight. If you have a problem with that, count on me sneaking along, permission or no permission”.

Sarah laughed, startled at the declaration, and oddly relieved. “Well, I guess I’ll have to return the favor. We do this for Mom. Alright?”

The younger girl nodded. “For Mom, and for ourselves. Not to mention all those sons of bitches who fucked up those people outside”.

She grinned, prepared to call Wanda back in so they could come up with a plan, until AJ surged forward and tackled her around the waist. Sarah stumbled, surprised, and her arms wrapped around
her sister’s back out of reflex.

“We do this together”, she growled, and there was definitely a lump in her throat she was trying to speak around. “Or we don’t do this at all”.

She was right- they’d been apart long enough. It was time to fight back against the damned man who ruined their lives as a family.

“Together”, Sarah agreed, and tightened her grip around AJ. “Or not at all”.
Chapter 32

POV CHANGE- Penny

For a week after the Junior Avengers vs Avengers showdown, everyone walked on eggshells- even when Penny’s own team finally hit the streets, they stuck to petty crime like muggings and robberies to avoid the same level of attention.

“What, is it a trend now?” Tony had declared, his patience clearly piqued. He was going over the ancient bank robbery footage from so long ago (about a year, if Penny’s memory served. Melody’s seventeenth birthday had passed calmly and quietly, without fuss). He kept trying to fix it without success, because he didn’t know Melody was hacking into FRIDAY and undoing the progress.

“First, it’s the ‘Junior Avengers’, then the mercenaries, and now it’s these guys”.

Penny tensed at the mention of the mercenaries. The few witnesses of their raids hadn’t seen any faces, and the only information they could give confidently was that all of the members were young. No older than eighteen.

Tem and Aiden had taken it upon themselves to check out one of the warehouses. The two confirmed it was Weapon X they were attacking.

“This is nuts”, Joven had confided, later. “You don’t think it’s our friends, do you? I mean, I know they won’t talk about what happened-”

“Don’t”, Penny had interrupted, and refused to hear more. If Wanda was involved in that sort of thing, she would tell her, no questions asked. They didn’t keep secrets.

(Admittedly, not even the stuff that should probably remain secret).

The Junior Avengers were looking into it further, beyond Tem and Aiden’s excursion. Of course, they were trying to lay low to avoid another confrontation, but they were managing in juggling that, and helping Saleitha find her mom.

SHIELD still hadn’t done shit in that department, although Penny could tell that Wanda and AJ were talking to each other a lot. She couldn’t say she knew why, so maybe they were keeping secrets now, after all.
Either Wanda was ten times more paranoid than she used to be, or something really was going on, and Joven’s words had truth to them.

“I just want to know what’s wrong”, Penny cried, and threw her hands up in the air. She hopped off of Melody’s worktable (they hadn’t ended up moving bases after all, but quite a few spells had been cast to better conceal the location). “She won’t tell me! I don’t want to be a jerk, because they all went through terrible stuff and it’s not her job to unload on me, of all people, so I feel better about myself. I just- she has to talk about it with someone. I know she killed escaping from that place. Hell, I bet they all did! But- what if they’re really out there, wreaking havoc on the program? And is she working with SHIELD? Because Wanda used to despise AJ, and now-”

Saleitha, the other person in the room, held up a hand to stop her. Penny’s rant screeched to a halt and her jaw snapped shut; cheeks flushing red with embarrassment.

The Asgardian was silent for a moment. “Dude, I’ve known you for a couple months now. I’m going to be honest, and say that I have no idea what you’re talking about- that, and say that you and your buddy are definitely gay for each other. What the fuck”.

Penny groaned. “Hey! We aren’t gay for each other! I mean- Wanda’s pan, so she could be gay for me, but she’s always kidding when she flirts”.

“Does she ever explicitly say so?”

She opened her mouth to reply- obviously- but froze. Because, in all honesty, Penny couldn’t recall a time when Wanda had made an innuendo, and then taken it back.

Wanda had also told her that she loved her, within seconds before being captured. Adding best friend on the end had seemed to debunk the meaning then, but now she wasn’t sure.

Saleitha took one look at her expression, and nodded knowingly. “I rest my case. Or, are you going to tell me that you’re straight?”

Penny hadn’t given that much thought, either. The men she was usually surrounded with were her cousins, and that would be weird. She and Wanda were always joined at the hip, so they’d only ever had eyes for one another, and no one else.
“Oh, my god”, Penny said. She covered her face with her hands. “Oh, my god”.

She couldn’t see Saleitha anymore, but got the distinct impression that the sorceress was frowning in concern. “Uh. Are you okay?”

“I’m gay for Wanda”.

“Alright. Thanks for noticing? Seriously, do you know how many times someone has commented on your relationship? It’s weird”.

“I’m gay. For Wanda”. Penny lowered herself to the floor and tried to process. She’d spent a ridiculously long portion of her life believing something else, and now that the point of view had changed, it was taking a minute to process.

A thud signaled the arrival of Jace, who almost always came in through the ceiling.

“Uh”, he said, not five feet away. “What’d I miss?”

Penny resisted the urge to say, my Big Gay Crisis™.

Saleitha made an odd choking noise. Maybe she was thinking the same thing.

Jace evidently decided it wasn’t worth the interrogation. “Yeah, okay. Whatever. Melody’s on her way here with supposedly ‘important’ information, so…unless you guys are planning on joining in, I guess you should go?”

“Wow, the future ruler of Asgard giving orders”, Saleitha pondered, amusement coloring her tone, the confusion from earlier having vanished. “I’d be impressed, except, you know, that didn’t sound anything like an order. And what’s the big deal? I thought there wasn’t going to be any withholding of info, like your parents do”.

Penny moved her hands away from her face, but didn’t get up from the floor. Her newest teammate
was right- Melody herself was a fan of not hiding stuff (if you didn’t count all the baggage she and her father were currently keeping from each other), so it would make no sense for her to want to keep things on the down-low.

“I don’t know, to be honest”, Jace admitted, sheepishly. Penny noticed with a start that his sword was drawn. “Mel didn’t tell me. Kind of interesting, since she’s well known for oversharing”.

“Don’t I know it”. Tem skirted around the caution tape with Brian and the rest of the Junior Avengers in tow, holding hands with their shapeshifting powerhouse. “We had a sleepover once, and the game of Truth or Dare got out of control. I wanted to find earmuffs”.

The brunette laughed nervously and dug out her cell phone, firing off a quick text to A’yana (the unofficial Secret Avengers co-leader): *get the others and come meet us. Important.*

Simple, and to the point. Perfect. Or, it would’ve been, if Penny’s stomach wasn’t valiantly trying to tie itself into knots. She gulped.

“Excuse me”, said the eccentric genius, as she waltzed in with less of a spring in her step than usual. “I’ve never done anything that required *earmuffs*”.

Her mood was reasonable. The other night, Thor had been explaining the importance of Sumarbrander (unfortunately unhelpful), and had accidentally spawned an impromptu discussion on the Junior Avengers. Melody had attempted to defend the ragtag team of misfits with the pretense of admiring their initiative, or something like that, and she and her father had gotten into what could be considered a blow-out argument.

The Starks were getting into a lot of blow-out fights recently.

“You’re a lying liar that lies”. Aiden’s tone was more good-natured than usual, and he and Tem sat down in the chairs they had brought in on an off-day. Where exactly they came from, no one was certain. “So, what’s this about intel?”

Melody made a face. “Not really intel. More like a briefing. A lot of stuff has happened in the past year- cue round of applause for my latest birthday, thank you -and we need to do a rundown of what we do know, and what we don’t know. I contacted Jessie, who’s organization skills definitely put ours to shame, and she made us a list”.

“Then what is it?”

Brian mouthed, *don’t tell her*, and since there might’ve been some red seeping into his black irises, she laughed uncomfortably and said, “Not important. My team is on their way, so could you wait to start until they arrive?”

It looked like the last thing Melody wanted to do, but it wasn’t like Jessie was here.

“You are lucky we were close”. Khari’s mild, and ever-disapproving monotone cut through the momentary silence, as he, his sister, Tasha, and Joven made their way onto what Saleitha had started calling the “ground-floor”.

(It was basically the cleanest part of the abandoned building, where Melody’s worktable was set-up, and where the sparring took place).

“Oh, hey guys”, Saleitha said, as Joven found his place hovering next to her (the poor boy was smitten. She was more oblivious than anyone thought she would be. Or she was just ignoring the display intentionally). “Now we just need Blondie”.

Jace’s nose scrunched up. “Don’t call her that. She despises the ‘dumb blonde’ stereotype”.

“Right, right. Sorry. I forgot she was your girlfriend”.

“Hey!” The demigod’s cheeks flushed faster than Penny could remember her own budding
feelings, and she got the urge to hide her face again.

Melody squinted at the younger girl suspiciously. “I know why Jace is turning the color of a tomato, but why are you?”

“Not important”, Saleitha interjected, quickly. “Where’s Jessie? I want to get this over with, so I can go back to the Compound and finish *Downtown Abby*”.

“You know, since our friends were found right when we made that deal, we’re helping you for free, right? Don’t test my patience”.

“Are you kidding? I’m a joy to be around, my company is payment enough”. Saleitha’s words dripped with sarcasm, and a fair amount of malice.

Melody obviously hadn’t been serious when making that threat, but she wasn’t kidding when it came to finding her mother. Making a joke at the missing woman’s expense hadn’t been the best idea.

Jace, who just wanted to change the subject, snickered. “Everyone knows you don’t watch *Downtown Abby*. But, she poses a good point. Where’s Jess?”

“Here!” She said on cue, out of breath, and skidded into the semi-circle holding a notepad. Penny caught a glimpse of elegant script, before Melody had plucked the coveted list out of her hands and held it too close to her face.

“Alright, listen up!” She shouted, unnecessarily. “Here’s what we know: Weapon X is back, and they’re worse than ever. A mercenary group consisting of teens has popped up, and is specifically targeting them- probably victims out for revenge. Jace has a sword with a powerful binding spell on it, except we don’t know who cast the spell and why. Our only clue is a rune on the bracelet”.

He turned the sword back into a bracelet and pointed to the aforementioned rune.

Penny wasn’t sure if anyone else had noticed, but Saleitha’s eyes darkened. Jace had claimed that his cousin didn’t know its meaning, however, it was possible that she hadn’t been telling the truth. But if that was the case- why?
“Saleitha’s mother Ziva, an Asgardian, has been kidnapped”, Melody continued. “Heimdall claims the culprits were men in black outfits wielding Midgardian weapons, which sounds like the same bastards who grabbed our friends”. She lowered the notepad and gave it back to Jessie, whose face was set with determination.

“I’ve got a feeling all of these are connected”, Steve’s patriotic daughter said. “Trouble is, I have no idea how. Why would Weapon X go after Saleitha’s mother, and how would they even know she was on Earth? Is she responsible for the spell?”

Saleitha shook her head. “Mom hardly interacted with anyone outside of the bar she worked at in Alaska. There’s no way she knew those in charge of the hellsite, or snuck back into Asgard to do magic. Maybe if we could talk to those mercenaries, we might get some answers. I’d recommend we ask your friends, but…” she gave a helpless shrug.

Melody sighed. “I don’t want to push them. It’s been a couple months since they were rescued, but they’ve hardly said a few words about the place”.

“We could ask them about the other experiments?” Joven suggested, carefully, like he was tip-toeing on a field of landmines.

Penny gulped. “I can ask Wanda. I need to talk to her tonight, anyway, and we’re all going to be at the Compound for dinner. I’m not sure if having all of us in the same place is a good idea, especially considering the state of Mel and her dad’s relationship- sorry- but it’ll be easy to sneak off and talk to her”.

Saleitha was staring. “Sounds like a plan to me. All in favor?”

“Slow your role, you’re not in charge”, Melody complained, with little heat (she pointedly ignored Aiden’s declaration of, you aren’t either). “Only I get to say that! And Penny, nice idea, but I take full offense to the jab about my family. You are begrudgingly forgiven”. She cleared her throat, and said, loudly, “All in favor?”

There was a chorus of reluctant, “I’s!”

“Lovely”, she hummed. “It’s in your hands now, Park. See what you can find out”.

“Right”, she agreed, and fidgeted nervously.

This can go one of two ways: really, really good. Or really, really bad.

The dinner went as well as they figured, with a lot of awkward, tense silences, and forced conversations about anything but “work”.

“This is like Thanksgiving, but without turkey and stuffing”, Wanda moaned, from where she was sprawled ungracefully on the couch. Her thumb was pressing buttons on the Nokia Penny had bought her in Christmas past, and while she couldn’t see the contact, the teen had a sneaking suspicion that she was texting AJ.

“Hey”, the brunette said, before she could stop herself. “I need to talk to you”.

Wanda rolled onto her back and blinked at her, curiously. “Well, you’ll have to be more specific. We talk all the time”.

“Wanda, it’s important”.

There was a pause. The mutant squinted suspiciously, before flipping off the cushions and onto the floor. “Alrighty, then. Outside?”

“Outside”, Penny confirmed, and grabbed her wrist as a reflex- they used to hold hands when they were younger, when they didn’t understand the romantic connotations. They did it more often now, as a side-effect of trauma (post-kidnapping and post-human experimentation trauma, to be specific).

Wanda allowed it to happen, not that that was unusual. They passed Saleitha on the way out, who was talking to Thor, and she shot them a look.

Penny resisted the urge to flip her off as they made their retreat. Odd, considering she’d never been the type of person to do something vulgar.
She didn’t speak again until they were safely away from FRIDAY, and any eavesdroppers or prying eyes. The last thing the Junior and Secret Avengers needed was for their secret to be outed, because they talked about “business” in earshot of Uncle Clint, or whatever.

“You have my undivided attention”, Wanda declared, which must’ve been true, because she’d tucked the phone away. “What is it?”

The question was at least half-serious. Penny would take what she could get, if her mouth would stop being dry, and her heart would stop pounding.

“You know the mercenary group?” She blurted, and cringed.

Wanda’s expression didn’t change. “Uh, yeah. They’ve been on the news, and my dad’s been talking about them with Mom. They’re from the program, right?”

Penny nodded. “I know you and the others don’t talk about what happened- and you definitely shouldn’t be forced to -but…do you remember any other people who were there? Kids, like us? Kids who didn’t make it out with you?”

“Kara mentioned there were older experiments, but those guys would basically be in their twenties nowadays. Why? Do you want to talk to them?”

There was an inflection when Wanda said the word talk, and Penny chose to look past it. It was bad enough that the topic at hand was testing boundaries.

“Yeah”, she admitted. “We suspect that Saleitha’s mom was taken by some Weapon X guys, but we don’t have proof, save for Heimdall’s description. We didn’t want to ask you because we didn’t want to pry”.

Wanda’s posture was stiff, having lost the playful edge, but she seemed to understand.

“I see”, she said. “I didn’t really leave my cell for the duration, but I can spread the word. I’ll let you know if I find anything. Was that it? Top-secret-vigilante-stuff?” A smile had begun to tug at the corners of her lips, and Penny slowly relaxed.
“Actually, one more thing”. She cleared her throat. “Do you want to go out sometime? To, like, that Mexican restaurant you love more than life itself?”

Her best friend frowned. “I can’t tell if you’re being serious. Which, you know, sucks, because I know you so well. Are you asking me out?”

“Y-Yeah. Is that a yes?”

Penny waited, and suddenly she was being hugged, and Wanda was yelling, “I can’t believe it took you this long to realize I was flirting with you!” in her ear.

She laughed, startled, and hugged back tightly.

In the middle Wilson’s back pocket, the Nokia rang incessantly.

POV CHANGE- Wanda

- Wait, the mission’s TOMORROW
- So, you’re going to be going on a fckin date while we risk our lives?

Wanda read at the text from AJ, and snorted softly through her nose. She texted back a hasty reply: oh please, and made eye-contact with Penny, who smiled.

Her heart was still threatening to exit her chest. Years of hitting on someone who never seemed to reciprocate your feelings will do that to a person.

I can’t believe she asked me out.

Saleitha had approached them a few hours ago, and said all of two words: “Hey, congrats”, and then walked away to join Joven and Tem by the bar.
Wanda was fairly certain the redhead was trying to sneak vodka, and that the Asgardian was down with getting her some. Natasha was definitely onto them, though, so the probability of getting drunk was low. Dammit.

“Who’re you messaging?” Penny asked, not quite upset, but not quite casual either.

Wanda made a noise of discontent—her friend-turned-maybe girlfriend’s questions about the rest of the test subjects had been strange, and certainly unpleasant, but there had been no hint of distrust. Besides, if it was to find Saleitha’s mother, Wanda would be happy to dig around for fake leads, and then give real help.

But, it wasn’t good that their friends were on the hunt for their group. Noah would no doubt throw a hissy-fit when she found out, and Kara would panic.

(Kara panicked a lot).

“AJ”, Wanda said, opting to tell the truth. “She’s bitching about a mission”.

Penny cocked her head to the side and curled her legs up to her chest. “I thought you two hated each other?”

“Oh, we do- that little shit”. She glared at the screen.

• Have fun with ur girlfriend while we kick ass
• I hate you

Wanda didn’t take her eyes off Penny as she replied (I’m not even hecking going do u think I’m going to wait around for news, and, yeah, yeah, kick all the ass for me. Damn right I’m gonna have a good-ass time). “Are you jealous, ‘Pen?” She teased, eliciting a loud yell of displeasure and a kick. “Hey! Ow!”

With no small amount of reluctance, she sent one last text—Good luck.

• Thanks, I guess
• Don’t worry
• We got this
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

watch out for mild gore fellas

POV CHANGE- AJ

AJ had never been happier to shed blood.

“Uh, guys”, Alec said nervously. “I think Mars is thinking about murder again”.

The brunette scowled, in part because of the added again, as if she thought about homicide often, and the use of her codename outside a mission.

Coulson had been rather lenient, all those months ago, when allowing the freshly formed team to choose their respective aliases. SHIELD usually assigned them or based it off of nicknames earned in the field, but the agent wanted to let the teens have some fun.

AJ hadn’t chosen hers. Instead, in the midst of arguing that she wanted no part in name-choosing, Maggie had dubbed the brunette Mars, after the Roman god of war.

The blonde’s own name was Miss America, which was marginally less cool. Alec’s was Archangel, Quinn’s was Pagan, Kat’s was Mage, Ella’s was Cobra, James’s was Demon, Anael’s was White Tiger (after her mother, who still held the current title), Lily’s was Iron Girl, Emma’s was Nix, Andy’s was Echo, Antoine’s was Heron, Joseph’s was Cavalry, Adam’s was Nightmare, Elysium’s was Crossbow and Josh’s was Missile, Kelly’s was Iron Fist (after her father, the actual Iron Fist), Clara’s was Maveth (odd), and Simon’s was Binary.

AJ thought it was arbitrary. However, it wasn’t as though they would stop calling her Mars, no matter who’s asses she threatened to kick.

“I’m not thinking about murder”, she snapped, annoyed. “I’m thinking about the mission”. 
Alec’s expression said he viewed the two as similar, and his wings – tawny, feathered monstrosities that were admittedly pretty awesome – bristled. Unfortunately, they ended up smacking Andy on the back of the head.

“Hey!” He complained, scooting away from the Inhuman. “Keep those things tucked in, okay? It’s not like we have all the room in the world”.

“I told you we should’ve borrowed the bigger jet”, Clara said from the pilot’s seat, amiably enough. She wasn’t flying the thing (despite her promises that she could try and see what happened) and was actually sitting up there to keep an eye on the autopilot.

Their mission was to rescue Belladonna Howle. According to the stolen warehouse credentials, she was being held on a cargo ship in the Atlantic called the Asclepius. Thankfully, those documents had included the last recorded coordinates, or else they wouldn’t have gotten any further than that.

Convincing the rest of the team hadn’t been easy. Some of them were still on the fence about the whole thing, but the unanimous agreement that SHIELD wasn’t getting anywhere with stopping Weapon X helped things along. AJ was relieved they were with her, and hadn’t deeply questioned the whole sister-miraculously-not-dead, stuff.

“I still don’t trust your source”, Anael growled. “You said they were mercenaries- the same group that Coulson and the real Avengers are preoccupied with. Something about them being their lead to the program’s source, or whatever. Are you sure this is a good idea?”

AJ snorted. “If I thought it wasn’t a good idea, we wouldn’t be doing this shitshow. Besides, they aren’t really mercenaries. They’re…a team”.

She looked less than convinced. “Really? Do they have a name?”

“What is with you people and naming things?”

“Aje, come on. Do they?”

AJ scowled. “I don’t know, uh- Team- Team X! That’s it. Team X. Happy?”
“Ecstatic”. Anael crossed her arms over her chest. “Look, I have to ask. I know your sister used to work for Weapon X. Can she be trusted?”

That time, she looked her dead in the eye, and said with confidence: “Yes”.

Even Joseph was taken aback by the ferocity, and he hardly seemed affected by anything. There were rumors flitting around the base that he might be a robot instead of a human being. Clara thought they were mean and distasteful.

Anael reluctantly fell silent; chewing on the inside of her cheek in order to keep quiet. Ella leaned over and whispered in her ear, eliciting a hum.

With lack of nothing better to do, AJ dug out her cell phone. She’d been texting Wanda for the past few days, mostly so they would be on the same page for the rescue operation, and their relationship had grown from mutual dislike to a grudging respect.

She was probably about to go on her date with Penny, about now.

- I gave ur shitty team a name
- It’s Team X

AJ didn’t wait for a reply and opened up her sister’s contact next. Lily had managed to manufacture a phone that couldn’t be tracked, so there would be no need for burn phones, or perishable means of stealthy communication.

- Do we need to go over the plan?

Sarah, luckily, responded right away: No.

Good. She had confidence in her group, just like she did.

The plan, in theory, was supposed to go smoothly. Essentially, the former Zookeeper and her squad would sneak aboard and attack the main deck as a distraction. Meanwhile, AJ and the rest of the boy band would sneak below and look for Belladonna. Clara was going to put the SHIELD jet into
invisibility mode and wait for them to finish. When the target was neutralized, they would meet at the lifeboats, and row a safe enough distance away for the scientist to blast it out of the water.

*In theory*, AJ thought, which was immediately accompanied by, *maybe not in practice.*

“We’re approaching”. Clara’s warning cut through the silence that had befallen them, and for the first time since they commandeered their transportation, she began to sound nervous- potentially scared. Objectively worse. “Get ready”.

They must’ve been a sight. Twenty-some kids dressed in black catsuits with SHIELD logos, save for Kat (who was in gold and green armor), Quinn (who wore a blue tunic), Lily (who wore black and gray armor like Stark’s), and AJ herself (who wore regular clothes, save for the leather jacket, which had a SHIELD logo. She despised uniforms more than she despised the codenames). In hindsight, they probably looked ridiculous.

“Ready?” AJ held up a hand as the hatch opened, exposing the crisp blue sky, the endless sea, and the long, inconspicuous looking boat a hundred feet below. “Go!”

She grabbed a parachute and took a running start, and then she was freefalling. A second later Alec whizzed past her, carrying Joseph and Josh in each arm.

There was already gunfire coming from the vessel, which meant Sarah and her crew were keeping up their ruse nicely.

*Together. Or not at all.*

AJ pulled the string and the chute billowed to life behind her, and by the time she and the others touched down, her tomahawk was drawn.

Sarah flashed them a thumbs-up as her opposite arm (the metal one), threw a startled man in black over the side. There was a scream, a splash, and then nothing.

“*Split up!*” AJ shouted, and sprinted for the door. She dodged a crate full of something-or-other, and chopped the head off an enemy who tried to intercept. Kat and Quinn cut away from the ongoing firefight to follow.
“If it’s all the same to you”, Sarah’s voice buzzed, over the intercoms. “I’ll stick with Mave, Kilo, Orion, Zu, and Rio. I’ve got some anger I’ve been meaning to work out, but let me know when you find Belladonna, and I’ll come to you. Roger that?”

“Affirmative”, AJ agreed; kicking open the door, narrowly avoiding a spray of blood when it smacked a person about to exit in the face. “The paper said lower levels, right?”

“I think so”. That was Zu speaking. “Try the third”.

“Thanks”. She turned her head to look at the duo behind her. “Did you copy that?”

Quinn huffed, haughtily. Both of her forearms were encased in what looked like oddly shaped shields of fiery energy, but it was nothing AJ hadn’t seen in training.

“Obviously”, she said. “We pay attention. It’ll take five minutes, at least, to search the rest of the decks if the third is empty”. A bullet chipped off a piece of wall by her head, and she shrieked. “Oh, fuck!”

Kat darted in front of them and impaled the closest gunman, leaving the remaining one for Quinn to exact revenge on. “How long is this hallway?”


“Got it”, they chorused, and just before rounding the corner, the blonde winked.

“You’re checking the captain’s quarter’s?” Andy asked. There was a gunshot, and a yelp of disgust. “Sorry. Close range. Do you know where that is?”

“I’ll figure it out!” She glared at the gore smearing the blades of her axes- the last time there was that much blood on them, it took hours of careful scrubbing to get the edges to look sharp and deadly once more. “I wish that goddamn info had come with a map”.
Ella was next to answer, and she sounded amused. “Actually, it did. You’re lucky I have an eidetic memory—where are you right now?”

“Be nice”, James complained, and AJ hissed through clenched teeth.

“Shut up, both of you”, she said, and kicked the shins out from under a knife-wielder. A knife of all things, like he thought it was a good idea to come at an obviously pissed off girl armed with two weapons bigger than his brain. “Cobra, I just passed a sign that points to the restrooms, or some shit. What about from there?”

There was a brief pause. For a second, AJ was sure she wasn’t going to answer.

“Go all the way to the end of the hall where Mage and Pagan went”, she said. “Make a right. The last door should be the captain’s quarters. Speaking of our two witchy women, they went to the third deck, right?”

AJ almost nodded, then remembered that Ella couldn’t see it. “Yeah. So, help me if you say they went the wrong way, I’m going to kill you”.

“They didn’t go the wrong way”, Adam protested, out of breath from whatever fight he was currently engaged in. “I saw the map too. They’re on the right track. If Belladonna isn’t there, then they should try the second. Also, I need back-up. Pronto”.

The brunette resisted the urge to run back upstairs and check on everyone visually, just to make sure they were still in one piece. If they returned with the jet intact, and not as many passengers, Coulson was liable to go off on them (and realize they hadn’t gone out for a test run, like Emma and Clara had convinced him they were).

“Please don’t die”, she muttered, banking right as instructed, and chopping off the hand of a gunman. He screamed in pain, until he no longer had suitable vocal chords. “Sarah, did you catch that? How’re you and your guys holding up?”

“We’re good”. A sickening schlock, as if something had popped or broken. “I heard everything. Can you kids handle this up here alone? I want my team and I to start working our way down”.

“Okay, first of all, I object to being called ‘kids’”, said Elysium, although her tone was more
playful than angered. “We’ll be fine. Also, if you’re a team, don’t you need a name?”

AJ cut off what must’ve been her third head in five minutes, and tasted the relief in the back of her throat when she spotted the Captain’s Quarter’s sign. “Seriously, quit trying to name shit. Naming shit doesn’t always work”.

“Aw, I’ll play”, Orion said. “I say we call ourselves the Antis”.


“Didn’t they call you Scythe?” Maggie asked skeptically. “That’s as bad, if not worse”.

AJ entered the quarters and threw her tomahawk squarely into the Captain’s chest (he’d been rising from his chair and reaching for the automatic on the desk. His body hit the floor with a dull thud, and she retrieved her weapon and sat down in his unoccupied seat).

“I made it”, she said. “And keep focus. There’ll be time for small-talk later”.

“Addy’s right”, Sarah acquiesced, a hint of affection to the words.

AJ started sorting through the files with vigor. The room itself was plain and uninteresting, with a cot for a bed, concrete for a floor (which was now bloody), and messy, unorganized paperwork. It was stuffed into a suitcase, and the guy had been attempting to flee with it.

“Yahtzee”, she said, and pulled out a laminated (laminated? Whoever made this had a bonafide neat streak) form. It looked nearly identical to the one Wanda had shown her on Belladonna Howle, except it was updated, and included a location on the ship. “I got it. She’s confirmed to be on the third deck. Mage?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you read?”
“Definitely. Me and Pagan are almost there”.

AJ couldn’t stop a wolfish grin from spreading across her face, as she tucked it into her jacket pocket. She was about to turn back and go meet up with them, when another picture caught her eye- a recent photograph, and of a woman with brown skin, thick dark hair, and amber eyes. Around her neck glittered a necklace of gold and green jewels. She looked angry, but also dazed, as if drugged.

AJ had caught a glimpse of Saleitha Grey when Coulson first brought her in. From what she heard from the few adult agents she interacted with, the girl was fiery, and had a sharp (and admittedly admirable) tongue to match.

The woman on the file looked remarkably like her. AJ’s blood ran cold.

“Hey, I got something”, she said, and picked it up. Her eyes scanned the heading with a hungry energy, and the bold words seemed to jump out at her.

*Test Subject: Ziva Grey.*

“Holy shit”, AJ said, softly. “Holy shit”.

“What?” Anael asked. “What is it?”

“Saleitha’s mom- that woman Coulson said was missing, and that they’ve been searching for! She was kidnapped by *Weapon X*”.

“Do you have the file?”

“I’m taking it with me”. AJ slipped it with the first paper, and impulsively grabbed the rest, before bolting back outside. “Do you have Belladonna yet?”

“Yeah. She’s unconscious, but alive. Meet at the lifeboats, stat”.
“You heard her. Lifeboats”. AJ kept an arm wrapped protectively around her midsection as she sprinted back down the way she came. “Sarah, are you alright?”

“N-” Sarah started to speak, and then the connection fizzled and died. “Ru-”

“Sarah? Sarah!” AJ exploded onto the main deck. “What happened? What’s wrong? Zu? Mave? You there?” She could see SHIELD’s Avengers loading onto the lifeboats, but not her sister and her squad. Andy was cradling Belladonna, who was dressed in a hospital gown, and decidedly limp in his arms. She looked younger than she had in the picture.

AJ opened her mouth to call out, just as the Asclepius jolted suddenly.

**BOOM!**

The ground shuddered beneath their feet.

*Explosion.*

“Mars, we need to go!” Anael shouted. “Hurry!”

Above them, the jet materialized, and Clara’s terrified cries clouded the intercom.

“What’s going on!? She demanded. “Where did the blast come from!?”

“Come on!” Josh cried, insistently. “We don’t have time!”

“Where is my sister!?” AJ yelled. The fear clogged her throat. “I’m not leaving without her! Which way did they go!?”

“Mave mentioned the engine room, but-”
The ship shook, again. Judging by the magnitude of the detonation, the whole boat was primed to go down in flames.

“Are you crazy!?” Kelly hung from the rope tying the lifeboat to the ship, a hand outstretched, begging their leader to take it. Her eyes were pleading.

AJ spared her team one final glance; feeling as though her heart would exit her chest. She turned and ran back inside while their cries faded into nothing. She shut off the com and crushed it with a single stomp, abandoning the pieces.

*Engine rooms are normally near the bottom.*

It took her much too long to reach the area. Debris was crowding the corridors now, as well as dead Weapon X operatives, and there was fire and smoke.

When AJ burst through the wrecked opening, she almost tripped over Rio’s body.

His face was a shredded unrecognizable mess. The only reason she knew it was him was because of the chain on the corpse’s limp wrist. Rio had been wearing it earlier.

The room was a disaster. Whoever had attacked was gone, possibly vanished out a gaping hole. Mave’s boot lay just outside the exit wound, but she couldn’t see him anywhere. A twisted mess that may have been Zu lay in the corner, and she couldn’t even see most of Orion, the way he was bent over a table.

Judging by the amount of blood, the waist-up may have been nonexistent.

Like Mave, she didn’t see Kilo anywhere. Sarah was propped up against an intact wall; metal arm and legs destroyed; shrapnel and the remnants of her blade scattered about.

“*Sarah!”* AJ almost fell onto the tomahawk, stumbling over to her sister. She partially registered the blood, and how there didn’t seem to be a source.
The older woman’s half-lidded eyes settled on her, and widened. “No”, she coughed wetly, an ugly hacking sound. “Addy, run”.

“No!” AJ landed painfully on her knees, trying to drag one of Sarah’s arms around her shoulders. When she shifted, she made a pained noise and fell back.

“Go”, Sarah insisted. “Don’t you understand what’ll happen if you stay? You need to get out of here- so fucking leave me!”

The destroyed engine groaned, as if to further illustrate her point.

“No”. AJ felt like she was five-years-old. She sat down beside her family (her only family), and latched onto her remaining hand. “No, I want to stay with you”.

The look in Sarah’s eyes was tortured, and her lungs rattled in her chest when she inhaled.

“No”, she said, softly. “Listen- you said they kidnapped Ziva Grey? The Asgardian? They- they’ve been using magic to mutate people. Belladonna’s one of them. T-There are most likely more. I don’t know if they tortured Ziva for the spells, or-” Sarah stopped to take a breath. “Y-You need to go. You have to warn them”.

AJ was crying, now. She put her head on Sarah’s shoulder and sobs wracked her frame.

“Stay alive”, she begged, her fingers tightening. “I want to stay with you”.

The engine gave another, ominous, wail.

Sarah’s tears were less noticeable, and she looked around at the carnage mournfully, before returning to the young agent. “It’s okay”, she promised.

*We said we’d fight together.*

The dying brunette swallowed, returning AJ’s grip; accepting that she couldn’t get her to leave.
She’d always been horrifically stubborn.

“Just close your eyes”, she ordered gently. “Then…then, we’ll wake up at home”.

Maybe that lie would’ve worked on AJ had she been a child. Nevertheless, she squeezed her eyes shut.

“Okay”, she said, to play along; pressing close enough that red started to soak her clothes. Sarah nodded, kissed AJ’s forehead, and cleared her throat.

“I love you”, she murmured firmly, eyelids drifting shut. “Everything I did was for my pain in the ass little sister”.

“I love you, too”, she replied dutifully; clinging like that could keep her from leaving her alone. She’d forgotten about the intel, and the groundbreaking information on Ziva.

Sarah breathed out. “M’ sorry…”

She exhaled and didn’t finish. After that, there was silence.

AJ’s stomach plummeted when her heart went, ba-thump, ba-thump, and stopped. She hid her face in the soiled fabric of Sarah’s suit and felt her own breathing hitch.

“I’m sorry, too”, She sobbed.

There was a colossal ripping sound, and the ship folded in on itself.
POV CHANGE- Ruby

Ruby’s nightmares started out as they always did- with her mother.

Without the few pictures K had scattered around their apartment (them at college, them at bars, them in matching superhero gear), the redhead wouldn’t even know what she’d looked like. Auden Devon- Snow, to her friends -had died during the Infinity War, when her daughter was just a newborn.

When Ruby was younger, she used to ask why the psychic chose to fight, regardless of the baby who needed her. The dreams started with Snow standing in a landscape of black nothingness, but when she opened her mouth to answer the voices weren’t her own.

Most prominently, the voice is K, who’s saying the number one excuse that Ruby always received: *Snow fought because she felt she had to, to protect us. She wasn’t the kind of person who was capable of abandoning her family.*

She would always try and scream back, *I was her family too. She abandoned me.*

But the words would never come. The cries were soundless.

On the day the Asclepius exploded, Ruby had been taking a nap on the couch. Instead of excuses, a loud *booming* sound (the sound of something bursting, something *big*) had come out of her deceased mother’s mouth. There was screaming. Most prominently, there was blood.

“Ruby”. An annoyed voice cut through the haze, and the fifteen-year-old’s eyes snapped open, only to find Izzy shaking her shoulder. “Wake up”.

“M’ up, m’ up”, the redhead groaned irritably, batting her hand away. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. There was an unpleasant, coppery taste coating the girl’s tongue. “What is it?”

There was no color in Izzy’s cheeks. “Dad texted me. He said he and mom got called down to the
SHIELD building. There was an accident”.

The magnitude of Ruby’s dream hit full-force, and her blood ran cold. “An accident? What happened? The mission-”

“I don’t know”, Izzy interrupted, sharply. She stood up and grabbed a set of keys off the coffee table (the keys to K’s convertible; a car they were universally not allowed to touch, although at least one of them could drive). “But someone’s hurt, and I’m going to check it out. The others are going to meet us”.

Fear seemed to clog the mutant’s throat, but she rose from the couch and followed her sibling out the door. They took the steps three at a time.

Ruby didn’t know what was going on- not fully, not yet- but she understood that a terrible thing had happened. She climbed into the passenger’s seat and pulled out her phone, shooting off a quick text to Melody.

- Did you hear about what happened?

Thankfully, the genius responded in record time. Yeah. The Avengers left about twenty minutes ago. Apparently, some kind of unauthorized mission went south.

- Have you heard from Lily?

Ruby bit her lip as Izzy put the convertible into drive, and peeled out of the parking lot. She careened into traffic so suddenly that the van they cut off honked and swerved.

No. Why? Melody’s confusion was palpable in the message.

Heart in her throat, she mechanically typed an answer and shut the device off.

- Just wondering
When they reached the facility, Kat (of all people), was waiting outside.

“I should’ve figured it’d be you guys”, she said, when they got out. “Don’t worry, I gave everyone clearance- it’ll hold, I think, before either Magnus or Coulson takes away that little privilege. They’re pretty pissed with us”.

Izzy’s posture was hostile, but she wasn’t reaching for the knife in her waistband. “Can you tell us what happened?”

Kat’s already pale and worried expression worsened. “Everything was going fine until- I don’t know, there was some sort of explosion. AJ was retrieving papers from the captain’s quarters, and Sarah and her crew were working on getting to me and Quinn, who were rescuing Belladonna. But- but Sarah and the others didn’t make it to the lifeboats. AJ ran back to get her sister and the boat was shaking so bad, Anael had to cast off so we wouldn’t be crushed. The Asclepius burst, and sank. We found AJ, and we found-”

She couldn’t finish the sentence, but Ruby understood.

*Bodies.*

“Sarah, and the rest of the experiments”, she said, quietly. “They’re dead”.

It wasn’t a question. Izzy didn’t comment, but her eyes glittered darkly.

Kat nodded tearfully. “AJ’s in the infirmary with broken ribs, burns, and a concussion. She’ll be fine- at least, I think. They finished surgery an hour ago”.

No one seemed ready to discuss what losing her only remaining family for the second time- for *real* -would do to her. AJ was definitely strong, as far as Ruby could tell, but even the strongest people could shatter like glass.

“Ifirmary?” Izzy asked. There was no noticeable inflection of emotion in her tone (she seemed to be a wall of calm). “Can you take us there?”
Kat nodded, stricken. “Follow me”. She turned and vanished into the facility, not waiting to see if the pair would oblige. Izzy and Ruby exchanged a look, before darting after the blonde demigod.

The hallways were eerily silent. The few agents they saw during the trek looked busy, or stone-faced. It seemed the whole base had heard the news regarding Fury’s young protégées, and they weren’t taking it well.

When they finally reached their destination, the only people outside the door were the rest of the mercenaries, and the rest of SHIELD’s Avengers.

“The superheroes went off to discuss our fate with Coulson and Magnus”, Andy told Kat, when they skidded to a halt in front of the two separate huddles. “We’re probably going to be in a shit-ton of trouble”. That said, he turned to Ruby and Izzy. “As far as they know--” at this point he lowered his voice, “-we got wind of a Weapon X base from an anonymous source, and snuck off to take a look. It went bad, and AJ got hurt”.

“What about Sarah?” Ruby cringed and hesitated, before asking the question.

From the back, Clara spoke up. She sounded choked, as if she’d been crying, or still was. “I told Magnus that we found her being held prisoner along with Mave, Kilo, Zu, Rio, and Orion. We managed to recover what was--” there was a tremor and a sniffle, “-What was left”.

“Left?” Izzy demanded, sharply. “Did something tear them to pieces?”

“Iz”, Noah warned, and swiveled to face the agents. “Any information you have would be great. For instance, what’s happening to Belladonna?”

“Infirmary, too”, Josh replied, automatically. “Magnus assured us she would be well taken care of. She hasn’t woken up from whatever drugs they had her on yet, but she’ll be fine, provided SHIELD gets the poor girl a therapist”.

Ruby hoped he was right. “But what attacked Sarah? Kat said there was an explosion, but didn’t specify a cause. Did anyone have a bomb?”
Quinn shook her head. “Not that we know of. Maybe if we’d run back up with the kid, we’d have seen something, but I used my sling-ring to return to the main deck. As far as we know, the blast happened in the engine room”.

“They were probably fighting”, James said, gravely. “Another body was recovered, but it was pretty charred and blackened. It hasn’t been identified. Whatever it was must’ve caused the explosion and…” he let the sentence hang.

Ruby was okay with that. They didn’t need him to finish.

“How’s AJ?” Kara asked, by far the gentlest out of their ragtag bunch of psychopaths. She was currently wringing her hands anxiously.

“I want to say ‘okay’, all things considered”, said Alec. “We’re not allowed in”.

“Oh, yeah?” Alex piped, up nervously. “Then where’s Wanda? She was standing right next to me a minute ago, and now she’s not”.

There was a long pause, as everyone considered that statement.

“Aw, sh*t”, Noah muttered, and face-palmed. “We could get in trouble for this”.

“We could get in more trouble for letting you, but also for telling you about the mission and not telling anyone that you’re the vigilante group”, Elysium agreed mildly, although she didn’t seem overly shocked that they were, in fact, the vigilante group.

Dante went to reply (probably about to say something snarky, or threaten them if they dared to reveal their identities), when Wanda slipped through the door.

She looked upset and angry. Her hands were clenched into fists.

“Thanks for your help”, she said, and there was weight to the gratitude. “Really. Come on, guys. Let’s go before anyone thinks it’s weird that we showed up in the first place”.
Wanda went back the way they came without stopping for a conversation.

Oh, no.

“Don’t worry”, Emma said thinly, “Your secret’s safe with us”.

“Thanks”, Ruby repeated, dumbly, and meant it, even if the unspoken apology loaded into the single-syllable phrase fell flat. She grabbed the back of Izzy’s hoodie and let the former assassin pull her off, in the opposite direction of the fractured team.

Wanda didn’t speak until they were back at the base, and sitting in a semi-circle on the lobby floor (the days where Riley would practice with his wings, months ago, were gone. A “canary”, indeed. Nothing had warned them that this was coming).

“AJ was lucid”, the middle-child said; legs pulled up to her chest and arms looped around her calves. “There’s no need for drugs, I guess, when you can’t feel pain”.

Noah frowned and glanced at Jake, who shook his head subtly. “What’d she tell you?”

“The important bits. Did you know she was with Sarah when she died?”

“Wanda, please”, Dan said, softly. “Not now, okay?”

Wanda glared hard at the floor. There was a moment, albeit brief, where Ruby was sure she was going to start crying.

“Fine”, was all she said, although it definitely wasn’t. “Ziva Grey was kidnapped by Weapon X. I have no clue how they found out she was Asgardian, but AJ suspects they’ve been torturing her for knowledge in sorcery”.

Sorcery?
Oddly enough, it was Dante who straightened then. The look in his eyes had turned haunted instead of wary. “Sorcery? What for?”

“To mutate people. Belladonna’s one of the kids they used it on- the files AJ stole were laminated, so they were protected from the sea water. Sarah and her pals got jumped by another. I guess he was more powerful than they were”. The bitterness in Wanda’s explanation suggested the guilt she felt was personal. “There was a third, too”.

“A third?” Riley rolled his shoulders, like his wings were bothering him. “Who?”

Dante coughed. “Uh. I-I think that may have been me”.

Underneath the exclamations of surprise, Ruby couldn’t find it in herself to be shocked. It made the most sense, considering he’d never shown off his mutation in front of them. All they’d seen so far was lightning fast reflexes and super strength.

Rafe rocked back and forth on the heels of his feet. “What can you do? Magic-”

“I don’t really know”, he interjected, rushed, and buried his face in his hands. “I wasn’t awake for most of the…procedure. But, I think- it’s kind of like this alternate personality, you know? Like the Hulk and Hellhound. I call it Wendigo because of its appearance”.

“How do you know what it looks like?”

“I heard the scientists talking. It’s supposedly emaciated, like a spirit or corpse. The wendigo is a famine spirit. It made sense in my head, but it’s terrifying knowing that it’s just there, and naming it just made it more real”.

Noah held up a hand for silence, and potentially order (which there would be none of. Ruby could tell because of the panicked thoughts currently buzzing inside her skull).

“Alright”, she said, slowly. “Do you realize how much shit this creates for us to wade through? Yeah, we know who snatched Saleitha’s mother, but she’s probably with Kane and we’ve got nothing on him. How do we know AJ won’t come clean to SHIELD and spill the beans about this?”
What would they even do about it?"

“She won’t”, Wanda said. “She told me”.

“And you believe her?”

“I guess we’ve got no reason to, but yeah. I do”.

Ruby didn’t mention the fact that they used to be at each other’s throats 24/7.

Noah nodded and sighed reluctantly. “Alright. That just leaves the whole Kane debacle. Still. I swear it’s like he vanished into thin air after we escaped”.

“Yeah, and I know how to solve that too”. Wanda inhaled deeply and exhaled, as if preparing herself for a great feat. “We need to come clean”.

Ruby sat there, staring, as the room burst into an uproar of loud yells and protests. She couldn’t say she hadn’t seen this coming, either. Keeping secrets from their parents was hard enough, but keeping secrets from their friends, who had trusted them with their own identities? It was starting not to be worth it.

“Are you crazy?” Levi demanded. “Do you think they’re going to accept the fact that we’ve been dropping bodies for months?”

“No, as a matter of fact, I don’t”. Wanda smiled wanly. “But we can’t keep hiding this forever. And if we had the others’ help with finding Kane, we could kill two birds with one stone- killing him, and finding Ziva. It’s smart”.

“Smart, and yet unbelievably stupid”, Ruby relented, wearily. “I say we do it. I’m not reassuring anyone that they’ll approve, but it’s not like some of them have room to judge”.

Izzy studied her for a considerate moment. She glanced at Riley, who shrugged and then winced in pain. Now they needed to convince the other tenth of the gang, who were still sniping back and forth. It was like a verbal ski-ball match.
Noah stood and shouted, “SHUT UP!”

The bickering halted immediately, and Wanda grimaced at the order.

Ruby waited with bated breath. She made eye-contact with Angie, who made a, *whatcha gonna do?* gesture. She made a face in return.

“We’ll do it”, Noah breathed, and ran a hand over her face. “Are we a vigilante team now, that saves people? Is this a redemption arc?”

“Well”, Wanda said, amused as well as relieved, “I think we should call ourselves Team X”.

Ruby laughed nervously, and without much humor. “Team X is good”, she hummed. “But first, I think we should actually talk to them”.

“Great like *that’s* gonna go well. I’ll call them. Their base, or ours?”

“Theirs. It’s nicer”.

“Hey! I thought you liked it here!”

Their reactions were disappointed, but not surprised.

“What the *fuck*, Wanda!” Penny screamed repeatedly, as she punched her best friend (and girlfriend?) in the jaw. “You SUCK!”

Tem had an arm around Izzy’s shoulders, and she squeezed slightly. The older redhead said something in Russian that was obviously meant for her, and her alone. Ruby walked away to give them a semblance of privacy.
“It’s not *that* big of a deal, I guess”, Aiden was saying, uneasily. “I mean, it’s definitely a big deal, but…” he hesitated, and she got the feeling he didn’t know how to finish the sentence.

“Questionably morality, aside”, Melody declared, loudly. The genius had clambered atop her workshop table like a public speaker. “Noah said she had super important information about Weapon X and Saleitha’s mother, so shut the fuck up. Penny, I know Wanda is your Gay Thing, but please. Fight later”.

Wanda, who had been letting herself get punched, held up her hands in surrender.

“It’s okay”, she promised, hastily. “I deserve it”.

Penny let out a loud breath. Her cheeks were flushed with anger, and she was definitely trying not to cry. “I just…I just wish you’d *told* me sooner”, she said, and then one of New York’s most recent heroes was sobbing openly.

Alex pressed her lips into a thin white line. “Go and make up with your girlfriend, preferably outside. We’ll fill you in when you get back”.

Wanda nodded and cautiously wrapped Penny in a half-hug. When she allowed it, the two exited quickly to go talk out their issues and resolve them.

There was a long period of awkward…nothing.

“Okay then”, Noah said. “A couple weeks ago, we met up with Kane’s former pet- a girl named Sarah Freeman, AJ’s sister. She had a couple of old test subjects with her named Mave, Kilo, Zu, Rio, and Orion. They called themselves the *Antis*. We presented to them an idea: rescue a mutant by the name of Belladonna Howle, who was being held captive on a boat called the *Asclepius*. They agreed, as well as SHIELD’s Avengers. The mission was incredibly early this morning, and needless to say, it didn’t go well. Sarah and her friends…” she swallowed. “They didn’t make it. AJ got hurt, but she’ll be fine. But, she *did* tell Wanda some pretty important things, and confirmed that Weapon X kidnapped Ziva Grey”.

“What?” Saleitha started forward. “Where the *hell* is she-”

“We don’t *know*. The papers didn’t have a location, but we assume she’s with Kane. He’d want to
keep an asset like that close to home. Our assumption is that he’s been torturing her to learn about sorcery, and he’s been harnessing it to mutate people. Belladonna is one of the victims. The Antis were killed by another. The third is Dante”.

Dante waved half-heartedly. “Hey, everyone”.

“I’m not asking you to forgive us for lying, or anything like that”, Noah continued. “But we can help each other, and achieve the same goals at the same time”.

“Sure”, Jessie said, “Except your goal is straight-up murder”.

“Would you like to bring him in alive?”

She didn’t respond. Jace cleared his throat.

“Okay”, he murmured, slowly. “I mean, we’ve done weirder. I…think”.

Melody grunted. “Whatever. I’m down. Admittedly, I’m insulted that you didn’t ask me to make your suits. My seamstress skills are through the roof thanks to this”.

A’yana looked unsettled, but determined. “I can’t speak for Penny; however, I am co-leader for the Secret Avengers. We’ll help as well”.

“Yeah”, Saleitha said, fiercely, daring anyone to argue. Joven made a squeaking sound, and Ruby wondered if he’d wet himself.

Noah’s shoulders finally released their tension, just as Wanda and Penny burst back into the room at full speed.

(Their fingers were intertwined. Ruby chose to believe they’d handled it like adults).

“Big news!” Wanda shouted, “Huge-ass news!”
“Oh, come on”, Melody groaned. “What now? Did Timmy fall in the well?”

“What? No! My Dad just texted me and said he’d be late coming home tonight”. Penny was out of breath, and her phone was clutched in the hand not holding Wanda’s. “SHIELD captured somebody on their Most Wanted List”.


The girls said, in unison, the name that would truly throw off the dynamic the teams had settled into in the past year: “Loki”.
Chapter 35

POV CHANGE- Saleitha

You would think the arrival of Loki would cause a descent into chaos, but oddly enough, there was a lull instead- not in crime, of course, because there were always petty criminals for them to run around and stop whilst wearing spandex. There was simply a lull in activity around the Compound, despite the familial tensions still running high. The fighting between the Starks slowed down to a few snipes here and there.

It made Saleitha (who didn’t trust calm), uneasy, to say the least. Especially considering that Thor had only mentioned Loki directly once, and it was to say this: He claims he knows where your mother is, but my brother is well-known for his lies. We will find out if he speaks the truth.

That was three weeks ago. Saleitha had heard no other news from her uncle, or from SHIELD, so she could only conclude that they hadn’t figured out her dad yet.

The Junior and Secret Avengers were carrying out searches of their own, obviously. With Team X now on board, it seemed like finding Ziva themselves should’ve been easy.

It wasn’t.

“When you said Kane would’ve been a great magician”, Melody said, fingers flying across her computer keyboard, “I didn’t think it was because of his stellar disappearing act”.

Saleitha gritted her teeth and began to pace. A few feet away, Jace eyed her warily, maybe because her pacing was a lot more intimidating when she was in full costume.

(Melody had finished the outfit in three days, as per their deal. Also, as promised, it looked even more awesome off paper).

“We don’t have time for this”, she said, through gritted teeth. “My mother could be getting tortured, and if she keeps revealing spells-”
“Hey, it’ll be fine”, Joven cut in, quickly. His hands were facing palm-up in what was intended as a placating gesture, but more resembled a poor attempt at a high-five.

Wanda, who was also in full gear and sharpening her swords in view of everyone, snorted loudly from her perch on some rubble. “Nice”.

In three weeks, the mercenaries (former mercenaries? Were they even really mercenaries at all?) had gotten remarkably comfortable around them. Especially the Wilsons, whom Saleitha was beginning to believe had no sense of personal space.

Joven flushed and backed down. “Right. Sorry. I just- we’ll find your mom, okay? We said we would, and it’s going to happen”.

He sounded so sure, that she almost felt better. Until she remembered that her other parent was still being held at the SHIELD base, and no one would let her so much as talk to the guy. In truth, it was more for information than any desire for a father/daughter bond, but whenever Saleitha tried to bring it up, the idea was shot down.

“Thanks”, she said anyway, just to make him feel better (Joven was sweet, but she’d never encountered a teenaged boy with such low self-esteem). “I just wish we would find her sooner, rather than later”.

“Sooner, hopefully”. Aiden’s voice rang through the base, as he ducked through the entrance with his bow in hand. He sounded like he was in a good mood, for someone who had finished an hour of patrol that involved rescuing three different cats from three different trees. That in itself wasn’t terrible, except that Aiden was allergic.

Melody squinted at him in both annoyance and suspicion. “Did you get cat fur all over your suit? Because I don’t think the Dry-Cleaners will agree to take it and wash it, which means good luck looking up a tutorial on YouTube and doing it yourself”.

The archer’s expression changed from semi-pleased to pissed in a matter of seconds. “I did not get cat fur on my suit. Why do you always assume the worst of me?”

“It saves time”.

“Guys”, Jace said. “Mel, more hacking and less insulting. Aiden, change out of that stuff and take a shower. You may not have gotten any fur on you, but you still smell a little like piss. Did one of the kittens have a nervous bladder?”

The brunette bristled. “What? No!” A pause. “…Maybe”.

Saleitha resisted the urge to laugh. It was the first time she’d needed to suppress that in a while- it felt like all she did was frown nowadays. “I could zap it clean, if you asked nicely”.

Her cousin’s expression was appropriately horrified and wary. Aiden’s, on the other hand, was desperate (he was probably tired of being made fun of).

“Look, I don’t care if this is a demon deal”, he said. “If you can, please fix it”.

“Turn it pink”, Melody snickered. “I think that would be an improvement. You could put a big Hello Kitty sticker where the logo would be on an Avengers uniform, and-”

“Please”, Aiden said, louder. His cheeks were starting to redden, from either embarrassment or anger. Turning the color of a tomato when enraged seemed to be a shared trait.

“I think pink would look nice”, Joven offered, unhelpfully.

Tony Stark’s child rolled her eyes and turned back to the monitor, where she was supposed to be trying to hack SHIELD’s security. It wasn’t going too well.

“We’ll screw it”, she said, and cut a glance at Saleitha. “I’m just gonna Google your dad”.

She went to Google, presumably to do just that, as Tem and Jessie entered with duffel bags slung over their shoulders.

“I keep telling my dad I’m going to the gym”, Jessie was in the middle of saying, worriedly. She was worried about a lot of things lately. “At some point, he has to sit down and realize, wait, Jess never goes to the gym. Right?”
Tem shrugged. She seemed bored. “You go the gym in the Compound, right?”

“Well, yeah, but I mean an actual gym. This isn’t Dwight Schrute’s Gym for Muscles, although admittedly, I have more of those than the average person”.

Saleitha blinked. “You guys are strange”.

“No, that’s Quinn’s last name”, Jace said good-naturedly. He was smirking at his own dumb joke when Melody made a sound like a dying animal; leaning forward to better scrutinize whatever Wikipedia article she’d pulled up.

“I should’ve warned you not to Google my dad”, Saleitha muttered, half-heartedly, as if she hadn’t done so herself a few times. “He’s had…a lot of kids”.

The engineer looked up and made a face. “Um, ew. And that’s not it! Jace, give me your bracelet for a minute. I want to look at something”.

“My bracelet?” Jace frowned and examined the disguised sword on his wrist. Evidently, he was taking too long, because Melody grabbed his arm and pulled it towards her.

She examined it, forehead wrinkled in concentration, and cursed. “Well, shit”.

He extracted his appendage from her grip and took a couple of steps back. “Care to explain that, or do I need to pull out the actual sword?”

“No sword”, Joven begged. “I have no idea what’s going on”.

“Calm down, idiot”. She rolled her eyes; looking deeply unsettled. “I think we’ve found us another problem, or a disturbing coincidence. You know how we thought the binding spell, Weapon X, and Ziva were all connected, but we only connected Ziva and the program?”

Wanda looked confused (she hadn’t been there for that particular conversation), but Saleitha
nodded hesitantly.

“I remember”, she said. “Did you figure out the binding spell part of the equation?”

“Maybe. You see that rune?” Melody gestured to it with her head: .

She’d seen it before when she and Jace first met, in the parking lot, but hadn’t recognized it- at least, not completely. There was an inkling that Saleitha had seen it somewhere, but couldn’t recall exactly when, or what it meant.

“Well, that symbol there is the closest thing a certain Norse god has for a calling card, in the realm of runes and mythology”, the brunette said, unhappily. “Can you guess who that certain Norse god is?”

Jace’s eyes widened to the size of saucers. “Wait. Y-You mean Loki?”

“Who else? He knows magic, doesn’t he?”

Saleitha swallowed thickly and leaned back against a chunk of rubble. “Oh, fuck”.

“That’s crazy”, Joven squeaked. “Crazy”.

Jessie was beginning to make frantic hand gestures when she talked. “Are you serious? Why would Loki bind Jace to a sword that belongs to a different god?”

“He’s got to have a play of some kind”, Tem said, decisively. “That’s the way I see it”.

“This is like a really effed-up episode of The Brady Bunch”, Wanda mumbled, and flopped back to stare at the ceiling.

Aiden had begun to methodically massage his temples. “This is so weird. Really, really weird. Are you sure that’s what the Internet says?”
“Yeah. It’s pretty obscure, though. I guess that’s why we didn’t figure it out until now”.

“Fuck”, Saleitha repeated, and that time Jessie looked at her. “That makes so much sense. I can’t believe I didn’t think of that earlier!”

The blonde frowned distrustfully. “Uh…is something wrong?”

She flinched reflexively and huffed. “Definitely. But…there’s something I haven’t told any of you. I’ve been keeping it on the down-low for a while. Jace, do you remember our trip to Asgard, when we spoke to Heimdall?”

Jace made an unhappy noise in the back of his throat. “If memory serves, I broke a few ribs and almost got killed by an angry golem. Why?”

“Do you recall asking me what I stole?”

A pause.

“You said it wasn’t important”, he said, anger seeping into his tone. “What did you do?”

Saleitha began to pace again, and narrowly avoided running into Joven. “The only reason I took it is because I felt drawn to it- like you felt drawn to Sumarbrander, right? I knew something was up, so I smuggled it back with us. But I didn’t find any leads- until now, I guess. Just…don’t freak out”.

Jace arched a tense eyebrow, waiting. She squeezed her eyes shut in concentration, and the Casket of Ancient Winters materialized into her hands.

“Oh my, god!” He shouted, upon recognition. “I’d understand a dagger or a sword, but you’re bound to that?”

“Ah, yes”, Melody said mildly, “That. Could somebody explain to the rest of us what that is, so we
“It looks like an evil ice cube”, Wanda put in, making a wide swooping arch with her sword when she motioned. “Is that what it is?”

Saleitha groaned. Her fingers had already grown numb. “It’s called the Casket of Ancient Winters. It’s an old weapon from Jotunheim that my dad tried to use to destroy the planet, right when he found about his Frost Giant heritage. It’s the reason I can wield it without turning into a human popsicle, and I have no idea why he linked me to it. It’s probably for the same reason he connected Jace to Sumarbrander”.

“Which we also don’t know”, Joven said, weakly. “How are we going to find out? It’s not like we can walk up to the Avengers and ask, hey could you ask Loki a question for us?”

Saleitha bit her lip and tucked the Casket back into the little pocket of space she’d been carrying it in (difficult magic, but not impossible, and she was a fast learner. Besides, it was better than hiding it under her bed). “That’s not what we’re going to do. Although, I admit, it’s time I had a chat with dear-ol’-dad”.

“Are you insane?” Tem asked, point blank. “You’ve been denied access for days now, they aren’t going to let you in. Thor will never agree”.

“He doesn’t have to. I’m going to sneak in”.

Jace spluttered, having choked on his own spit. He rocked forward slightly on his feet, like being closer would change what he’d heard. “Come again?”

“You heard me”.

“Okay, I’ve done a lot of impressively dumb things lately”, said Melody. “But that takes the cake. Are you sure sneaking in is the best course of action? Unless you’ve got an invisibility cloak tucked in that armor, which I know I forgot to install, there’s no way you’re getting close without being seen. SHIELD’s Avengers are definitely done helping any of us with anything”.

(AJ had gotten out of the infirmary a few days ago. She healed a little faster than the average human, although it was difficult to tell due to the girl’s non-existent pain threshold. They kept
having to run tests to make sure it was alright. Kat had texted yesterday morning that Sarah’s funeral was soon, provided they could get through all the red tape).

“No, they don’t”, Saleitha agreed, “But I’m still going to try”.

“Could you try talk to Thor again, first?” Jessie asked. “He’ll listen”.

Their eyes met, and there was a brief battle of wills between the two girls.

“Whatsoever”, she growled, eventually. “I’ll ask Thor one more time. If he says no, I’m going ahead with my idea. Got it?”

“Crystal clear”, Melody said eloquently, and turned back to her computer. “Hey, what’s this about your dad screwing a horse?”

“What!?”

Thor said no (in a very nice, godly way), just like Saleitha knew he would.

“This is a bad idea, and I’ve had a lot of those”. Melody’s voice droned in the intercom like a peculiar, annoying fly. “This is right up there with starting a teenaged vigilante team. And I like to think of that as one of my better schemes”.

There was a brief bout of static, and for a second Saleitha was afraid that the SHIELD tech in the building had scrambled the signal. Then, Tem (who was more helpful than Stark), said, “Coulson’s eyes are brown”.

She cringed and made the adjustment to her disguise- shapeshifting came in handy, especially when clearance was needed to a highly-classified area.

“Are you sure Phil isn’t here?” She asked, quietly, walking briskly and efficiently towards Loki’s cell. In her pocket, a glimmer of green Seidr floated in her palm, otherwise known as the tracking
spell, which was currently pointing the girl in the god’s direction.

“No, I think he’s monitoring a SHIELD’s Avengers training exercise”, Tem hummed, thoughtfully. Out of everyone in the little group, she seemed the most comfortable with what she was doing. “Just make sure no one who knows him personally sees you”.

“Oh. Great”. Saleitha ducked a security camera and kept going. “I should’ve just turned invisible, but that doesn’t get me through locked doors”.

“Couldn’t you open them?”

“Theoretically? Yes”.

The Asgardian walked a few more feet, trying not to look and seem as jumpy as she felt, when the tracking spell fizzled and went out.

She’d found the right door.

Unfortunately, there were two men standing in front of it, with huge guns, who looked at her with confusion. Men, who obviously knew that Coulson wasn’t supposed to be in the base today, and was somewhere else with their prodigies.

“What’s happening?” That was Melody again.

Saleitha waved a hand and both guards slumped to the floor, unconscious. “Cut the cameras in his room and the one in the hallway. I may have had a little interference, but it’s handled. I really hope no one saw that”.

A snort. “Oh, please. The cameras in the whole building are down right now. I’ve been broadcasting a lovely image of what the place is supposed to look like on a calm day. Apparently, I can hack SHIELD”.

The sorceress grunted and waited until the door opened of its own accord, and slipped in. It shut behind her with an air of finality.
The cell was simple, and Loki was shackled to a table in the center with what looked like cuffs etched with Norse runes. They were separated by a wall, and Saleitha couldn’t tell if it was one-way glass, and didn’t want to. Bulletproof, though? Yeah.

He looked up when he heard her; a wry, tired smile twisting his face. She’d meant to play this cool. To come off as a badass.

“You look like me”, Saleitha said, stupidly- because he did.

Logically, she’d known she didn’t get her appearance from her mother. But until now, Saleitha had only heard about Loki a few times, and never seen a picture.

They had the same dark hair, sharp cheekbones, and piercing green irises. His armor (while she’d known about Melody’s inspiration), was reminiscent of her own.

Loki’s expression shifted to wariness and confusion. “I’m sorry, what?” He drawled, in the sort of haughty way that all Asgardians seemed to speak.

“Cameras are down”, Melody muttered.

Saleitha let the illusion melt away and stood in front of her father as she really was.

“Hey, Pops”, she said. “Mom must’ve missed the Child Support fund you sent”.

They stared at each other. It reminded her, weirdly, of a cat and mouse game.

“I was wondering when they would let me see you”, Loki said, finally, and his grin was nothing less than a Cheshire cat’s. “Though, it seems they didn’t let you do anything”.

“Hm. What can I say? I didn’t feel like waiting for answers”. She spread out her arms and the Casket of Ancient Winters filled the space between them, like it had not even three hours ago. “I know you’re responsible for this, and for Sumarbrander being attached to my cousin. So, I’ll ask
“Just a bit of fun”, Loki said. If possible, his smile widened.

Saleitha almost wished she could believe him. That would make the whole thing less complicated. “Bullshit. While you’re at it, tell the truth about my mother”.

“Sigyn?” He arched a delicate eyebrow. “Don’t you trust SHIELD to find, and return her?”

(Uncle Thor was right, she thought dryly. Silver-tongued menace).

“Spit it out”, she ordered, instead of putting that thought out into the open. “Now”.

The Casket began to glow. Saleitha glanced down at it, and back up at Loki, but he was gazing at it as well. All it did was make her antsy and suspicious.

“I need all my cards on the table”, he said. “But I do know where your mother is”.

Unbidden, her heart began to swell with hope. “Any chance you’ll tell me?”

“Well, I deserve something in return. Don’t you think?”

“He’s telling the truth”, Ruby’s voice said, suddenly, most likely having just arrived. She sounded…afraid. And out of breath. “I’m not really sure how I know this, but…he is”.

Saleitha inhaled deeply, exhaled, and put the alien relic away. “That depends on what you want. Are you planning on helping me actually rescue Mom, or are you going to bounce as soon as I set you free?”

“I owe her a debt”, Loki said. “I will help you. Afterwards-” he shrugged, “-I make no such promises. If you’d rather wait for the Avengers, then be my guest”.

this once: why?”
She gritted her teeth and left without replying; suddenly unable to stand being in the same enclosed space as him for any amount of time.

“You guys heard that, right?” She asked. “I’m not crazy? He wasn’t manipulating me?”

“Oh, he was definitely manipulating you”, Ruby said. She sounded tired. “But he meant what he said about finding Ziva. I…don’t know about the rest”.

Saleitha left the unconscious guards on the floor (they would wake up soon) and hurried off as Phil Coulson for the second time. “Do you think SHIELD will find my Mom? And defeat Weapon X before anyone else gets hurt, whether it’s you, or someone like you?”

It was Tem that replied, honestly. “No. I don’t. So. What’s that mean for us?”

Saleitha straightened and walked with renewed purpose. “It means”, she said, “that we might have to break Loki out of jail”.

There was a pause.

“Can I veto that?” Melody asked. “I think I should veto that”. 
Chapter 36

POV CHANGE- Jace

It started with a police broadcast.

A couple of weeks into their vigilante crime-fighting, Melody had set up a radio at the right corner of her work desk. Its designated use was to listen in on the cops to get wind of any disturbances or spontaneous alien invasions, but it was mostly used by Tem and Jessie to listen to R&B music.

It was three days after Saleitha’s “chat” with Loki, and so far, none of them had actually tried to break him out of jail. Melody hadn’t exactly vetoed the idea, but the point still stood, and needless to say, it made Jace nervous.

He didn’t really know how to feel about the possibility of busting his homicidal uncle out of a SHIELD facility, that wasn’t nearly as secure as it pretended (or claimed) to be.

The day had started with the blonde thinking about it. He was still thinking about it in the afternoon, when all three of their teams were gathered at the Junior Avengers’ HQ.

The most recent Melody VS her father wasn’t helping matters.

“Can’t you just ignore each other in silence?” Aiden asked, irritated. “That’s what the rest of us do”.

“No, it isn’t”, Riley muttered, where Izzy was kneading his sore shoulders with her metal hand. Every so often, a bone would grind together, and he would hiss.

The brunette shot both of them a death glower, and continued to tinker with whatever deadly project had taken up her 3:00pm schedule. This time, it looked like she was modifying Brian’s old hellfire bracelets.

“No one is going to need those”, A’yana said thoughtfully; leaning over the genius’s shoulder to take a look. “Why are you making adjustments?”
“Good question”, Melody agreed. Her forehead wrinkled as she squinted at the machinery.

Khari shrugged (he was in his gear, having just finished a friendly sparring match with Joven. The result had been a draw). “You know what Aunt Shuri says: just because something works doesn’t mean it can’t be improved”.

His sister grinned. “I suppose she does say that. But that doesn’t change the fact that they won’t leave this room. Unless you plan on giving them away?”

Her tone was unmistakably hopeful. Khari groaned, and Tasha snickered.

“Get your amazing aunt to make you flamethrower gauntlets”, Melody said, and pushed the welding goggles she must’ve stolen from her dad’s lab away from her eyes.

“I’ve asked, Father won’t let her”, A’yana replied, mildly.

Brian, who was lying on his back in the middle of the floor, lifted his head off his balled-up jacket (his pillow, for the last thirty minutes). “Technically, those still belong to me”, he said, although the dark-haired teen’s tone suggested he was teasing. “I don’t remember you ever requesting that I officially return them”.

“I don’t remember you ever thanking me for any of this cool stuff”, Melody retorted, and stood. She stretched and her back made an alarming cracking sound. “Can someone order a pizza? I didn’t eat breakfast this morning and all I’ve had is a protein bar”.

“You could’ve eaten breakfast, if you hadn’t gotten into another blow-out fight with your dad”, Aiden said, mutinously. “You couldn’t keep your mouth shut, huh?”

“Hey! He was talking shit about the team”.

“The team he doesn’t, and cannot know about”, said Tem. She was sitting cross-legged next to Brian, reloading her guns (Izzy had hooked her up with a pair of real ones to go with the original ICERS. If Jace was being honest, they terrified him). “Mom was looking a little suspicious when you insisted on defending them- well, us”.

“You guys are very defendable”, Wanda joked, good-naturedly. “Of course, not in their eyes, I suppose. To them, you’re a bunch of hooligans running around trying to be superheroes, who stole a valuable artifact from Asgard, shot Thor in the hand, and injured the Hulk. Not necessarily in that order. Or maybe it was, these timelines are so confusing”.

Jace winced. Coming home after that fight hadn’t been fun- the Avengers had been arguing upon their arrival, and it was the first time in a long time that the demigod could recall Brian hugging Uncle Bruce since after the explosion that gave him his abilities.

“In their eyes, Team X is a psychopathic group hell-bent on revenge, who are ruthless and don’t care about collateral damage”, deadpanned Melody. “Except maybe Deadpool”.

Wanda’s mouth snapped shut. Noah arched an eyebrow and hummed.

“Touché”, she said. Then, as an afterthought, “yeah, Dad semi-approves. It’s not like he has room to judge since he did the same thing, like, ten years ago. What did Colossus call it?”

Alex smirked. “A, ‘shameful, and reckless use of your powers’”. She deepened her voice to an over-exaggerated level, and spoke in a hideously bad Russian accent.

“I’m insulted”, Tem huffed. “My Russian blood is boiling”.

Izzy, as per usual, said nothing, but her eyes were glittering darkly.

“Can we talk about anything other than the fact that our parents hate us?” Jace asked. When Saleitha went to speak, he shot her a look. “Or Loki. We’re not talking about Loki right now”.

“At some point, we have to”.

“Sure, but right now I don’t want to consider the consequences of a jail-break, especially if it goes badly and Loki turns out to be lying about everything”.
“He’s not”, Ruby insisted. “I told you, I can tell!”

“You weren’t in the same room! What, did you have a weird vision? I know you get those sometimes, but they’re pretty rare”.

The redhead fell silent for a moment. She glanced away from Jace and studied her shoes.

Izzy shot to her feet so fast, she was a blur. “A dream? Ruby, you told me the last one you had was about the Asclepius going down, and even then, it was brief. What changed, and what did you see that proves Loki’s innocence?”

Jace was about to demand the answer to that question himself, when the radio near Mel’s elbow began to buzz and chatter.

“Hush!” She ordered, now excited, and started fiddling with the dial.

The trio of vigilantes all straightened; thoughts of Loki forgotten (at least for a while).

“…10-35, we need back-up in Times Square…”

Penny frowned. “10-35? What does that mean?”

“Major Crime Alert”, Izzy said, gravely. “It’s code”.

“Yeah, I know, but-”

“…Avengers on scene, we need…”

The transmission faded completely. Melody cursed, visibly agitated, and started fiddling with the radio to see if she could fix the problem. Unfortunately, it would no longer cooperate. All they got was static and the occasional hint that made no sense.
“They may need help”, Jessie said, not quite reluctantly (but not quite eagerlly), and it didn’t take a prodigy to understand who they, were.

Jace bit his lip and nodded. “Right. I don’t like the sound of Major Crime Alert. If the Avengers showed, it’s probably an attack of some kind”.

“Attack?” Kara’s feet shuffled back and forth across the floor, nervously. The white feathers of her wings ruffled. “Are you sure?”

“Well, suit-up”, Melody said, obviously not thrilled at making a second appearance as the Junior Avengers in front of them. “Let’s go and find out”.

It was an attack.

Not a full-scale attack, thankfully, like the Battle of New York or the fight for the Infinity Stones. Instead of Chitauri or Thanos invading, there were a swarm of robots flying around and divebombing people (Melody took one look at the scene and dubbed the enemies drones, and claimed they were being controlled by a single person. A queen bee).

The Avengers, evidently, weren’t the only people who had showed. Deadpool was there too for some reason, and he was multitasking in chopping up bad guys and trying to start friendly banter with Spiderman (who was not having it).

“Oh, not you guys”, Uncle Sam said, upon seeing them, and immediately spiraled out of the way of a drone and shot it full of lead.

“Great reputation”, Riley murmured, and took to the sky himself.

The original Falcon actually did a double-take when he saw his son’s wings (while Sam and Mira had seen the pack when it was folded in, they’d never seen it expand. At the moment, Jace figured it was lucky he wouldn’t recognize it in its current state).

“Who’re the new guys?” Uncle Clint shouted, from his perch on the roof of a car. He fired an arrow without looking and hopped down to join Aunt Nat, who was watching Team X with
narrowed eyes.

“The mercenaries”, she said, decisively. “The ones who’ve been attacking the warehouses”.

“Aw, you’ve heard of us!” Wanda shouted gleefully, and drove her sword into the stomach of an unsuspecting android. “I’m always glad to meet a fan! Hey, can you sign my mask?”

“**Deadlock**”, Noah snapped. “Focus!”

“I’m focusing, I’m focusing- hey Ein- however the *fuck* you say it- DUCK!”

Jace looked up just in time to see a hotdog cart arching towards him. He made an undignified squeaking noise of surprise, and ducked out of the way. Before he’d given it conscious thought, Sumarbrander was in his hand, and it glowed with energy.

(The bond hadn’t felt nearly as positive ever since Jace had found out its source, but he couldn’t deny that it came in handy. Since the blade hadn’t gone all ax murder-y and tried to kill him yet, he figured it was safe enough).

Thor zeroed in on the weapon instantly. Thankfully, Iron Man shouted, “Fight for the damn sword, later! Army: more important!”

Melody hovered a few feet above a fire hydrant and started barking out instructions for them: “Viper and Liberty, start getting civilians to safety! Einherji, I want you in the air! Fry their circuits and make like you’re on *Chopped!* Hellhound-”

The beast (roughly the size of a semi), lifted its head and waited.

“-Raise some hell, buddy!”

It barked and shot off, presumably to do just that.

Jace twirled the sword and swung up into the air to follow his own command, and intercepted the
first drone with a friendly beheading. The corpse nearly landed on Penny, who was busy sticking several of her opponents to the sidewalk.

“Hey!” She complained. “My team…do what she said!”

The Secret Avengers roared in approval with an enthusiasm that rivalled Team X’s, and charged into the fray with a contagious energy (that…also rivalled Team X’s).

“Wait”, Uncle Bucky said, in disbelief, “You all know each other?”

“Figures that they’d be in cahoots with the mercs!” Scott called back, and then hesitated in a way that was comical. “That is what we’re calling them, right?”

“Technically we’re not mercs!” Jake said, unhelpfully, as he blasted a robot into a thousand pieces. The streetlamps closest to him shattered, and he winced. “Sorry!”

Deadpool was clearly having the time of his life, and didn’t care about the new additions to the fight (but then again, Uncle Wade was always pretty easygoing. The last thing he was going to do was question somebody else’s morals, when he had a questionable set himself).

“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery!” He said. “Right up there with-”

“Deadpool”, Uncle Peter complained. He swung into a drone about to tackle Aiden from behind. “You are not the best role model!”

Dante tore one in half with his bare hands and made quick work of the next. His form had grown thin and skeletal, and when he opened his mouth his teeth were fangs. Now that Jace was close enough to see the other guy’s claws, red eyes, and corpse-like complexion, he finally understood the name Wendigo.

“Save the jokes for later”, Captain America said, as his shield ricocheted off the side of a building and back into his hands. “We need to find who’s behind these things!”

Jace twisted in mid-air and shot an arch of lightning through a quartet of mechanical soldiers. From
the altitude he was at, he couldn’t see or hear any discernable source of the chaos, but they were definitely coming from somewhere.

“EINHERJI!” Saleitha’s voice called, and he looked down to see his cousin jumping and waving her arms. “IT’S A PORTAL- A PORTAL! HE’S USING MAGIC!”

Magic?

Jace nodded. The fact that the drones were appearing from seemingly nowhere made sense now, although if it was magic combined with technology, then this was the work of the Weapon X program. “Shut it down, I’ll cover you!”

She gave him a thumbs-up and bolted for what appeared to be a black van, who’s back doors were wide open. He couldn’t see anybody inside the vehicle, but that didn’t rule out the possibility of it being a trap.

“On your left!” Marya warned, and tore apart a drone about to shoot at her mother.

Aunt Wanda gave her a once-over, Scarlet Witch costume and all, with a confused and vaguely horrified expression. Apparently, imitation wasn’t always the sincerest form of flattery, at least where the rest of the seasoned heroes were concerned.

Meanwhile, Saleitha had reached the van, and was clambering in. She’d vanished inside when the doors slammed shut, and it began to shake.

“Trickster!” Penny cried, panicked, and darted after her. “Artemis, cover me!”

Tasha raised her bow and arrow and ran to follow, pulling back the quiver in preparation.

Dread began to fill Jace’s gut. His grip on Sumarbrander felt slippery.

Saleitha exploded out before they could reach her, and even before he got a good look at her, he could tell she was running like a bat out of hell.
“OMNIA, PUT A SHIELD AROUND US!” She screeched, and Melody threw up her hands right when the whole thing exploded.

Jace, on reflex, raised an arm to protect his face. He blinked, and suddenly they were all surrounded by a dome of red energy. He examined the streets, heart in his throat, but found that Melody had protected the adults and any bystanders as well.

The remaining robots had shut off and fallen to the earth, inanimate and dead. They’d most likely been cut off from whatever was powering them for so long.

The shields flickered, then vanished as if they’d never been there in the first place.

Jace breathed a sigh of relief and slowly descended down onto the pavement, with the others. He came to stand next to Jessie, who looked a little worse for wear, save for a small cut on her shoulder. The tear in the outfit would be a bitch to sow.

“Hey”, she greeted. “You alright?”

“Yeah, I think so”, he said. “You?”

“Oh, you know, it’s not every day that there are robots followed by explosions. Never better. Could someone explain that, please?”

Saleitha grimaced. “That was my fault. I was stupid enough to believe that the portal hadn’t been boobytrapped, and when I shut it down-”

“It triggered a massive detonation?” Penny guessed. She had what looked like dust and rubble coating her leotard, and Wanda wandered over and started trying to brush it off. She batted her hand away with a cry of, “Quit it!”

“That was risky”, Tony Stark said. He landed with a clunk, and the faceplate came up as if on cue. “Of course, now that you’re here, we’re gonna need you to come in. Especially you”. He looked at Team X pointedly.
“Uh, no”, Noah said. “Not until Kane’s dead”.

“A girl after my own heart”, Deadpool said, wiping away a fake tear.

“Not helping, Wilson”.

“Wasn’t trying to~!”

Christa began to edge back from the Avengers and Co. “Alright, well, since the robots are gone we’re just…going to go. Nice fighting with you?”

“Cute”, said Tony. “But it wasn’t a request”.

“It never is, is it?”

Melody heaved a colossal sigh of, I’m going to regret this later, and stepped in between her father and the former (?) mercenaries. “That’s not going to happen. If you want to get to them, you’re going to have to go through me”.

“Nice try. You are your Merry Band of Misfits are coming, too”.

Jace angled himself slightly in front of Jessie (who made an unhappy, offended noise in the back of her throat), and raised Sumarbrander. “Great, except, no thanks”.

Oh no. It’s happening again. Like last time.

Iron Man went to say something else, probably another passive-aggressive snarky comment that would escalate to a fight, when Hulk leapt over the wall of Avengers and slammed into Hellhound full force.

“DOG HURT HULK!” He bellowed, angrily. “HULK SMASH PUNY DOG!”
Oddly enough, none of them had considered the possibility of the Hulk holding a grudge against Hellhound.

“Oh, shit”, Jace blurted. “Hound!”

“Hulk, no!” Steve yelled, eyes wide, and started forward (to do what? To put himself in between a huge, green rage monster, and another huge, black fearmonger?)

Hellhound, who had been dazed at first, seemed to finally realize it was being punched. It roared in terror, fury, and pain, snapping at Hulk’s legs with razor sharp canines.

“No!” Tem took her gun (the genuine one, not the ICER), and aimed at it their wrestling family members. She hesitated, and Jace realized she was seriously considering shooting Brian’s father in an attempt to draw his attention.

“Don’t!” Natasha interrupted, her own firearms drawn. “He’ll-”

Tem’s hands shook, but she fired an entire round into the Hulk’s unprotected back.

Banner’s alter-ego froze. Hellhound stopped too, still growling. There was a terrible period where they simply stared at each other, and then he was charging Tem, and it was limping to stop him before he reached her.

“Stark, we have to break this up!” Uncle Sam said, seriously. “At this rate, they’ll kill each other!”

“Stop it!” Jessie moved away from Pietro when he tried to grab her, and Jace’s feet felt rooted to the concrete. “You don’t understand!”

“Hulk!” Tony was saying, not paying attention. “Banner, dammit, snap out of it!”

Melody’s cheeks were drained of color (she must’ve overextended herself shielding them from the explosion), but she raised her arms, and a weak barrier sprung to life between Hulk and Hellhound.
“Hulk was bleeding now, but Hellhound was whimpering.”

“That won’t hold”, she ground out. The words sounded like they were being pulled from her throat with fishhooks. “Separate them!”

Hulk punched through the wall like it was made of paper, and the human mutate’s knees buckled as a green fist wrapped around the beast’s throat.

It was Ruby’s shriek that pierced the air: “Melody!”

It was a beg. Perhaps to try for another shield, or maybe to check if she was alright. No matter the cause, everyone stopped, and thankfully the Hulk was included in that.

Tony was pale as bone. “What did you say?”

Jace liked to think they could’ve bounced back from that. Maybe the groups could’ve made something up and everything would’ve carried on, like it had been.

Maybe if Hellhound hadn’t finally slipped, and turned back into a shivering mess of a familiar boy, still being dangled like a limp ragdoll.

(Jace couldn’t tell if Brian was breathing).

Melody was shaking. It didn’t look like she could get up.

“Aw, damn”, she said. “Cat’s out of the bag on this one, huh fellas?”

It started with a police broadcast. It ended with the look on Tony Stark’s face.
Chapter 37

POV CHANGE- Aiden

Silence charged the air with tension, and nothing was okay.

Aiden helped Melody limp into the Avengers’ quinjet (the brunette couldn’t walk, and her eyes were trained on the ground. Her feet dragged along the cracked asphalt).

“C’mon Mel, work with me”, he complained, without heat. “You’re heavy”.

Brian was wrapped tightly in a shock blanket. Steve carried him inside swiftly and set the boy down on the floor. Hulk had changed back into Bruce upon the realization he was attacking his son, but he couldn’t seem to go near the teen.

(Brian was breathing, but there were bruises scattered on his torso and neck. He hadn’t woken up yet, and Aiden was glad the injuries seemed to be fading).

It didn’t take a PhD to know that Tony was furious- more furious than he had been during he and Melody’s first fight, and it was terrifying. He was monitoring his daughter’s vitals with his armor, to make sure she was alright, but wouldn’t say a word.

*They’re a passive-aggressive bunch.*

“We’ll have to take Brian down to the lab and run some tests”, he said, voice hard, and Tem reached unconsciously for the gun Natasha had confiscated.

(Shed hadn’t said, *give us your weapons.* She’d held out a hand for them, and no one had bothered to push the matter).

“No”, the young spy said, and Wanda edged in front of their friends (her arsenal had been taken away as well, and Deadpool didn’t seem as disappointed as he was surprised. Maybe he’d wished that his children wouldn’t be so much like him). “Y- You’re not running any goddamn tests. There were enough of those when he was a kid”.
Aiden remembered hearing about the explosion. He remembered Brian coughing up blood and spending years in quarantine. Tests were the last thing he needed.

“And apparently, they didn’t do their damn job”, Tony practically spat. “Did you think that was normal, what he can do? Did you ever consider the possibility that it could be hurting him? That it could be hurting both of you?” He shot a pointed look at Melody, and Aiden swallowed down the lump in his throat.

“You don’t know what they can do”, he said, before he could stop himself.

*I’m sick of being judged like a naïve child.*

Melody side-eyed him curiously. Aiden’s heart squeezed when he saw gratitude, as well.

“Don’t talk about it like you couldn’t have told us”. He straightened to his full height, and the archer was finally aware of just how powerful he was in his armor- as an *Avenger,* something they’d gone to great lengths to keep them from. “Why didn’t you?”

Izzy grunted. She wasn’t looking at Bucky, and Bucky wasn’t looking at her. “We were scared”, she said, simply, and absently rubbed the port where metal met flesh.

“Scared?” Steve’s face was stressed and upset. “You hid it because you were scared? If you knew we wouldn’t exactly be proud, then why did you do it at all?”

“Well, that was all I ever wanted”, Melody said, weakly. She lifted her head and met everyone’s eyes with a tired gaze. “I wanted to make you proud. Forgive me for being an impressionable seven-year-old, who heard my dad’s thoughts and believed that he hated me for doing something stupid”.

“And nothing’s changed”, Tony agreed. “Except you really screwed the pooch on this one. Yeah, I get you being seven, and not understanding consequences. But *this?* You’re sixteen, and you should *know better*”.

“Seventeen”, she corrected. Her expression- carefully concealed by some constructed mask -
cracked down the middle at her father’s words. “Didn’t you notice?”

No one spoke. Melody leaned against the wall with a barely restrained groan and Aiden hesitantly knelt down next to her.

Brian stirred and hissed in pain. His eyes cracked open, and fluttered.

“O-Ow”. He grimaced. “Wut h’ppened?”

Jace sat cross-legged next to the shapeshifter, and pat his knee. After several attempts at trying to remove Sumarbrander from his possession, and the sword stubbornly teleporting back to its master, they’d given up on taking it. It was currently in its bracelet form around the demigod’s wrist (luckily, no one had found out about the Casket yet).

“S’ okay, buddy”, he said. “Our parents discovered our extracurricular activities, and Hulk beat the crap out of you. The usual”.

Brian grunted. It occurred to Aiden that he wasn’t fully awake.

“‘Kay”, he murmured, and curled into a tight ball underneath the undoubtedly scratchy material of the blanket. Tem reached over and ran her fingers through his hair, and he hummed contentedly. “M’ tired. Is Dad alright?”

Bruce made a strangled sound in the back of his throat. Natasha pressed her lips into a thin line, and spared the powerhouse of the Avengers a glance.

“Uncle Bruce is fine”, Jace managed. “Do you…think your ribs are broken?”

“Mph. Healing”.

“…Healing?”

“Can feel it”.

“Can feel it”.
“He heals?” Tony demanded, and Wanda shushed him. Her feet shuffled back and forth on the floor nervously, and they felt it when the jet lurched and began to take off.

(Hawkeye was flying. Aiden hadn’t dared looked at his father).

“He heals”, Marya confirmed quietly. “We don’t really have any theories on why he turns into that thing, but we call it Hellhound”.

Bruce dropped his head into his hands. “And is it angry, too?”

Brian snorted. “Nah. Scared”.

Tem, who was still carding her fingers across his scalp, paused. “What?”

“S’ scared. Cus’ I was during the explosion”.

“Is he serious?” Uncle Sam asked, horrified. “How does he know that?”

Melody brought her legs up to her chest, wrapped her arms around her calves, and buried her face in her knees. Her shoulders shook silently. Aiden fought the desire to draw a bow that was no longer there.

Deep down, they must’ve known it was going to be bad. It would’ve been amazing (a miracle), if they had accepted what they were doing as any form of right.

There was a long moment of silence. Tem looked like she wanted to cry, but didn’t seem to know how. Brian blinked at her hazily.

“Pl’s don’ stick needles n’ me”, he said, as an afterthought.

“Don’t worry”, his girlfriend replied. “I won’t let them”.

There was no questioning the subject of *them*. He definitely wasn’t going to the lab, now.

They changed out of their gear upon arrival and stood in the Compound’s living room, awaiting the verdict on a punishment, or a longer, much more thorough lecture.

“FRIDAY’s locked all the exits in the building”, Tony explained flatly. He’d cycled from angry, to hurt, to stone-cold, to all three at once. “She’ll let us know if you so much as scratch at the paint. We need to go down to the SHIELD base and speak to Coulson about getting you *pardoned*, for the whole vigilante thing. We’ll deal with this when we get back. Understand?”

They nodded without saying a word, and then the Avengers left, and they were alone with their thoughts and each other for company.

*How comforting.*

Melody looked better than she had on the way home; bundled on the couch with a mug of juice and a cookie to improve her blood sugar levels. But there was an aura of defeat that Aiden had never seen. Not since the explosion, when she was in that awful hospital bed and there were whispers of permanent damage.

(No, not even then. Then, Mel was frantically desperate to make it up to her parents. That seemed like lifetimes ago).

“I’m sorry”, she said. “I shouldn’t have-” her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat and pushed on. “I shouldn’t have dragged you into this mess. It was *my* idea, and *my* stupid problems, and all I do is hurt people. Dad’s right”.

Just as suddenly as Aiden felt sympathy for his childhood frenemy, he was furious.

“Are you kidding?” He demanded. “We go through all this shit, and you still assume we followed you out of a sense of *obligation*? Do you honestly think you’re the only person in this group who believed they had something to prove?”
It must come with the whole super-parents territory.

Melody practically recoiled. Her eyes widened. “I-”

“It wasn’t that I had red in my ledger”, said Tem, without warning. She kicked her feet onto the coffee table and stared at the ceiling thoughtfully. “I was twelve, and the men Izzy and I killed were mercenaries that our parents hired to track us down. I thought that I could do something good- that all the training and exercises and pain our mom and dad put us through could be worth something other than keeping me up at night. Other than telling me to check behind every closed door, and always have an exit available, and to never trust your family, or your friends, or yourself”.

Izzy held up her right arm and picked at the ridges in the plating. It threw off a glare in the florescent lighting. “I got this when I was ten, in a car crash. The vehicle flipped, the limb got pinned underneath, and the doctors were forced to remove it. Our father was an engineer who knew the people who operated on Dad’s own arm, back in the Winter Soldier days. He made me a new one, and trained me to crush windpipes with it. I’ve never tested how much weight it can handle, but the numbers reach somewhere around 10,000 pounds. I wanted to use it- not to kill innocent men, like Father intended, but to kill the scum of the earth. I wanted to crush Kane’s windpipe, instead”.

“Team X was created because we were all united in that goal”, Riley said, cautiously. He’d cut holes in the back of all his shirts to expose the wing pack, and it looked pretty good for something that’d been put through strenuous activity, recently. “Personally, I thought it’d be pretty damn awesome to turn the weapons he gave us against him”.

“We wanted revenge”, Kara said, and nodded towards her old friends, who had all been through the same shit for the same amount of time. “We wanted to put him through hell. Make him taste a fraction of what we went through, for his so-called ‘science’”.

She was quivering. Jake put a hand on her shoulder, and she stopped.

“Me, too”, Ruby chimed in, and the Maximoffs nodded grimly, side-by-side.

Saleitha was studying her nails, under the false pretense of not caring. “I wanted to find my mother. There was really no ulterior motive other than that. I didn’t care about Loki, I didn’t care about helping you guys be martyrs, and I didn’t care about what anyone thought of me. I wanted her back- I still want her back. Sure, it was nice that you guys liked me when no one in Alaska did, but…she’s my mom. The one who’s stayed”.
“I wanted to live up to being Captain America’s daughter”, said Jessie, ruefully.

Jace slipped off his bracelet and Sumarbrander sprang to life. A bolt of electricity shot up the blade and fizzled out at the sharp tip. “I wanted to live up to being the heir to the throne of Asgard. I wanted to feel like a son of Thor, and not carry it around as a title that always felt like it was in name, only. ‘Guess I deserve it even less than before’.

Penny shrugged. “I’d just lost my best friend. I…wanted to make sure it didn’t happen to anybody else”. She sounded close to tears.

“I am not going to lie, I did this because everyone else was doing it”, Khari hummed, and A’yana laughed nervously. “A’yana did it because she wanted to help you. Somehow, I tricked myself into believing I could keep my friends from doing anything foolish. Evidently, I was wrong. Perhaps foolishness is a given at our age”.

“I always liked to think it was ambition”.

Scott’s son cleared his throat. “I wanted to help people, and Penny”.

It was the first time Aiden could recall Joven sounding completely sure of himself, although he was sweaty and nerve-wracked.

Tasha leaned back in the chair she was sitting on. “I wanted to help Penny, too, and there was no way I was letting my brother beat me in the archery department”.

Aiden moaned. “Thanks, sis”.

“You’re welcome”.

“Cheeky little shit”.

“We’re twins, jerk.”
“Yeah. But I’m taller”.

“You- you dick!”

Brian, who was finally fully awake (if not embarrassed and ill), tapped anxious rhythms on his leg. “I remember saying Hellhound was triggered by fear. I guess… I wanted to teach it to be something besides afraid. So then, maybe I’d be less afraid, too”.

“I did it for you guys”, Aiden blurted. “I think I do everything for you guys, which in hindsight, kinda means my self-preservation skills are crappy”.

Melody almost laughed then, but didn’t. She was drooping like a flower that’d been deprived of sunlight and water. “I put the idea into your heads, though. Didn’t I?”

*Great pep talk, guys.*

“Starks”, Alex said, disdainfully. “Always guilt-tripping themselves. Look, I know you’re the Numero Uno who started this shebang. But we were all thinking it, whether we were admitting it to ourselves or not”.

“She’s right”. Brian scrubbed his palm across his forehead and kneaded it into the skin, like it could remove the headache pulsing through his brain. “Our parents don’t agree with it. So, what? We move on. We keep going”.

“Keep going?” Melody sneered. “Go where? Loki knows where Ziva Grey is, but wants a get-out-of-jail-free card. My dad hates me. What are we supposed to do?”

“I don’t know!” Aiden exploded, and all of his pent-up emotions bubbled up and out of his mouth. “None of us know what we’re doing, but you’re our team leader! We may have all come up with these ideas, but you took the reins, and now you have to accept that! You may have gotten yourself into this mess, and now I’m saying you need to get off your ass and finish it, because you’re Melody-Fucking-Maria-Stark, and as much as I pretend to hate you, half the time, you’re a freaking genius. If anyone can come up with a plan, it’s you. So? Got any bright ideas?”

Melody stared dumbly. Aiden waited, arms crossed petulantly over his chest.
When’s the last time I made her this speechless?

“Wait. You pretend to hate me?”

“Mel! That wasn’t supposed to be your take-away!”

She threw her head back and cackled, and Aiden (plus the rest of the room), let out a collective sigh of relief. There was a renewed energy in Melody’s irises, and she sat up and promptly chugged her mug of juice.

“Alright”, she said, and belched unceremoniously. “I need status updates. I’m still a little tired, but I should be fine in another hour or two. Brian?”

He set his jaw and smiled fiercely. “Hound needs extra than that to recharge, but we’ve got this. Depending on what you’ve got planned, the Junior Avengers can count on Satan’s personal guard dog making an appearance”.

Melody cracked her knuckles. “Excellent. Izzy, I trust you know where they put our stuff?”

“The safe. It’ll take a while to hack, though”.

“The safe? I can try, but it won’t be pretty”.

Saleitha raised a hand, like they were in elementary school. However, her devious smirk belonged in the unforgiving realm of adulthood. “Or, I can crack it with magic. Diffusing that portal didn’t drain me so much that I can’t be a functioning lockpick”.

“I have Sumarbrander”, Jace added. “And the Avengers don’t know that she has the Casket of Ancient Winters. Are we talking about what I think we’re talking about?”

“If you mean breaking out of the Compound, going to the SHIELD facility, and breaking Loki out of jail, then yes. Let’s face it, our parents will never believe us after today”. Melody turned to Tem,
who raised an eyebrow at being addressed. “Red, we need a plan. Preferably one that doesn’t involve any risk of bodily harm. I’d like to get out as quick and clean as possible. Saleitha, go start working on that safe. Jace, go with her in case she needs good old-fashioned brute strength”.

Mr. Stark has commanded that I lock all doors, FRIDAY’s AI droned, over the speakers. It sounded almost concerned, or upset.

Leave it to the AI to have feelings.

“Sorry, Fri”, Melody said, reluctantly. “I’m going to have to override that”.

I am programmed to notify Mr. Stark if you-

Saleitha raised a hand experimentally and gave it a wave. There was a flash of green, and FRIDAY cut off with a familiar crackle of static.

“I think I stopped the signal”, she said. “But, since your dad has Wifi everywhere, he’ll figure out that something’s wrong and will come straight back”.

“Right”. The prodigy inhaled deeply and bellowed, “AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!”

Khari smiled wryly, amused. “We are already here”.

“Yeah, I know. I’ve always wanted to say that!”

I take everything back. We’re doomed.

Roughly twenty minutes later, they were back in their outfits (Saleitha used magic again to conjure up some extra ammo, and fix anything out of place since the robot fight. Amazingly, she still looked steady on her feet, despite the exertion).

“Alright”, Melody said, once they had gathered into a semi-circle. “This is how it’s going to go.
My team and Team X will serve as a distraction, while Penny’s team goes in to grab Loki and get out. Hopefully there won’t be a firefight, but if there is, don’t hurt anybody. The SHIELD agents are technically doing their jobs right if they’re shooting at you”.

“I hope they have Stormtrooper aim”.

“Wanda!”

“What?”

“Great”, Dan mumbled. “I love being shot at!”

“Can it, pretty boy. After Loki is extracted, we meet outside. It’s too risky to steal a quinjet from the Compound and I wouldn’t try and steal one from the facility, so we’ll need another plan in how the hell we’re getting to where we’re going”.

Noah exchanged looks with her siblings. “We know a guy in Jersey. One of Dad’s old contacts. He runs a shoddy airport, and can hook us up with a plane”.

“Our parents will find us”, Ruby warned. “They’ll be calling in back-up, and even all-together, we’re outnumbered. We need reinforcements of our own”.

Tem and Izzy met each other’s eyes. A silent understanding seemed to pass between the pair, and Tem turned to face the crowd.

“We can call our sisters”, she said. “But it’ll be tough meeting up”.

“I can create a portal”, Marya hummed. “I can pick up your friends”.

Dan huffed. He still seemed a little upset at the possibility of him getting shot at.

Aiden frowned. “Great, but three more people doesn’t make much of a difference. What about the Fantastic Four’s kids? Do you think they would help us?”
“Marie? Without question. Skye and Mark might take some convincing”.

“I can handle that”. Ruby squared her shoulders.

Melody surveyed them; determined. “Well, hop to it. We need to get moving if we want to catch them by surprise”. She paused, then grinned at them widely. “I believe in you assholes. You know that, right? Thanks for believing in me, too”.

“Yeah”, Aiden said. “We do. And you’re welcome”.

“…For the record, I don’t really hate you either”.

“While we’ve been waiting for you two to admit that for years”, Tem said, not without humor, “We really should go. Let’s get this show on the road”.
POV CHANGE- Tem

They ended up stealing a series of vans from the Compound- of course, they all had Avengers’ logos on them, but Saleitha’s magic wiped them clean.

It was Melody’s idea, unfortunately, to give them Walkie-Talkies and names.

Van #1, which housed Tem, Aiden, Melody, Jace, and Jessie, had been christened the Stark Mobile. Aiden voted they name it after their team instead, she’d shot the idea down so fast the redhead had gotten whiplash.

Van #2, dubbed Hell on Wheels by Wanda and Noah, had a name which wasn’t so much as amusing as it was accurate. Before climbing in after Riley, Izzy had given Tem a very knowing, very pained look. It held all three Wilson sisters, and roughly half of their team.

Van #3 held most of Penny’s Team, and it was called the Tarantula Truck (something that bothered Park to no end, because it wasn’t even a truck, and the radioactive spider that’d bitten Peter was in no way a type of tarantula).

Van #4 was Fast ‘n Furious, because Elisabet’s adoptive mother had shown her the movie a few weeks ago, and she’d thought it was hilarious. Seeing the rest of her sisters in person after so long made Tem’s heart ache, but it was a good kind of pain.

Van #5 was the Mystery Machine, and contained the Fantastic Four’s kids, as well as what remained of Penny’s group. She suspected either Joven or Skye had chosen that alias.

Van #6, the last van, was (after some deliberation), just called Beep Beep. It was being driven by the rest of Team X.

“We look like the bad guys in movies”, Melody rambled aimlessly, into her coveted Walkie-Talkie. “Are we driving in a straight line? Do we look like we know how to do this? I don’t suppose anyone needs a second rundown of the plan?”
“Do you?” Saleitha retorted, unhappily, and the genius made a noise of disgust and put the communicating device down.

Tem’s finger methodically smoothed over the trigger of her gun. She would use the ICER when distracting the SHIELD agents, but when they confronted Weapon X, there was no way she wasn’t firing real bullets.

If you make it to confront Weapon X, her traitor brain thought, and she shut it down without hesitation. There was no point in mulling over what might, and might not be.

“If we’re right”, Jessie said, carefully, “Maybe they’ll forgive us”.

“Eventually”, Brian agreed. He pulled his jacket tighter around himself (there was still no color in his cheeks, but no bruises. He wasn’t moving stiffly, like he was hurt).

Aiden rolled his eyes, shoulders tense. He was white-knuckling the wheel. “Focus”, he said. “One thing at a time”.

“Yeah”, said Melody, and then made a face. “Why are we agreeing so much now?”

“I have no idea”.

Tem snorted as Jessie glared at them both. She took her firearm out of the holster, checked the amount of ammo, and put it back.

When they were young- nine or ten? -their parents taught them how to reload weapons. Izzy always claimed that when Tem got nervous, she would obsessive-compulsively check to make sure all of the rounds were there. She’d dismissed the claim, both because of their ages, and because the anxiety could be contributed to Mother’s careful inspections.

Now, she wasn’t so sure.

“Hey”, Tem said, abruptly. “I love you, guys”.
There was a pause. Whatever inane thing they’d been bickering about came to a halt, and the five stared at her in dumbstruck silence.

Finally, Melody blinked. “Uh. Okay. Love you, too?”

She huffed and leaned against the wall; arms crossed over her chest and fists jammed into her armpits, to stop them from twitching towards the holster again. “Ugh”.

“You okay, Tem?”

“Are any of us?”

Jessie cringed. “Good point. Hey- we’re almost there. Get ready”.

Melody swallowed audibly and sat up straighter. She claimed that her powers had recovered enough to serve as a suitable distraction, but Tem had no idea what that meant, and had a sneaking suspicion she didn’t want to either.

Aiden was muttering a mess of incomprehensible junk under his breath as he pulled in front of the building- on the outside, it was quiet, and there was no one waiting.

Melody held the Walkie-Talkie to her lips. “Come in, Beep Beep. Ruby?”

“Copy, Stark Mobile”, the psychic replied. “Need something?”

“‘Fraid so. Can you check to make sure Loki is still inside?”

Ruby exhaled on the other end. “I can tell he’s here. Our parents, too”.

“Fan-tas-tic”. Melody ran a hand down her face and cracked her neck. “You guys know what to do. Get in, grab him, and get out. We’ll take care of things out here. Operation Roadtrip With Uncle
Loki, is a go”.

“We’re not calling it that”, Saleitha interrupted angrily.

“Too late. Move it, we don’t have all day!” She stuffed the device into her suit before the Asgardian could reply, and kicked open the backdoors to the van. “C’mon, y’all”.

“Please stop talking like a trucker”, Jessie said honestly, as she followed the brunette out. She hiked her shield further up her arm, and hugged it to her body tightly.

Tem came out last, as Aiden got out of the driver’s side and circled around to stand with them. Nearby, everyone else piled out and made a beeline for either the base, or where they were standing. Anyone stupid enough to do so went with the infiltrating-SHIELD group.

The teenaged spy split off from the Junior Avengers to join the second party, and Izzy, Irina, Anastasia, and Elisabet broke open their close-knit huddle to let her join.

“Tatiana”, Elisabet said, with a grin. “Давно не виделись. How bad?”

“Хорошо”, Tem replied easily, and shrugged. “No worse than usual”.

Irina exchanged a subtle glance with Anastasia, and the twins rolled their eyes in unison. The expression was so foreign on their faces that she felt the urge to do a double take.

Izzy had a sniper rifle in her hands, and Tem didn’t dare ask if the bullets in it were real (she knew that they were. The brunette had never been one to hold back when it came to weaponry, especially when it was important).

“фокус”, she said, sternly. “We need to extract Loki as quickly and quietly as possible- a little hard to do, when we’re essentially waltzing up to the front door”.

“The one and only”.

“I see. How bad is your usual? Because even on your worst days, it was usually better than this”. She made a face and drew an ICER that Tem had lent her.

Elisabet’s eyes and hair were brown, like Izabela’s, but lighter. Irina and Anastasia both had black hair and gray eyes (Irina’s hair was wavy, and Anastasia’s wasn’t). When they stood together, you couldn’t even tell they were related. It was all in their body language- the way they angled themselves towards one another; the level of trust.

The ache in Tem’s chest intensified.

“Listen up”, Riley interrupted, from where he had evidently taken up the mantle of leading the pack. His shoulders were squared with determination. “This has to be fast. We’ve got no idea how long the others will be able to distract the SHIELD agents, and maybe our parents. Most importantly: we stick together, we leave no one behind, and no bloodshed”.

He may have looked at Izzy pointedly, when saying that. She glowered.

“We have an advantage since they haven’t seen us yet”, Irina put in helpfully. “Maybe we can start a fire and get anyone who doesn’t fall for the original bait in one place, so we can move in”.

Marie, who was Johnny Storm’s daughter (Tem hadn’t seen her in at least a year, but after their explanation she’d been happy to help), grinned widely.

“Starting fires is kinda my thing”, she said, and winked. “Big or small?”

“Nothing major, please”, Mark, Ben’s son, said (he sighed like this had happened before, perhaps on a more disastrous scale). “What should she set ablaze?”

“A desk”, Izzy said. “An empty desk. There has to be an office that has nothing in it. Maybe a supply closet”.

“Why would a supply closet have a desk?”
“You know what I mean”.

“Alright, alright, not important!” Riley huffed. “Mel’s giving me a thumbs-up, which must mean she’s ready to start lure everyone outside. Ready?”

“Are we gonna sing ‘We’re All in This Together’?” Alex whispered giddily. “That’s been one of my dreams ever since seeing High School Musical”.

If it were possible, Tem thought she saw some of the life leave Canary’s eyes.

“I’m just going to take that as a yes”, he said. “Move in- slowly. Got it? Great. Good”.

Saleitha mumbled something that was probably along the lines of, why did I ever agree to help you idiots with anything, ever, and then waved her hands. There was a flash of green, like sparks, that flitted in between her fingers. “We’re invisible. Don’t make any loud noises or sudden movements, though. To be on the safe side”.

The large facet of the next Avengers began to file inside, right through the front door, and Tem got an odd sense of satisfaction when trained eyes skittered right over them.

“Close the door, Paul”, an agent carrying a bin of files, complained. “The draft is blowing the damn thing open and if I have to re-sort this paperwork because it blew away, I’m going to flip my shit and punch out Fury’s other eye”.

Another agent, presumably Paul, went to close it. He slammed it shut right when the last in line (Joven), slipped through; almost crushing the boy’s ankle.

He made a tiny, high-pitched squeal of surprise, that was quickly muffled by his palm. The employee who had shut the door paused, waiting, but left when he heard nothing else.

Penny kicked him (lightly), in the shin. Tem couldn’t see Parker’s pseudo-daughter through the mask, but she must’ve been furious.
You’ll ruin the mission, she signed (all of the Compound’s inhabitants had learned ASL to help communicate with Uncle Clint, who was mostly deaf). HUSH!

Joven cringed. His hands shook when he answered, Sorry. Caught me by surprise. Won’t happen again, promise.

Anastasia’s frown was questioning, as if wondering why they still kept Joven around if he was a potential liability. Just as soon as the thought crossed her face, it vanished, and the look in the girl’s eyes now was guilt.

Tem wasn’t too upset. Sometimes, she found herself thinking like that, too.

Riley and Saleitha led the (admittedly, not at all glorious) charge down the hallway the Asgardian had presumably gone down, on the way to talk to her father. Judging by how the sorceress held herself, she was less than pleased to be back.

They rounded a corner and Tem started stroking the trigger again. Izzy noticed and bumped their shoulders together, gently. Her own hands flexed around the rifle.

Saleitha froze so fast that Riley kept walking for a solid two steps, before doubling back. He followed her gaze and swore, colorfully, in sign language, for what must’ve been a minute.

Iron Man and Thor were outside the door to Loki’s cell, along with four SHIELD agents (none Tem recognized, not that she’d been in contact with a lot over the course of her lifetime. The most interaction she’d ever had was when Nick Fury was introduced to her and Izzy, at twelve-years-old).

Damn. A’yana looked ashamed. Why didn’t we consider them upping security?

Because we’re idiots, Tem signed back dryly, and let out a soundless breath. I have tranq darts, but I don’t want to use them.

The horrified gleam in Riley’s irises banned them from seeing the light of day no matter what the mission, or the purpose. That didn’t change the fact that they needed to get into that room and grab Loki without causing a fight.
Get them away from the door, Saleitha signed unhappily (odd, but not unpleasant, since Tem hadn’t known she knew ASL). Marie, or whatever your name is? Now might be a really good time for you set something on fire.

Marie’s face lit up, like she’d found her calling in being a Human Torch 2.0. She studied Iron Man and Thor, who were arguing about Melody and Jace.

“I do not understand how the boy could’ve hidden it from me”, the prince of Asgard was saying, gravely. “He has never proved himself to be untrustworthy”.

Tony exhaled loudly. He looked like he’d aged fifty years in the span of a few hours (Melody had that effect on a lot of people, but now, it was sad). “Tell me about this sword, again? Sumar-whatsit?”

“Sumarbrander”, Thor supplied, semi-annoyed. “It is a powerful blade that was once wielded by Frey, and I suspect even my father, Odin, does not know its origins. No one but its original owner, or his offspring, should be able to wield it”.

“Are there any exceptions to the rule?”

The blonde hesitated. “Perhaps if he was bound to it by a powerful source, as he claimed. But the only ones with enough Seidr to enact a spell like that would be the Allfather, who wouldn’t dare do something so rash. Other than that, there is only—” Thor’s expression went blank, and then darkened. “Loki”.

“Wait, Loki’s been messing with your kid?” Tony asked. “Are you sure? Wouldn’t Jace mention that- hell, does he even know?”

“It is a possibility. There was an incident earlier, in the facility- you said two guards were knocked unconscious?” Thor half-turned to face the clustered agents, who had so far remained a respectable distance away from the Avengers.

A younger one nodded, and flushed. “Y-Yes, sir. But we checked the security cameras and there was no sign of a break-in. There were no disturbances in Loki’s cell”.
“Are you certain?”

“O-Of course”.

The God of Thunder exchanged a look with Iron Man, and an understanding seemed to pass between them. Tem’s stomach bottomed out into her feet at the sight.

“Saleitha”, Thor said. “She must’ve snuck in. Do you think Loki could be manipulating them, somehow?”

“Is his daughter in on it?”

“Doubtful. Her insistence that they had never met was genuine”.

They were coming to a conclusion, alright. Except it was very, very wrong.

“Could he be tricking them into freeing him? Is that possible?”

Tem’s eyes widened. She nudged Marie forward and motioned for her frantically to set something—anything—on fire, before the conversation escalated more than it already had. The newest addition to their haphazardly put-together squad stumbled forward, hands lighting like matches or candles, and the side of Thor’s cape went up in flames.

“Oh, shit”, Riley said, aloud, and shooed Saleitha forward. “Go!”

She swallowed and bolted, dodging a flailing Tony and several shocked agents. Tem watched as Saleitha opened the lock with her magic and disappeared inside before they were finished finding a fire extinguisher.

“She didn’t mean Jace’s dad”, Levi snapped.

Tem raised her ICER when the same SHIELD employee glanced in their direction, confused. She shot both him and Riley pointed looks, and they shuffled their feet.
“Uh, Mr. Avengers, sirs?” The agent asked. They reached for the gun at their waist. “I think we’re being watched”.

“Watched?” Iron Man looked up from frantically waving at the smoke now billowing from Thor’s outfit (he was fine, if not singed. Singed was better than burnt). “By who?”

“We have a situation!” Maria Hill rounded the same corner they had not ten minutes ago, gun in hand, and almost ran into Kara (she pinwheeled out of the way and almost smacked into the wall. Thankfully, Dante grabbed her just in time).

Tony blew air out of his cheeks. “What now!?”

“Your kids escaped house arrest”, she said. “They’re outside right now and have engaged several agents in close-combat”.

“Come again?”

Tem gulped just as Saleitha came barreling out of the room, dragging Loki by the arm (his hands were still in cuffs, which was smart, and there was a shit-eating grin on his face).

“Dan, blackhole!” She shouted, and that time all of the adults looked at each other in a mixture of alarm and surprise.

In other words, their cover was blown. So much for stealth, but they were making good time. Good time was better than nothing (at this point, Tem didn’t care what went right for them, as long as something did).

Dan expanded his hands and they were enveloped in darkness, before anyone could see the realization dawn on Tony and Thor’s faces (realization, recognition, and horror).

It was cold when he created blackholes. Tem shivered, and then they were standing in the parking lot again, and everything had gone to shit.
Disappointing, but not surprising.

“They’ve got Loki!” Someone shouted, panicked, and it hit Tem that the invisibility spell had dissipated.

“Everyone to the cars!” Noah bellowed, loud enough for the whole city to hear. She grabbed both of her sisters by the arm and zoomed away, faster than the naked eye could follow.

“Good advice”, Melody agreed, popping up at Tem’s left. “C’mon, Red. Gotta run”.

Izzy shooed Elisabet, Irina, and Anastasia back towards their own vehicles, and hurried after Riley towards Hell on Wheels.

Tem climbed into the van where Brian was waiting, just as Aiden clambered into the driver’s seat. He wasn’t missing any arrows, on the bright side, and besides mussed hair and wild-eyes, he seemed fine. There were bruises on his knuckles.

“Hurry up!” He shouted. “We need to get out of here!”

“No need to tell me twice!” Wanda called back, just as the Avengers burst out of the building and started running in their direction; followed by SHIELD’s Avengers.

“Ah, crap”, Melody said, and groped for the Walkie-Talkie. “Are we going to be able to get away in time?” Then, into the speaker, “How ready are all of you to fight the literal Avengers? Like, honest-to-god Avengers?”

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Loki asked skeptically, where he’d somehow managed to sit cross-legged on the floor.
Saleitha grunted in disgust and released him (it seemed she was riding with them now, whether they liked it or not). “Vaguely. Enough to rescue Mom, which if you go back on what you told me, I won’t hesitate to kill you. Are you sure we have to fight them?”

Jace poked his head inside, accompanied by the crackle of ozone. “Uh, yeah, I think we do. They’ll be able to track the cars”.

“Well, that’s not good”, Jessie said finally, out of breath. She gave their “guest” a suspicious once-over. “If we release him, will he help?”

“Sure”, Tem said. “Our parents think he’s brainwashed us”.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. A fair assumption, but not true”.

“Shit”.

“Such vulgar language, from ‘Captain America’s’ daughter”, Loki drawled. “I’m not sure what I expected, but this was far from my expectations”.

“Can it, Shakespeare in The Park”, Melody hissed. “Do you, or do you not know where Saleitha’s mother is? If so, tell us so we can go and get her, preferably so we can also destroy Weapon X. And, help us with our escape”.

He looked down at his cuffed hands expectantly. Jace groaned and sliced the links neatly in half, the sword still semi-pointed at his uncle.

Loki followed as they climbed back out of the van. Tem stayed close to Aiden and Jessie, fighting the urge to trade in the ICER for the real deal.

“Boss fight?” Melody muttered. “I didn’t see that coming”.
“True”, Aiden grunted. Then, half-heartedly, “Any decent strategies?”

“None”, Saleitha growled. “Worry about incapacitating them”.

The order left no room for arguments, but Tem wasn’t complaining.

“Melody!” Tony shouted from across the parking lot. The SHIELD agents had retreated at a nod from Natasha and Uncle Clint. “You are grounded for *life*, young lady!”
POV CHANGE- Melody

“Melody! You are grounded for life, young lady!”

The genius had never heard him sound so furious- of course, he’d been furious before, but this was a different brand. The look in his eyes was betrayal, and worry. The rest of their fathers and mothers spread out on either side of the legendary Iron Man (more adults than Melody could count, and all of them looked incredibly upset).

“I thought I was already grounded!” She called back, ignoring the small snort from Aiden, to her right. “I was running around in a jumpsuit using badass radiation powers without you or Mom’s permission!”

“But breaking Loki out of jail? Do you honestly believe a word he says? He’s manipulating you!”

“But he hasn’t lied”, Ruby interrupted. Her hands were balled into fists. “I can tell. You claim to be protecting us by withholding the truth- about the bombers when Mel was seven, and SHIELD wanting to train us, and you’ve been neglecting the search for Saleitha’s mother intentionally. Because something came up. Something more important. What is it?”

“Ruby”, K ground out, eyes hard and pleading. “Listen to me-”

“What?” The psychic sounded mad, sure, but mostly sad. The kind of sadness that was usually reserved for people who had seen a lot more shit than they had at fifteen. “Are you going to tell me Snow would’ve been disappointed? I’ve never-” her voice caught, “I’ve never even seen her in person”.

Melody should’ve guessed Ruby was hiding issues revolving her biological mother. On the kid’s other side, Izzy tensed (she was thinking the same thing. The brunette didn’t need the same level of telepathic skill to know that).

“Loki, cease your games”, Thor said coldly. “Back away from my son”.
Loki’s expression was carefully blank. “Brother, if I may-”

“That’s enough”. At the Asgardian’s side, Mjolnir crackled with lightning. “I will have none of your false explanations”.

Jace swallowed thickly. “Dad, please. I don’t know why you couldn’t search for Ziva anymore, but he wasn’t lying when he said he knew where she was. We can go and rescue her together”.

“Uh, correction, you’re not going anywhere”, Tony said. “I don’t know what Loki told you, and I don’t know why Ruby insists she can read him like an open book, but there’s no way in hell you’re going on a field-trip”.

Melody spread her arms in what she hoped looked like a come at me gesture, and straightened up. “We have to finish this ourselves. The Weapon X program, everything- we’ve been looking into it for months now and have found more dirt on it than SHIELD has in the same amount of time! We’re one-upping you! I don’t trust Loki-”

“Then why are you following him!?”

“How else would we find her location!? After she was dead, and they dumped her body on your doorstep for someone to step on? Loki’s not the most reliable source out there, but it’s a source”.

“AJ”, Lily started nervously, leaning to the side to be closer to their leader. “Maybe they have a point-”

“We got orders”, she interjected, listlessly. “So, follow them”.

“But Aje-”

Anael elbowed the armored girl in the side- hard -and she reluctantly fell silent. Her father, in his War Machine outfit, looked back at her briefly.

“With all due respect, we kinda made a group pact to kill Kane”, Dan said flatly (the Avengers probably didn’t remember his name). “We’re going to”.
Deadpool raised a hand, the other holding his sword. “If I may weigh in-”

“Dad, your moral compass is, like, way screwed”, Noah cut in, exasperatedly. “Are you seriously going to tell us that we shouldn’t get revenge, like you did?”

There was a pause, in which Spiderman and a few other heroes turned to look at the former(?) mercenary, incredulously.

Deadpool slowly put his hand down. He shrugged. “Yeah, well, it’s bad parenting if you let your kids go around stabbing people- so proud, by the way”.

Melody, like always, couldn’t tell if Uncle Wade was being serious. She couldn’t tell which she would prefer, either. She settled with ignoring that particular statement entirely, and looking her father directly in the eyes.

“All I’ve ever wanted was to prove you wrong”, she said, evenly. “I wanted to show you that we- that I - could help. That we weren’t little kids anymore, who didn’t understand what not to touch. That’s what I was trying to do this whole damn time”.

“So far all you’ve done is prove me right”, Tony said.

Melody could handle the anger. She’d been handling the anger for ten years, ever since she peered into his mind by accident and saw all the ugly thoughts he’d been hiding away. Like resentment, and fear, and the rage. The thoughts of how mad he was that she didn’t listen, how she never listened.

Melody couldn’t handle the sadness. She’d known she’d disappointed him, but had never clearly heard it in his voice until now- the weight Tony had put on her, knowingly or unknowingly, and how much better he’d expected her to be than him.

She saw red.

“Oh, shit-” said Aiden, and then both sides were charging one another.
Melody’s feet left the ground and her gut seemed to contract in on itself when she threw up her hands- her arms were shaky, the shields a little weaker than they would normally be, but it was enough to stop three ICER bullets from hitting Tem and Izzy in the chest.

Iron Man spiraled into the air to meet her, and a sliver of her concentration went to deflecting repulsor blasts and dodging attacks.

On the ground, the rest weren’t fairing much better- there were too many of them, and the teens were still outnumbered by at least five people.

Tem had engaged Black Widow in hand-to-hand combat. That in itself wouldn’t have been too bad, but Ella and James kept bringing up the rear and getting in her blindspots. Melody knew Tem was good- maybe better. But there was no way she’d last long surrounded on all sides.

Ella went to roundhouse kick the girl in her unprotected back, when one of her other sisters (her name might’ve been Anastasia) intercepted. Anastasia’s twin, Irina, tackled James around the waist when he tried to go to his sibling’s aid.

I love them already, Melody thought dryly, dodging a punch from Tony’s iron fist. She almost ran directly into Uncle Rhodey, who was about to sneak up on her. His daughter hovered behind him, unsure of what to do.

Riley, Uncle Sam, and Aunt Mira were currently chasing each other around, mid-air. Riley’s eyes were beginning to look wide and panicked.

“Look out!” Kara shouted. Her own wings (flesh and feathers compared to metal and complex circuitry), folded as she swooped down and knocked Mira off-course.

Momentarily relieved, Riley ducked to the side and flew around the building, out of sight. After a moment, his parents followed close behind.

“Nice work, Seraph!” Wanda called, where Deadpool and AJ had ganged up on her. She pumped a fist in the air and almost got that arm taken off by a tomahawk. “Hey!”
“Focus!” Kara shouted. She made to dive again, and was cut off by Alec (it was kind of scary how many people could fly, respectively).

Izzy and Bucky were fist-fighting. Melody had no idea which of their arms was stronger, but since Uncle Bucky’s was vibranium, she was willing to bet her friend’s wouldn’t hold up nearly as well. Katya was being held back from her daughter and long-term fiancé by Marie, Skye, Mark, and Elisabet, who were trying to employ the use of their abilities without hurting her.

Not that Katya seemed to be having any trouble. For a woman who didn’t really have any superpowers herself, she was fast. Like Aunt Nat.

Melody cringed. That made her extra-dangerous.

Jessie was fighting her father, her mother, and Maggie. The blonde had resorted to absorbing all the hits with her shield; unable to take offense when pinned down. Jace looked like he wanted to help her, but he was too busy blocking Thor’s lightning strikes and ignoring any snide comments Loki was making.

Saleitha and Kat weren’t fighting with their weapons, and were instead using magic to hurl cars and the odd trashcan at one another.

“Liberty needs back-up!” Melody said into the comms they’d brought with them (overkill in the vans, but not bad when in the field. If this counted as a field).

“And the names!” Tony said, “Did you pick those out yourselves?”

One of the shields surrounding her shattered when Rhodey hit it with his shoulder-gun, and Lily yelped a guilty, “Sorry!” when she clocked her in the jaw.

“Omnia!” Aiden shouted, below.

He and his father were using their bows as staffs, and for once the younger archer seemed grateful for the rigorous (and extensive) training Tem had put him through. Elysium and Josh (who were actually Uncle Clint’s niece and nephew, so, what the hell), fired smoke-bomb arrows at his feet, trying to disrupt the rhythm they’d fallen into.
Aunt Wanda, Uncle Vision, and Marya were duking it out together as a really fucked-up family thing. Vision’s attempts to subdue his daughter failed every time he tried (her powers had similar origins to Aunt Wanda’s, and one of the few things that had an effect on the Mind Stone in Vision’s head were the other Infinity Stones).

The only person who seemed to be getting anywhere in taking down Marya (watching her fight Scarlet Witch was pretty redundant, as their blasts cancelled each other out) was Quinn. Out of the threesome, she was probably the one using actual magic.

Tony called Doctor Strange, Quinn’s dad, a “wizard”.

Every once in a while, Christa and Pietro could be seen racing. They were moving so fast they were nothing but blurs.

Clara, Andy, Anael, and Joseph were trying to tag-team the rest of Team X- Noah and Alex were the most preoccupied, which was what was keeping them from rushing to Wanda’s aid. Rafe, Jake, Angie, Dante, Levi, and Dan were doing a pretty good job at holding down the fort, while Ruby and Emma battled with their epic psychic powers.

“Loki!” Thor growled, as he side-stepped a knife. “If you know where Ziva Grey is, tell me! Stop this madness now!”

“Thor, on your left!” Steve warned. Jessie took the opportunity to kick his legs out from under him and he went down with an oof!

T’Challa was currently fighting his two children. It seemed pretty evenly matched despite the difference in experience, and it was clear that Khari and A’yana were trying to avoid releasing the kinetic energy absorbed by their father’s suit.

*One of these days, I really have to meet their Aunt Shuri.*

Melody couldn’t find Scott, Hope, or Joven in the mess, but there was a swarm of ants near one of the Avengers’ vans (Beep Beep? Or was it the Mystery Machine?)
A swarm of ants. There was no way that could be anyone but Ant-Man.

“Khari, I think Yellowjacket might need some help too!” She said, loudly.

“I do!” Joven supplied helpfully. He sounded out of breath. “The ants don’t like me and neither does the asphalt! Which I keep hitting!”

“I’m a little busy!” Khari snapped. “Figure something out!”

“Love you too, bro!”

Izzy looked like she desperately wanted to roll her eyes, but couldn’t, because if she did Bucky would accidently take her head off.

“Speaking of bug-related heroes who need help!” Penny’s voice buzzed. “My boss is really upset, and the side of the base is covered in webbing!”

Melody risked a glance to find that, yes, the right side of the SHIELD base was covered in the sticky, homemade substance. Penny and Uncle Peter were crawling on the side; sticking to the surface and shooting globs of web fluid at each other.

“We still don’t have enough hands for this”, she muttered to herself. With a wave of a hand, she blocked the arc reactor beam coming from Tony’s chest. “Canary?”

“Sorry!” Riley rounded the building and vanished. “Being run down, here!”

“Well, can you shake him off?”

“Would I still be doing this if I could shake him off?”

Melody groaned. This wasn’t what she’d pictured, waking up this morning.
Near another van, Tasha was fighting Kelly in a one-sided match of boxing. Clint’s daughter was better at long-distance than she was at close-range. It didn’t help that Antoine insisted on being there, preventing Tasha from getting any significant space between her and her opponent (which, in hindsight, was probably the idea).

Hellhound and Hulk were going at it with the same viciousness Melody had seen earlier that day, except this time the wolf was getting in some good hits. Aunt Nadia and Adam (who had shifted into a giant spider) were trying to give Banner an edge, but it wasn’t working too well. It seemed the bigger Hellhound got (or maybe the more scared it got), the harder it was to penetrate its skin. All the attacks bounced right off.

Melody was admittedly jealous. She’d taken to flying in fast circles in an attempt to avoid the constant attacks (she’d never told anyone, but protecting herself from multiple hits was exhausting. The engineer had developed a sharp headache that throbbed in the temples and radiated outwards, to the back of her skull).

Nearby, Wanda seemed to be talking to AJ- the leader of SHIELD’s Avengers’ face kept changing. Shifting from angry, to grieving, to confused, to a host of other emotions.

Melody couldn’t relate. She, of course, had three.

“We’re going to lose”. Tem’s voice was low, and matter-of-fact. “We’re holding for now, but we’re still outnumbered. Has anyone made it to Jessie yet? Riley? Penny?”

“Can’t”, Jace panted. “Dad’s not making this easy. How long can they last?”

“Not much longer”.

“Damn”, Melody hissed. “Damn, damn, damn”.

“Mel, c’mon”, Tony insisted. “We can fix this!”

“Is it broken?”
Before he could reply, a sharp ringing sound sliced through the air. The entirety of the fighting slowed to a halt. Even those in the air froze, watching.

AJ had gotten in between Wanda and Deadpool and blocked a strike with her ax. Judging by the angle, it would’ve disarmed Deadlock easily.

“SHIELD’S AVENGERS!” AJ ordered. “Cover their escape!”

The moment of silence seemed to drag on for a long, long time.

“Well, shit”, said Riley. “I did not see that coming”.

“Never look a gift horse in the mouth”, Melody replied. “Let’s go!”

She angled herself towards the vans, ready to drive off, when Wanda shouted, “Wait!”

The middle child of the Wilson family was jumping up and down, waving her arms. She pointed in the direction of the facility. “Jet!”

*Oh. New, new plan.*

“You could’ve finished your sentence, with a harried, “Sorry, Uncle Tony!” Prompting Rhodey to trail after.

The trio of teams streamed towards the SHIELD base, leaving SHIELD’s Avengers to hold off their parents as they did so. Wanda may have been fine with alerting them to a better route, but after they got inside, she clammed up fast.

Distantly, Melody wondered if she was a little bit gay for AJ too, and then immediately focused on something else. There would be time to ponder her love life later.

“It should be in the hangar”, Riley was saying. “Will we all fit?”
“It’ll be like sardines, but yeah”, Jessie said. “I’ve been inside one before, when my Mom took me to work. Just as an aside, I’m not sitting next to Loki”.

“Seating arrangements later!” Melody complained. “Does anyone know the way to the hangar, because the agents won’t be very happy with us”.

Saleitha shook her head. “I casted a weak sleep spell. They should be down for the count until we can make our getaway”.

“…You are terrifying, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told”.

“Weirdly powerful magic, aside”, Jace said. “Can anyone fly a jet?”

“I can”, Tem, Izzy, Elisabet, Irina, and Anastasia all said, in unison. Which, Melody wasn’t going to lie, was more than a little creepy.

“What’s going to happen to AJ and her team?” Kara asked, abruptly. She’d started wringing her hands, a nervous tick.

No one answered. No one seemed to know how.

“They’ll be fine”, Penny ground out, and even she didn’t sound convinced. “Loki, it’s time for you to fess up. Where’s Ziva Grey?”

Melody was prepared for resistance. Possibly a snarky comment. Instead, he told them, and she was so surprised that she almost stopped running entirely.

Ziva Grey was being held in a Weapon X base, in Greenland. In the middle of nowhere.
Noah hummed, noncommittally. “Greenland? Unexpected”.

Hellhound barked. Melody was amazed that it fit in the hallway, and hoped it wasn’t trampling any unconscious agents or fellow teammates.

“It doesn’t matter”, Tem said. “What matters is that the flight to Greenland is roughly five hours and thirty minutes, which means we have to be ready when we get there”.

“You’re not exactly our specialty”.

“There’s no time like the present”.

Melody nodded. “We’ll recheck ammo inside. Aiden, Tasha, did you two use any arrows? I sincerely hope not”.

“I was tempted, but my quiver’s full”, Aiden said. “Sis?”

“Me too. Does great aim run in the Barton family?”

“I guess?”

She opened her mouth to say that, no, stupidity ran in the Barton family, when they skidded into the hangar and found the jet.

It was a beauty. She hoped she wasn’t openly drooling.

“Everyone on”, Penny said. “We need to hurry. Ziva’s waited long enough for someone to come rescue her”.

Saleitha’s mouth was set into a grim line as they boarded their mode of transportation. There was excitement in her gaze as well, as though the idea of going in there and kicking the asses of her mother’s kidnappers was an enjoyable pastime.
Melody supposed it was. She let it be.

“Alright”, Tem said, as she climbed into the pilot’s seat and flipped a few switches. “Who’s ready to go and do some superhero-y things?”

“Superhero-y things?” Aiden deadpanned. “I don’t know her”.

Tasha gave her twin a pity snort. Joven laughed genuinely (because he was a giant dork), and Izzy’s head dropped into her metal palm.

There was a brief pause. Loki sighed.

“This is going to be a long flight, isn’t it?” Jessie asked.
Chapter 40

Jessie was both right, and wrong about it being a long flight.

Melody spent most of her time flitting back and forth between her teammates (Tem insisted she was fine, but it was Izzy’s terrifying death glare that finally got the genius to leave them alone). Jace was standing with Saleitha and Loki, who seemed to be giving them an explanation for how he knew Ziva’s location (Melody didn’t stay to stick around and chat about that. She had enough of her own family drama to deal with). Brian- or, more aptly Hellhound -was curled up as close to the cockpit as it could get. Because the wolf was so big the space was more limited than it would normally be, which was bad enough, but since no one wanted to go near the beast they were smushed into groups. Aiden had taken it upon himself to sit down near one massive paw; busied with cleaning his arrows.

Melody spent what remained talking to Penny and the Wilson sisters, as well as Ruby (Team X had Noah as the leader, Wanda and Alex as the unofficial leaders, and the psychic as the unofficial, unofficial leader). They talked battle-strategy, although it was clear they were trying their best to wing it.

“It would help if we had blueprints”, Alex said, unhappily. “That way we would know the floors, and what the inside of the building looks like. Maybe we could even figure out where Ziva’s being held- that’s how AJ and the rest of SHIELD’s Avengers knew how to rescue Belladonna Howle”. She cringed at the reminder of Ajax’s daughter and her crew.

Melody understood. The group were certified SHIELD employees, and helping them had been akin to breaking the law. Coulson could hardly write them slips for detention and call it a day. Fury would probably get involved. Maybe even used-to-be Secretary Ross, who was an asshole (according to Tony, but since the Accords days, no one talked about him much).

“I don’t suppose Loki knows?” Melody asked. She made no attempt to hide the bitterness from her tone when she voiced the question.

Penny shrugged helplessly. For a girl who constantly seemed like she was under a lot of pressure, she had a surprisingly decent level head. “Maybe. Does anyone want to actually go over there and ask?”

“This plane is miniscule by even your pitiful standards, and I am a god”, Loki said, roughly a few feet to the right. He sounded like he was deeply regretting allowing a bunch of adolescent children to rescue him (Melody suspected desperation). “I can hear everything you’re saying”.
“Yeah”, Joven agreed, despairingly. “There’s no privacy”.

Wanda gave him an amused look, to which he muttered, quietly, “I have to pee”.

Loki ignored that. “You said you wanted to know the schematics of the building?”

“Holy shit, you know what schematics are?”

That was definitely regret on his face. Melody hoped that whether their parents believed they were being mind-controlled or not, they knew that Thor’s brother was having a terrible time.

Loki never got the chance to answer, or perhaps turn her into a frog in retaliation. Marya opened one of her portals and Riley dropped in, wings folding before they could smack anyone in the face (monstrosities that size could give any self-respecting passenger a concussion. Except maybe Hellhound, because it looked less than impressed).

“I ripped out the communications”, he said, out of breath. “They shouldn’t be able to track us now, but I have no idea how far they got before I was finished”.

Saleitha cracked her knuckles, despite the fact she was looking a little pale. “I can hide the jet, just give me a second-”

“You’ll overexert yourself”, Loki interrupted, tersely. “I’ll do it”.

Everyone stared at him. A few were smart enough to do it subtly, but others had their jaws hanging open and hitting the floor.

The sorceress hesitated. “…Okay”.

Melody considered the idea that he might be playing them, but eventually decided not to look into it too much. He didn’t want to go back to prison as much as they didn’t want to be found by their parents. Therefore, Loki had no ulterior motives for hiding them.
“Anyway”, Penny said. She fidgeted awkwardly. “…Schematics?”

“Right”. Noah pulled down the hood of her costume and ran a nervous hand through her hair. “Drop some knowledge, God of Mischief”.

So, the flight went pretty quickly for Melody. For everyone else, however, who spent the majority of the five hours twiddling their thumbs and obsessively checking to see if their gear worked properly, it probably felt like days.

“Whoa”. Tem’s low voice caught her attention, from where they were proofing the plan for the trillionth time. “Uh, Mel? You might want to take a look at this”.

Melody bit her lip and obliged, leaning over the pilot and co-pilot’s seat. It was dark outside in Greenland, but the Weapon X facility was well-lit, and seeing it in the flesh versus Loki describing it were two very, very different things.

It reminded her of a concrete-and-iron skyscraper. There were only a few windows, and she had a feeling anyone on the outside couldn’t see through. More than a few guards, all dressed in black and toting huge guns, paced the outside in the ice and snow. The entrance doors were big, hulking things that reminded Melody of a bunker.

“Oh, yeah”, Noah, who had come up behind her, whistled. “That’s a home base if I ever saw one. Ruby?”

The tiny redhead scurried over. “What?”

“Is Kane inside?” At Saleitha’s glare, she amended, “and Ziva”.

Ruby frowned and squinted at the building before them. Her forehead scrunched up, and then her expression cleared. The grin she gave Noah was fierce, and a chill shot down Melody’s spine. It should’ve been illegal for the kid to look that scary.

“He’s inside”, she said. “Ziva, too”.
“Really?” Saleitha no longer looked angry—she sounded so hopeful that even Loki glanced away from her, although he was looking anxious himself.

Ruby nodded. “I’m sure of it. I have no idea where she’s being held, though, and that place is huge. We’ll have to split up”.

Melody squared her shoulders and spun on her heel to face their gaggle of runaways.

“Alright”, she declared. “Here’s the plan- Wanda, Noah, Alex, Hellhound, Tem and Co., Jessie, and Izzy are going to storm the front. Show no mercy against these sons of bitches. If you don’t want to kill anyone, don’t kill anyone, but make sure they stay down. Understood?”

Jessie mock-saluted. The Wilsons exchanged knowing looks, and Tem and her sisters whispered to each other in rapid-fire Russian. She had no idea if Hellhound really got it, but it growled low in its throat, and she chose to take that as a good sign.

Ruby picked up where she left off. “Me, Saleitha, Loki, Melody, Kara, Jace, Penny, Joven, and Marie will enter through the roof. We’ll work our way down and see if we can find Ziva in the upper floors. Joven, so help me, do you still have to go to the bathroom?”

“No”, he said reluctantly.

Melody grimaced in disgust.

“Everyone else-” Noah cleared her throat. “Everyone else, Marya will create a portal and get you into the middle of the building. Work your way down. We need to hit this from all sides. Got it?”

Dan flashed a thumbs-up. Levi grabbed his boyfriend by the shoulders and pulled him in for a kiss, uncaring of the audience. When they finally separated, he glowered at the looks they were receiving.

“What?” He asked. “Just in case we die. That’s a thing, right?”
Melody’s heart squeezed. She honestly hadn’t considered the possibility of any of them dying on this mission. Although now that she thought about it, it seemed suicidal.

“Yeah, okay”, she sighed. “Say your goodbyes- just in case, of course. There’s a chance we’ll get out fine and can stop for shawarma on the way home”.

Wanda and Penny embraced. Aiden clapped his sister on the back and she punched him in the side. Khari and A’yana exchanged a few words in Xhosa, and Tem, Izzy, Elisabet, Irina, and Anastasia joined hands solemnly.

Jessie wandered over to Jace and smiled. A blush colored the boy’s face when she kissed him on the cheek, and then went to stand next to Melody.

She arched an eyebrow and leaned in to whisper, “Uh, what was that?”

Jessie shrugged. She was blushing as well. “Just a…thing”.

“Riiight”.

“…Do you really think we’re gonna die, Mel?”

At their feet, Hellhound rumbled and nudged the engineer’s leg with its nose. Melody crouched down and started scratching its ears.

“Not if I can help it”, she said. “Let’s kick some ass and take some names. Agreed?”

The blonde stared at her for a minute, then smiled. “Hell yes”.

“You’re not gonna kiss me too, are you?”

She squawked in protest and made to smack her, and Melody lithely ducked out of the way with a cry of, “Kidding, kidding!”
Izzy got out of the seat as Tem guided the jet towards the ground. She ruffled Ruby’s hair as she walked past and allowed Riley to pull her into a one-armed hug.

“We’ll take care of things down here”, Jessie promised, before following her best friend outside as the door lowered. “Make sure you do the same up there!”

Melody snorted. “Wouldn’t dream of doing anything else!”

As she joined her search party to find and rescue Ziva Grey, she couldn’t but wonder if something was about to change— for better or for worse.

They put their ride into stealth mode and flew up to the roof (a few people had to be carried, but Loki took it with dignity and Joven didn’t stammer and drop Saleitha).

Already, there were gunshots, yelling, and explosions coming from the ground. Melody forced herself to block out the sounds and watched Jace saw a hole in the concrete with Sumarbrander (it reminded her of cheesy cartoons).

“It’s possible there’ll be angry enemies when we finally get through”, he grunted, as the sword cut through the substance like butter. “There’s also a very real possibility that this could be a storage closet, and we’re way off our target”.

Saleitha rolled her eyes. “Don’t be pessimistic”.

“Et tu, Brutus? You’re, like, the most pessimistic person I know”.

Melody smirked. “Besides Izzy?”

A pause.

“Besides Izzy”, he acquiesced. “This is gonna be a good time”.
As if to prove Jace’s point, the concrete fell away to reveal a perfectly good opening in the ceiling. When no one started immediately shooting at them, Melody leapt down and onto the floor. She was instantly thankful for the heating in the place, but that was before she got tackled from behind and her throat was almost ripped out.

“What the hell!?” She shouted, kicking off her attacker and surrounding them with a shield. Last Mel checked, Weapon X operatives didn’t pounce like animals and use brute strength- she was probably going to have bruises for weeks!

“Omnia?” Jace called. “What’s going on down there?”

Melody blew air out of her cheeks. “Hang on a sec! Don’t come down!” She stood up carefully and eyed her surroundings- it looked like a small, rectangular, white room.

The only things in it were a cot and a sliding door that was firmly closed. There was a long window made of one-way glass, and she spent a good minute looking dumbly at her reflection, before examining its inhabitant.

It was a woman, with dark hair that’d been beautiful once, but was now severely disheveled. Her complexion was light brown and sallow, either from malnutrition or an illness of some kind, and her eyes were amber and unfocused. She was dressed in normal clothes that looked like they hadn’t been washed in months. The left sleeve was rolled up to reveal a series of puncture wounds that made Melody nauseous.

“Oh, my god”, she said. “Ziva Grey?”

Ziva flinched at the sound of her name. “Who are you?” She demanded, voice wrecked.

“Uh- I’m Omnia? We’re here to rescue you!”

At that, the Asgardian wavered. “Rescue…me?”

Before Melody could reply, Loki and Saleitha dropped down, almost landing on top of one another. She glanced in between the three and hesitantly lowered the barrier (she was at least 85% sure she wouldn’t attack again).

Saleitha took one look at her mother and rushed to her. “Mom!”

Ziva half-caught her, and half-stumbled and hit the wall. She wrapped both arms tightly around her daughter and buried her face in her hair; shoulders shaking.

Melody felt like she should leave. She settled with backing towards the door, and when Saleitha finally pulled away, she was scrubbing tears from her eyes.

“We looked everywhere for you!” She cried. “My friends and I-”

Ziva gave the teen a onceover, registering the outfit, and finally looked at Loki (Melody had no idea what’d happened between them, but whatever it was couldn’t have been good).

“You”, she said, and there was grief, anger, and exasperation rolled into that single word. She angled herself in front of Saleitha. “The last time we met, I recall making a vow that if I ever saw you again, I would kill you. Did you have anything to do with this?”

“Not nearly as much as you would think”, he replied dryly. There was a glint in his irises though- a glint that suggested he was happy, or relieved.

Jace dropped down with Sumarbrander in hand, along with the others, and Ziva took one look at the blade and did a doubletake.

“Loki”, she said. “What did you do?”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m attached to the Casket of Ancient Winters”, Saleitha added, unhelpfully.

“What!”? Rage overtook Ziva’s expression, but since she looked too weak to walk more than a few steps, Melody figured she was too weak to strangle Loki.

“I don’t want to impede on the reunion”, she said. “But our friends are downstairs, and I think we
should go and join them”.

“Good idea”, Ruby agreed. Her face was pinched, as though she had a bad headache, or a migraine coming on. “I can hear the fighting. They've found Kane, and it's not going well”.

Well. If that wasn’t just the story of their lives.

When they reached the bottom level; Loki half-carrying Ziva (who reluctantly allowed his help), Ruby was proven right- the fight wasn’t going well.

There was a man in the center of the room, with flint-gray eyes and a mustache. He was crouched behind an entire blockade of Weapon X agents, who were trying to herd him toward the exit (where Dan and Levi waited, blazing with fury).

Melody had never seen him before, but it was obvious that was none other than Alistair Kane.

“Come on, Mom”. Saleitha tugged on her arm. “We have to get you to the jet”.

“As much as I’d like to stay and chat, I think getting out of here is our best option”, Loki said. His gaze was fixated on Kane, also.

Ziva winced as they started moving again, shuffling forward slowly. Melody threw up her hands and surrounded them with a red shield, deflecting bullets and the occasional grenade. She scanned the area for the rest of her friends, heart in her throat, while the others crowded behind her.

The operatives didn’t seem to be doing much damage, as a whole. Hellhound mowed through them viciously; Tem on its back with two handguns. She wasn’t the best marksman in the group by far, but she never missed once, and Jessie was throwing her shield like a deadly frisbee with one arm, the other hanging onto Hound’s tail.

*That can’t be comfortable.*
There was another, younger man, fighting Izzy and the rest of her sisters. He had spiky hair, and thankfully no cybernetic limbs, but he was using some sort of energy- another mutated individual, and Ruby’s eyes widened when she saw him.

“Oh, no”, she said. “Plato”.

“Um”, Jace said nervously, “Who?”

“Plato Kane. His son. Sarah warned us about him. She said she would kill him herself when the time came, but-” She trailed off. “You know what happened to her”.

“Fantastic”, Melody groaned. “Can you guys protect yourselves, and get Ziva out of here? I’m going to go help our friends take this chump down”.

Ruby nodded; lips pressed into a thin line. “Be careful, Mellie”.

“Aren’t I always? And don’t call me that!”

Melody dissolved the shield and shot off, leaving them to fend for themselves and escape. Saleitha had already started flinging guys left and right, when they tried to approach. Jace slammed Sumarbrander into the ground and arc of electricity zapped at least ten who were sneaking up behind Riley.

“Hurry!” He shouted, wings expanding to life as he joined Kara in air-support duty (and Aiden and Tasha, it seemed, who were suspended by Penny’s webbing on the ceiling and firing arrows into the mess).

Wanda was almost to Kane. Melody could see her cutting down those who stood between them, and she was nearly to the line of soldiers.

Marie, Mark, and Skye were doing their best to cover her. Luckily, brute strength, fire, and more shields (combined with invisibility!) made effective weapons.

Noah and Alex had split off and joined the match against Plato. Izzy had resorted to dropping her
sniper rifle and was punching him in the face repeatedly with her metal arm. It was enough for Al to stick him in the side with a bowie knife while he was distracted.

Plato howled in pain. Melody swooped down and kicked him in the face, relishing the feeling of his nose breaking beneath her boots.

Rafe, Angie, and Dante were picking off people trying to escape. Dante’s Wendigo form was in full-effect, and the sight (while admittedly kind of cool), was petrifying.

Joven, Khari, and A’yana were back-to-back. Melody hadn’t expected them to fight well together, but the trio were kicking a lot of ass, so she wasn’t complaining.

Penny was crawling on the walls and webbing feet to the floor, giving Christa ample opportunity to zoom past and land punches to the jaw. Marya was hovering around the room, blue light streaming from her fingers, and she was close enough to reach out and touch one of Kane’s bodyguards when Plato mustered up the strength to blast her away.

“LAMIA!” Jake screamed. He ran to her aid and Melody turned back to Plato, who was bleeding from pretty much every orifice imaginable now.

“You’ll never win”, he said, spitting blood into Elisabet’s face. “You’ll never-”

There was a hissing sound, and the oxygen in the room dropped several degrees. Ice coated Plato’s form, until it was at least five inches thick, and Saleitha stepped around his frozen body holding the Casket of Ancient Winters.

“Sorry”, she said. “He was getting pretty annoying”.

Melody grinned. “I love that thing. Where’s your mom?”

“Loki’s getting her out of here”. Saleitha’s tone suggested she trusted her father to do that much, at the very least, without betraying them.

Izzy examined her red-smeared fist with distaste, and looked up to find Ziva.
“Trickster”, she said, sharply. “Look!”

They looked, and immediately wished they hadn’t.

Ziva was in trouble. The operatives had ganged up on Loki and ripped her away. He was fighting them with knives, and the weak Asgardian was trying to find a gun.

“Mom!” Saleitha shouted.

Wanda broke through the line and drove her sword directly through Alistair Kane’s throat, just as he shot Ziva Grey in the back.

The bang! reverberated in Melody’s ears. Dread coated her tongue.

“No!”

Loki turned around in time to catch her before she hit the floor; blood already soaking through her shirt and staining his hands. Saleitha skidded to a halt in front of them and reached for the wound, but the former prince stopped her with a look.

He shook his head.

She began to scream—loud, and long, and every Weapon X agent who wasn’t already down for the count began to drop like flies. When it tapered off, she began to sob—Ziva’s mouth was moving, but Melody was too far away to hear the words.

She caught a sliver of a thought (something about waking up beside Loki, like she had in Asgard a long, long time ago), and that was all.

Wanda pulled her katana out of Kane’s body with a sickening schlock. She was breathing hard, and when she saw, the blade clattered out of her hands.
Melody’s knees gave out. She covered her mouth.

Ziva Grey was dead.
Chapter 41

The flight home was spent in silence.

Tem put the jet on autopilot and sat on the floor; legs pulled up to her chest. Hellhound curled around her and rested its head by her feet (Melody didn’t know if it understood what sadness was, but at the very least, it knew something bad had happened. It was cruel that one of Brian’s lessons on other emotions included grief).

Saleitha sat with her mother’s body, which was wrapped in a white sheet Dan had found before they left. She spent at least an hour crying over the corpse, and it took a lot of coaxing from Jace to convince her that it was time to go.

Loki checked out before they did. Melody saw him speaking to Saleitha (saying goodbye?) but she didn’t hear what was being said. No one tried to stop him.

Truthfully, no one had the energy.

Jace was on Saleitha’s other side; unable to look at where the blood had soaked through Ziva’s makeshift shroud. He looked like he wanted to comfort her, but had no idea how.

Melody wanted to apologize as much as she wanted to cry.

It had all led up to this- becoming vigilantes, hunting Weapon X, trying to live up to the legacy of the Avengers. And in the end, they’d failed their biggest mission yet.

Wanda had her head in her hands. Her sword lay on the floor next to her. She probably felt guilty as well, if not more than Mel- maybe if she’d been faster, then Kane would’ve died before pulling that trigger.

It was dangerous to think like that.

“I don’t blame any of you”, Saleitha started, abruptly. She choked off and started to shake violently. “I d-don’t blame-” The sorceress began to sob, loudly, and Penny knelt down and
hugged her tightly. After a moment, the rest of the Secret Avengers gathered around and huddled close to their teammate.

Jace stood to give them some space. His expression was drawn and pale. For a second Melody thought he was going to speak, but instead all he did was turn and punch the side of the jet as hard as possible.

The metal dented in the shape of his fist. He stood there, frozen, until Jessie ventured over and pulled him away.

“How are we going to explain this?” She whispered. “Ziva- and no Loki”.

“We were right”, Melody said listlessly. “Just…not good enough, I suppose”.

Saleitha shook her head. She couldn’t quite tell which part of the sentence she was supposed to be disagreeing with, and the brunette wasn’t going to ask.

“You guys are my best friends”, she rasped. “You tried”.

Izzy didn’t answer, and peered outside. She’d taken off her mask and was holding it limply in one hand. “We’re almost home”.

The Compound. Where their pissed, worried parents would be waiting.

So far all you’ve done is prove me right.

Melody winced. Her eyes burned, so she clenched her fists to distract from the sting. There was no way she was crying in front of them, not after all that’d happened.

Marya was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with her cousin, grimly. “What are we going to do?” She asked. “What are they going to say when they see us?”

Tem grunted. Hellhound made an unhappy noise, and she forced a weak smile.
“We need you to change back into Brian”, she said, gently. “The Avengers…I don’t know what the Avengers will do”.

Melody scowled. “Who cares? Let’s show them it’s not as dangerous as they think”.

The wolf barked softly. She couldn’t tell if it was grateful or not.

When the jet landed, there wasn’t anyone jumping to get off. Defeat soured the taste of victory—they’d won on one front and lost on the other, and to slink out with their tails between their legs was a shameful return (all of that talk about how they knew where Ziva was, and they still couldn’t save her).

The doors opened. They stared at the exit collectively, and Melody heaved a colossal sigh. It was time she really took one for the team.

“Wait for my signal”, she said. “You’ll know when you hear it. ‘Kay?”

Penny hesitated, then nodded. Noah shrugged noncommittally. She hadn’t removed her cowl, and her best guess was because she didn’t want anyone to see her crying.

Melody figured it wasn’t going to get better than that, so she cleared her throat and walked briskly outside, where the Avengers waited.

“You were gone all night”, Tony said flatly. “So. Where is she?”

His tone suggested that he, in no way, thought Loki had been telling the truth about Ziva’s whereabouts. Melody gulped and found herself nearly wishing he was right.

(Maybe if we hadn’t found her, she wouldn’t be gone).

“Dead”, she heard herself say.
Tony stopped whatever rant he was about to start in sheer surprise. “…What?”

“She’s dead”.

“Dead?”

“Kane shot her as we were leaving. Wanda killed him”.

Melody couldn’t look at them. It occurred to her that she really had no idea what the signal was supposed to be, but the others were coming out behind her anyway. They’d probably realized the same thing and had figured they shouldn’t wait.

Ziva’s body was hovering behind Saleitha as she walked. Thor inhaled sharply (Mel had forgotten he’d been friends with her), and started forward, ignoring the hasty, “Thor”, from Uncle Steve.

Saleitha cringed when she saw him coming, but all the God of Thunder did was put a hand on her shoulder and pull her in for an embrace. There was a pause where her arms hung limply by her sides, until she cautiously returned the gesture.

Jace’s face crumpled the instant his mother approached. Melody had to look away and forced herself to turn back to her own parents.

Brian was covered by a shock blanket, and Tem was helping him limp down the ramp. Bruce and Betty rushed to help, and she let them half-carry their son away, before sitting down right there. It was like the redhead had given up. After a moment, Natasha sat down next to her, shoulder to shoulder.

Pepper shoved past Tony and hugged Melody tightly. All the breath left the brunette’s lungs in a whoosh, and her eyes started to burn again.

*Please don’t cry, please don’t cry, please don’t cry.*

One by one, all the kids were greeted by their parents. Things weren’t forgiven, at least she didn’t think so (not yet, anyway), but maybe this was a sign.
Tony still wasn’t making eye-contact with her.

The next week was a quiet one.

The Avengers managed to get them pardoned by SHIELD, and Saleitha shut herself in her room and started planning Ziva’s funeral. The people she allowed inside to help were Thor and Jace, who sometimes spent hours upon hours in there in intervals.

Melody wondered if they talked about Loki. Loki seemed like he would be the elephant in the room when it came to the three of them.

At some point, the Wilson family must’ve sat down in their apartment and talked everything out. The next time Wanda came over to the Compound with Noah and Alex (a day or two after they returned), they were happier. Lighter. It wasn’t a perfect arrangement, but it was better.

Punishments never really came up, although Steve was borderline obsessive now, when he wanted to know where they were (not that they really went anywhere anymore). Jessie gave him the locations freely, and when she was going to the old base, she told him she was going to the old base. Her shield was hanging on her wall, out in the open.

Melody was never sure if Jessie took him to that base, and if she had, the genius sincerely hoped the blonde had taken the time to delete the Internet history off the laptop. There was way too much “research” on it, involving the origins of Loki’s weird, scary monster children. And a few memes about it.

Pepper and Melody eventually made up, after a tearful conversation. The fight hadn’t really involved her, but they traded apologies anyway, and at the end her mother promised that Tony was sorry.

(She wouldn’t believe it until she heard it for herself).

For the most part, Melody and her dad ignored and avoided each other like they always had. It was quietly not-talked about in their respective circle of friends and family.
Tem and Izzy drove their sisters to the airport to see them off, a few hours after the Fantastic Four’s kids were picked up by their parents and driven home. They came back with reddened eyes and spent the next few hours training, taking out their frustrations on punching bags and any robotic dummies Tony invented.

(Izzy’s arm did a lot of damage when she wanted it to).

Riley and Sam went flying, because Sam wanted to see how his son’s wings worked, when he wasn’t chasing him around a SHIELD facility. The whole mercenary-thing was a topic that went undisussed.

There was no word from Fury’s chosen Avengers. As far as Melody was concerned, no one had asked, either because they were embarrassed, or because they were guilty.

(Ruby started visiting her mother’s grave. Sometimes Bucky and Katya went with her, and sometimes they didn’t. She left flowers every trip).

On the news, there were stories of Spiderman getting a sidekick- a girl with a similar suit and similar powers, who was undoubtedly Penny.

Scott and Hope didn’t take away Joven’s Yellowjacket suit. It sat in the corner of his room and gathered dust until he put it back on and took it for a run. As though what the Lang family needed was another pet ant (Antony III, not related to Antony II, which belonged to Cassie Lang specifically).

T’Challa and Nakia left for Wakanda, and took Khari and A’yana with them. The brother-sister duo face-timed as often as they could, and Melody knew they were happy to be home (she missed them, though. They were a fierce, undeniably formidable duo).

Aunt Wanda, Vision, and Marya made peprikash, which wasn’t as good as Vision would’ve hoped it to be. Christa and Pietro raced; trying to see who was faster. According to Aunt Nadia, the judge, the results were always inconclusive.

Brian and Bruce came to an agreement. They started running small tests on Hellhound- no more bloodwork, but different things. Like how fast it could run, and how strong it was, and their relationship seemed to improve little by little.
No one talked about the fall of Weapon X, or the cause of Ziva’s demise. No one told them it wasn’t their fault, and Melody didn’t like to read too much into that.

No one talked about their teams anymore, either. That was kind of worse.

Melody was alone in the Compound when Tony finally confronted her (confronted wasn’t exactly the right word, though. He just walked in and sat down; a StarkPad balanced perfectly on one knee. He was playing Angry Birds and Melody kept watching her episode of Law & Order: SUV).

“I should’ve told you, Mel”, he said, finally, and turned the game off.

Because Melody understood social cues (Jessie had gone great lengths to teach her, in case one of them ever tried to apologize), she reached over and flicked off the TV. Hopefully FRIDAY would record the show, but probably not, because the AI had seemed a little salty ever since their return (could AIs be salty?)

She swallowed thickly. “About SHIELD wanting to train us, or the other thing?”

“Both”. He sighed and ran a hand over his face. There were dark bags under his eyes, evidence of how long their fight had really been going on for. “I wanted to protect you, but that wasn’t the way to do it. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have told me about your…powers, though. I’m also sorry you felt like you couldn’t”.

Melody rolled her eyes and started twiddling her thumbs. “You can’t put everything on yourself, Dad”, she retorted, mostly because there was plenty of patented Stark Guilt™ to go around, and the teen was practically drowning in it. “I know I should’ve told you. I wanted you to be proud of me, but instead all I did was make more and more bad decisions. I’m sorry for that, but not for helping people”.

Tony hummed. A smirk was starting to tug at the corners of his lips. “Well, you did exactly what I would do, so it would be hypocritical. But, kiddo, the whole not-trusting-your-father, thing? That’s always gonna be on me. You were seven”.

“I was seven”, Melody agreed. “Seven, and really stupid”.


“If it makes you feel any better, I shouldn’t have taken you there in the first place. Bruce regrets it just as much. There’s not a day that goes by he doesn’t wish he’d never allowed Brian to step foot out the door that morning”.

(Melody remembered- he’d bounced to the car and tripped over his shoes, because seven-year-old Brian was constantly fumbling).

“He’s okay, now. It may not look like it, but he is. I am, too- well, sort of”.

Tony snorted. “I gathered that. I know I didn’t listen before, but I can now. That day in the hospital, when Jessie said you could read people’s thoughts…that was when they first developed, right? And they just never went away?”

Melody hesitated, then acquiesced. She may have been one of the pettiest bitches out there, but she and her father were tied for first place. If he could stop, then she could too.

(She hated losing).

“Yeah”, Mel admitted. “The shields came later, and so did the telekinesis. I accidentally threw Aiden into an armchair while we were fighting”.

“Seriously? And wait- you have telekinesis?”

“Uh huh. I look back on it, and it’s pretty funny”.

He was smiling all the way, now, but not laughing. “I know you’re not going to like this, but we should run a few tests. Just to make sure the stuff isn’t hurting you”.

Melody groaned and flopped back against the cushions, glaring balefully at the paused screen. “You worry too much”.

“I’m your dad”. Tony ruffled her hair and she batted his hand away with a cry of protest. His eyes
were uncharacteristically glassy, like he was going to start blubbering (if he did, she would as well, and that sucked). “I’m always gonna worry”.

Her heart felt like it was in her throat. In hindsight, the question was going to be asked, one way or another, and perhaps not by her.

“Did- did we make the wrong choice?”

He stopped, and frowned. “What?”

“Rescuing Saleitha’s mother. Did we make the wrong choice?”

(Melody had nightmares about the gunshot, and Saleitha’s screaming).

Tony was silent for a long, long moment. There was a brief period where Melody was convinced he wasn’t going to answer, when he slung an arm around her and squeezed.

“No, Mellie”, he said. “You didn’t make the wrong choice. Admittedly, I’m not happy about Loki getting away, but we’ve beaten the son of a bitch before. We can beat him again”.

She grunted and pressed her face into Tony’s shoulder (when was the last time she’d hugged her father? Was it months ago?) “You know, I think he loved her”.

“Who? Ziva?”

“Yeah. You didn’t see the look on his face- when she died, I mean”.

“Well, Loki’s a sick bastard, but he had, like, five feelings. Probably”. He sounded almost unsure, as though he didn’t fully believe that himself. “I wouldn’t be surprised if at least a few of those went into Ziva Grey, or Sigyn, or whatever she called herself. Thor mentioned that they were pretty close as kids. The whole childhood friend, trope. But, I think that’s enough talking about the enemy’s love life- there’s another thing I need to talk to you about, that doesn’t involve any apologies or emotional baggage. Maybe”.

She cringed and pulled away. “Is it how long I’m going to be grounded for?”

He gave her a look. She grinned sheepishly.

“Close, but no”, Tony said wryly. “Your mom and I are still working that bit out. It’s about your team. What’d you call it? The Junior Avengers?”

But you’re the leader of your team- the Next Avengers, hell, the Junior Avengers since we’re all kids.

“That’s it”. Melody hadn’t thought about that moment in a while. “The Junior Avengers. It was off of something Marya said, before they got kidnapped by the program. We were solidified in our united front to rescue them”.

It was a hell of an origin story, she would give it that.

He nodded, then leaned over to pick up a manila folder off the coffee table- Melody had seen it when she came in, but hadn’t dared look at it.

Fear started building in her stomach. “Are you…disbanding us?”

Tony turned the folder in his hands a couple of times; contemplatively. “I would, only I know you would go and find a way to keep doing it, with or without my blessing. Look- I’m never going to wish my lifestyle on you. I’ll always be proud of you, but not for this. However, if I can’t stop you, the least I can do is make sure none of you do anything stupid”.

Melody huffed. She felt the strange urge to snicker. “That was Khari’s job. What did he say, before he left for Wakanda? ‘If I hear you’re running around in costumes without me, I’ll fly back myself to lecture you in person’. He was pretty responsible for a teenaged vigilante, huh?”

“Khari’s got the option to be in on this too, when he and his sister visit. I’ve already got the go-ahead from King T’Challa and Queen Nakia, as well as the rest of the Avengers. Providing if your friends agree”.
“…Agree? To what?” Melody wished she could trust the strange document in his hands, but there had been many unfriendly documents in the past year. Documents that held more power than they should have, because of what they were about, and because of what they led to—whether it was to Ziva, or the doomed Asclepius.

Tony didn’t look upset, so she took that as a good sign.

“A training program, of sorts”, he explained. “I’ll give you time to think about it, and we’re still working out some of the rough patches, but Steve and I think it’ll be a good opportunity to train young, superpowered individuals. To make a legacy”.

Tony handed her the folder and Melody took it with numb fingers.

A part of the girl didn’t want to see its contents for fear of what they would mean, but Iron Man was looking at his daughter expectantly, and she despised seeing that expression when it was applied to her. No matter the context (which was most likely why she got in trouble so often).

Mel enjoyed defying all expectations for as long as humanly possible. And, well, she wasn’t fully human, was she?

She bit her lip and opened it before she could change her mind, and the title jumped out from the page in bold print.

**AVENGERS MANSION**

Melody’s eyes widened, and she looked to her father in shock. “Are you serious?”

Tony stood and started making his way to the door. “Like I said, think about it. I have to go talk to Bruce about science-bro things. Although, I do need your answer in a couple days, otherwise Fury won’t be on board”. He winked, then let the door shut behind him.

She gazed down at the file and rummaged for her phone to snap a picture. Her stomach felt like it was contracting in on itself as she created a caption (you in?) and hit send— if this worked, they could receive proper training, and their parents would know, and they would meet other kids like them and help one another.
Maybe, this could be okay.

Not even a minute later, the phone beeped with Jessie’s reply.

- Do you even have to ask?
Saleitha received a condolence letter from Loki on the day of her mother’s funeral.

The card - a small, white envelope - wasn’t signed, but she didn’t need a signature to figure out who the sender was. The only thing written on it, in frustratingly elegant cursive, was, “in the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity”.

That in itself would just be considered dramatic, or perhaps ominous, but Saleitha saw it for what it really is. The quote was from *The Art of War*, Ziva’s favorite book.

Saleitha summoned a small flame and destroyed the condolence card. The last thing she needed was to explain to SHIELD she was in any sort of contact with Loki, who was still a wanted criminal on several fronts.

*The interrogation would be about as much fun as my first*, she thought, wryly, and almost laughed out loud alone in her bedroom.

The card, while sentimental in their family’s (if you could call it that), weird way, wasn’t what *truly* caught Saleitha’s attention. On the teen’s bedspread, next to where the note originally appeared, was a slim package wrapped in plain brown paper.

She momentarily considered getting someone to make sure there would be no explosives or traps, but she could sense nothing evil within the gift. So, Saleitha discarded the green bow unceremoniously placed on top, and opened it.

Inside was a spear.

It had a golden shaft and a green gem set on the top, with a long blade extending overtop of it. The weapon looked more than six feet in total, and when Saleitha hesitantly picked it up she could feel the magic running through it.

It fit in her hands, as an extension of her arm. Like what Jace and Kat’s swords were for them, or so
she figured by their fighting styles.

Saleitha eyed the paper wrap and it vanished with a wave of her hand. She twisted the spear around in her grip a few times, before casting a small spell to disguise it. It shortened and shrank until it turned into a small, insignificant-looking charm, and the Asgardian fastened it to her bracelet and turned to leave.

*You want to play a game, father?*

Saleitha was unable to stop the resentment that burned in the pit of her stomach.

*Fine. Let’s play.*

The Raft was a high security prison.

AJ was somehow not surprised that Fury or Coulson hadn’t tried to bail them out yet. At least she wasn’t in a straight-jacket, like Adam, Emma, and Kat. The sight of those sickening devices around her friends made her want to scream. It reminded her a little too much of Weapon X, a little too much of Sarah.

When someone *did* come, it was Magnus.

AJ and the others were allowed to change back into the clothes they came in, and through what she assumed was a lot of wheedling, their weapons were also returned.

Magnus walked them down the hallway, as an escort of sorts. It felt unironically like a funeral march, and they all stayed close together.

“Your parents are here to pick you up”, was the only thing he said.

Clara and Anael hesitated, glancing back at AJ as the rest shot off. She huffed and waved them forward. “Go on, already”, she snapped, pretending to be annoyed. “Get out of here”.

AJ watched them reunite with their families with a bitter taste in her mouth. Magnus, who still stood beside her, cut a sideways glance.

“SHIELD’s Avengers has not been disbanded”, he said, eventually. “But, due to recent insubordination”, (his eyes seemed to twinkle at that), “The members are prohibited from staying at any SHIELD facilities, and their clearance level has been knocked down a few pegs”.

“But, did we do the right thing?”

A pause.

“I am not the one you should be asking that to. My opinion is irrelevant”.

AJ grunted, resisting the urge to call bullshit, but let it drop anyway.

She didn’t have anywhere to go. Her mother was dead, her sister was too, and there were no legal guardians willing to take her. Coulson found her on the streets, for god’s sake.

“Ohkay”, she said, finally, with a sigh. “I guess I’ll just find a little apartment to call my own. I think McDonalds is hiring. Maybe I can scrape together some rent money”.

Magnus hummed, but didn’t sound unhappy. “That won’t be necessary, Miss Freeman”. He chuckled, and it was the first time someone said her last name without an added dose of venom. “Your living arrangements have already been taken care of”.

AJ frowned and scanned the people in the tiny office-like room, but no one stood out.

“You said we can’t stay in SHIELD facilities anymore-” the sentence cut off with a strangled choke. Her eyes widened.

There, in the back, was the Wilson family.
Magnus had yet to stop smiling, and he gestured to them. “It took some convincing on their part, but they have agreed to let you stay with them until you turn eighteen. Unless, of course, this is… unsatisfactory”.

His tone suggested he didn’t believe that for a second. AJ had to admit he was right- the old man was definitely smarter than anyone gave him credit for.

Carefully, she moved towards the five, head down and staring very hard at the floor. But, when she managed to lock eyes with Wanda, she smirked and arched an eyebrow.

The last time AJ had seen her, she was suited up and getting on a jet to save Loki’s lady love. Now, Wanda stood there in a flannel shirt, jeans, and sneakers.

Alex hovered next to Vanessa while Noah leaned against a wall, with her arms crossed. She could tell by the looks on their faces, and the weary grin Wanda offered, that they lost someone. It made her stomach drop.

About halfway across the room, Wanda started towards her, and a couple conversations actually died down in mute surprise when they hugged.

“We’ve got your shit in a duffel bag”, she whispered playfully, in her ear. “I didn’t know you listened to MCR in your free time. Do you have an emo playlist?”

AJ shoved Wanda back, only a little roughly. “Hey!”

The younger brunette cackled, slinging an arm through hers and dragging her back towards her parents and siblings. Alex was now grinning as they approached; body pulled taut with excitement, while Noah looked…pleased, for some reason.

“Who?” AJ asked, in a hushed voice, and she reached up to squeeze Wanda’s shoulder. She almost didn’t want to know.

The other girl’s cheerful demeanor diminished instantly, like that was the one question she was hoping she wouldn’t have to answer.
“Saleitha’s mother”, she said, quietly. “We were right, but…too late”.

That last part was heavy with regret. AJ didn’t ask about Saleitha herself, who went through all that trouble to save her mom only to watch her get killed anyway.

*Ain’t that a bitch.*

If there was anything she understood, it was what it was like to see something like that.

“It’s not your fault”, AJ said, anyway. “It’s *none* of your faults”.

Wanda snorted, but it sounded like a sob. Her eyes weren’t watering though (like she would cry in a crowded area like this, especially a prison. Even AJ’s own team didn’t shed tears while they were here, in fear of what the actual criminals would say).

“Hey, I feel sorry for a lot of things that aren’t my fault”, she answered. “It’s who I am. Some people-” her voice faltered, then cracked. “Some people are just doomed to be sorry”.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

The frenemy duo slowed down almost unconsciously; putting some more distance in between them and the Wilsons, so it would take longer to get there.

“Sure”, she agreed, in that way some do when they don’t really mean it. And then, “Thank you. For stalling, I mean. We wouldn’t have made it at all if you hadn’t done that for us”.

AJ bumped her head against Wanda’s and smirked, strangely content.

“Yeah, well”, she said. “I’d do it again”.
The mansion was big, loud, and already filled with teenagers.

“Oh, wow”, Aiden whistled. “Pretty crowded place, huh?”

Melody side-eyed him and grinned (she’d seemed a lot happier since reaching an impasse with her father). “I think it’s awesome. I’m going to go and claim one of the rooms before all the best spots are taken”.

“Mel, we get assigned rooms”.

“That’s what Dad thinks!” The leader of the Junior Avengers shot off without waiting for a reply, and Aiden groaned loudly. That’d be an interesting phone call, later.

The mansion was, indeed, impressive. After Tony and Banner had worked out the kinks and smoothed everything over with Fury, it’d been declared open for business.

Of course, no one had expected the sheer influx of kids to start pouring in.

Tem was standing by her luggage and snapping at her sisters over the phone, in Russian. They weren’t going to be staying at the mansion full-time, but were flying out for a visit, and judging by the few words Aiden could understand they were arguing about NYC traffic.

Jace was talking to Jessie about his latest trip to Asgard, which had thankfully not involved any extremist groups or magic.

“So, I was sparring, right?” He was saying. “And this guy goes to stab me, and I summon a lightning bolt- like, a real lightning bolt. And my grandfather, who’s watching the whole thing, pats my dad on the back and says, ‘he’ll be a great king’”.

Jessie arched an eyebrow, bemused. “Did you know you could summon a lightning bolt?”

“No”, the demigod admitted, and winced. “But it was AWESOME.”
Brian walked past the new couple carrying a couple dozen boxes. Aiden couldn’t tell how he was watching where he was going, and entertained the notion he was going by scent.

_Ugh. Too weird._

All around them, people were getting out of taxis and loading stuff out of vans and trailers alike- he spotted Mark, Skye, and Marie again, who waved.

The Wilson sisters were saying goodbye to Deadpool, and AJ was sitting on Wanda’s suitcase with her arms crossed. Penny, who was standing next to her, whispered something into the older girl’s ear. She smirked.

Aiden felt a shiver go down his spine. Those three as friends would be terrifying, although he got the feeling they were a little…more, than that.

The rest of Team X was scheduled to join them, as well as Khari and A’yana, who were flying directly to the mansion in a week or two. Joven had been bouncing on the heels of his feet ever since receiving the news that his best friends were coming.

Pretty much _everyone_ was coming, and staying in the same place with little to no adult supervision (save for Magnus, who apparently helped put SHIELD’s Avengers together and had been elected the supervisor. Fury and Coulson had recommended him personally).

Aiden could feel himself starting to smile. This was going to be exciting.

“Hey!” Ruby’s voice interrupted his train of thought, and he looked down to find the tiny redhead standing there, expression drawn. “I need to talk to you”.

He frowned, instantly suspicious. “…About what?”

“You know how the Avengers couldn’t look for Ziva because they were investigating something else? And how we were never told what that _was_?”

_Uh oh._
“Yeah…?”

“Well, I heard Aunt Lizzie thinking this morning. I got a name”.

“A name?”

“Yes”. Ruby hadn’t looked that serious since the Weapon X program was still running.

Aiden gulped. “Well, what is it?”

Her eyes, one green and one cyan, glinted like polished stones. “Thanos”.

Chapter End Notes

I hope this was as fun to read as it was to write :)

End Notes

I’m way too attached to this story.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!