Whispers in the Dark

by StellaLuna365

Summary

May and Ben are brutally murdered when HYDRA agents break into Peter Parker's home, seeking the super soldier serum rediscovered by his parents. Now on the run from HYDRA, carrying the formula and desperate to keep it and himself safe, the Avengers take him in for protection. Is he just another job for the Avengers, or will the heroes finally become the family he's always needed?

Meanwhile, HYDRA lurks, and despite the Avengers' overwhelming desire to keep Peter safe, they aren't so easily dissuaded. The adversary is everywhere, and they are just getting started.

PS I apologize for the tag overload; this is my first story on this platform. Please try it and comment!!
“Hey, there,” I said quietly, smiling as the brown and white cat nuzzled up against my hand, purring happily. “What are you doing out here, huh?”

It was way too cold for a cat to be out, so I could only assume it was a stray. It was November in New York City, and the winter was not kind to those without a roof and heating. Unfortunately, I was one of them.

Fifteen and homeless. Yeah, that was going to be great on a college resume.

I sighed, scooping up the cat and nestling her in my lap, where she lounged happily. It felt nice, having something warm draped over my legs. My tattered blanket stuffed in my backpack provided little to no heat.

“Peter!” Someone called. I turned to see my friend Jason coming towards me, holding two cups, grinning.

I smiled, reaching to take the cup he handed me. “Thanks. What kind is it?” I asked, peering into the cup of steaming soup, the thick red sloshing against the sides.

“Tomato,” he said, sliding down next to me. He smiled at the cat stretched out on my lap, one of my hands buried in her fur. “Looks like someone made a friend.”

I smiled, scratching the cat’s ears, laughing lightly as it rolled over in pleasure. I was sitting on the edge of one of the homeless camps I stayed at, on the edge of Queens. This one was my favorite, but I moved every few days. I was leaving today, in fact, for another one a few miles away in Manhattan.

“I kind of want to keep her,” I said quietly. “She doesn’t have a collar.”

“It’s your choice, but don’t forget that it’s one more mouth to feed,” Jason said, clapping me on the shoulder. I sipped at warm tomato soup, wishing the Styrofoam cup would get warmer so I could warm my fingers, too.

“She’s little,” I defended, dipping my finger in the soup and holding it in front of her. She licked it up happily. “She won’t need much.”

Jason smiled. “She’s making you smile, which is rare. So, keep her, if she makes you that happy.”

I blushed. Jason laughed and dropped a hand on my shoulder before wandering back to the heart of the camp, talking to some of the older, more permanent residents.

Jason was an enigma. He was homeless, but he was sharp. He could probably get any job he wanted. He was twenty-one, good-looking, and well-built, so physical labor wouldn’t be a problem either. He refused to get a job, though; why, he never said. He was really good with the rest of the people at the camp; basically, the unofficial leader. He invited me in the first time I stopped by. When I said I wasn’t staying, he seemed disappointed, but told me to stop by every once in a while, so he’d know I was okay.

I’d come by once every few weeks, randomly and without warning, so no one would be able to trace me. Other than that, I traveled from shelter to shelter, never staying more than a week.
If I did, I’d probably be caught.

I hadn’t even done anything wrong, either. Apparently, my parents were super-duper top-secret scientists who’d uncovered earth-shattering information and a new formula for the super serum used on Captain America. It was extremely dangerous information if given to the wrong people.

My parents were scientists for HYDRA. They thought they were trying to replicate the serum to isolate the components of the healing factor, to accelerate modern medicine, but then they found out that HYDRA wanted to use it, in typical supervillain fashion, to take over the world.

Naturally, they were unhappy.

They destroyed their lab and stole all of their research, dropping me off at Aunt May’s and Uncle Ben’s before vanishing from my life forever, in an attempt to destroy their research and alert someone of HYDRA’s intentions. From what I gathered, they managed to destroy the research, but were killed before they could tell anyone in authority about the project. The media called it a plane crash.

Sighing, I shifted my foot, feeling the paper against my skin. For safe-keeping, I kept the thick papers in my sock. Was it the cleanest, most comfortable, most dignified hiding spot? No. But sleeping on the streets was an open invitation for someone to turn out your pockets and take everything on you, and I couldn’t let anyone have it, so I kept it in my sock.

Before my parents left me with my aunt and uncle to destroy their research, they’d given Uncle Ben an envelope to leave to me for when I turned eighteen if they didn’t come back. They warned him to keep it well hidden, and not to look at it, because the information was dangerous and could get them all killed.

Eight months ago, when I was still fourteen, HYDRA agents came looking for the papers.

They stormed the house in the dead of night, dragging the three of us from our beds and cornering us in the living room. I was out of my mind in fear, so I wasn’t much help; I stood there, sheltered by my aunt and uncle, shaking from head to toe.

In accented English, one of the four men demanded the letter left by Richard and Mary Parker all those years ago. I was clueless, but Uncle Ben and Aunt May seemed to know exactly what they were talking about, and told them in no uncertain terms to go screw themselves. He knew what it would mean, giving that information to HYDRA. He knew it would be the end. HYDRA would be too strong with the serum. I mean, come on; thousands of Steve Rogers, but all bad? It would be the freaking apocalypse.

They didn’t ask again, simply shot Aunt May in the stomach twice.

I think I screamed. I think Ben screamed too, but then I was kneeling by her, my hands clasped over the wound, scorching blood pumping through my fingers, running down her sides, staining the hardwood floors, her clothes, my hands, my memory. Ben was still shielding the both of us, but tears were streaming down his face, and he shouted angrily something I don’t remember. All I knew was that May coughed, blood coating her lips, reached up and brushed the hair from my eyes with a shaking hand, and smiled slightly. I removed one of my hands from her stomach and held her hand against my face, smearing blood on the side of my head, in my hair. I didn’t notice.

“Be strong, Peter,” she whispered, blood trailing from her mouth. “Be strong for me, my sweet boy; I’m so proud of you. No matter what anyone says, no matter what you do, I’m so proud…oh God, my sweet Ben…”
And then her eyes seemed to dull. I literally saw the life bleed from them, saw them cloud over with something I couldn’t comprehend, saw the essence of life ebb away in place of something dark and cold and unforgiving. Her hand went limp in mine, and fell beside her to the floor.

The silence was too loud to think.

I shouted her name, then, shaking her. Her eyes were still staring at me. No, no—through me.

Uncle Ben turned his back on the men when I started screaming, kneeling beside his wife, sobbing. “May, May, no please May!”

He held her close and sobbed her name. The men behind him grew impatient, though, and prodded him in the back with his gun. “Give me the letter now. You and your nephew will die if you do not.”

Ben glanced at me, and I looked back, wide-eyed and absolutely terrified. Gently, he lay May down. That’s when I heard the sirens, and mountain-moving hope filled my terrified thoughts.

“Uncle Ben?” I said shakily, my face wet with tears, my body wet with blood.

Uncle Ben looked at me, and I’ll never forget the look on his face. He was trying to convey years of love and pride, and at the same time, he was trying to say goodbye. He reached out and ruffled my hair, then leaned forward, over May’s body, and kissed my forehead. “I love you, son,” he said with a smile.

I think I knew then. I knew I was going to lose him, too. But I didn’t know for sure until I saw it happen.

I heard the screech of tires outside. The three men who had been tearing the house apart, looking for whatever they’d come for, took positions to shoot whoever came through the front door. The one who’d spoken to Ben stalked forward, obviously sick of waiting, and shoved Ben out of the way, reaching across May for me.

I jerked back, wide-eyed, but his hand closed around the collar of my shirt, and he hauled me up and jerked me closer to him. I kicked and scratched and did everything I could to get away, but he just yanked me forward, and I unwillingly stumbled over May’s body. And then, Uncle Ben went postal.

He tore me away from the man and shoved me behind him, my back hitting the wall hard, knocking the breath out of me. By then, the police had knocked the door down, and bullets were flying everywhere. I crawled behind the armoire and covered my head with my hands, pulling my knees up to my chest, trying to keep my panicked screams bottled up inside my throat.

This went on for a few agonizing minutes, and then, it was quiet.

Slowly, I inched my head up, peering around the armoire, only to see everyone lying on the floor, pools of blood spreading around their bodies. That included Uncle Ben.

I darted from behind the armoire and knelt beside him hastily, feeling the blood soak through my pants. I grabbed his hand. “Uncle Ben? Uncle Ben!”

His eyes flickered open, though he was in pain. He smiled. “Hey, Pete.”

“Uncle Ben, I-I think the p-police are here,” I stammered, looking anywhere but the blood. There—that was so much… “They’ll help you, th-they’ll…”
Uncle Ben moved slightly, hissing in pain, but pulled a key from his back pocket and handed it to me. Confused, I took it, never releasing his hand.

“I’m so sorry, Peter,” he breathed, even as police stormed the house, sweeping it for any more enemies. “My desk, top drawer…false bottom. The envelope will explain. Keep it safe, Peter…whatever you do, don’t let them catch you. Stay safe.” He smiled. “With great power…comes great responsibility…"

Police had radioed for medical personnel, having cleared the building, and they barged in, pulling me gently but firmly away from Uncle Ben, working to keep him alive.

“Wait, Uncle Ben, what—what does that mean, don’t—let me go! Uncle Ben!” I yelled as they wheeled him away.

A police officer knelt in front of me, his hands on my shoulders. “Son, I need you to listen to me, okay?” His voice was kind, but firm. “The doctors are going to help your uncle. I need you to calm down, okay? Breathe with me.”

The officer took exaggerated breaths, but it didn’t help; all I could do was hyperventilate. All I could see around me was the blood—everything in the house seemed to be tainted crimson, and the metallic smell was so thick I tasted it. I was drenched in it. My arms were completely coated to my elbows. It was so deep in the crevices of my hands, I doubted it would ever wash out. My clothes hung heavy with its added weight, my heart even heavier. My vision started graying around the edges, and I clutched the key tight, putting it in my pants pocket, afraid I’d drop it if I collapsed.

A few seconds later, I fell forward. The officer caught me, yelling for more medics, saying something about shock. I didn’t know anymore until I woke up in the hospital.

I jolted a little, realizing how deep I’d gone into the memory. My eyes stung with tears, quickly wiped away with the back of my hand.

After that, my work had been cut out for me. Uncle Ben died from his injuries. I stayed in the hospital for a few days. They let me go back to my house to get some things before they packed all the stuff away. I would go into foster care, they said, maybe find a family.

Obviously, that didn’t happen.

Doing my best to ignore the blood stains covering every inch of the floor and the blood splatter on the walls, I stuffed a duffel bag full of everything I could—clothes, toiletries, canned food, every dollar in the house I found, and some pictures—and then grabbed the letter from Uncle Ben’s study, raced out the back door, hopped the fence, and faded from everyone’s lives like a ghost, ceasing to exist anywhere but memory.

I scratched the cat’s ears fondly as she purred. I’d read the letter multiple times, but I got the same thing every time—protect the research. That was it. That was my job. Don’t get caught, protect the research. Stay safe, stay hidden.

My family—both my families—had died for this information. If I had to, so would I.

“Peter?” Jason asked.

I jumped. I hadn’t heard him come up. “Yeah?” I asked, finishing off my chilled soup.

He smiled. “I hate to see you go, but if you’re leaving, you should do it soon. It takes a couple hours on foot to get where you’re going, and I don’t like the thought of you wandering around at
night.”

Glancing up at the sky, I saw he was right; it was early afternoon. I should head out.

“Thought of a name?” I asked, standing and hoisting my backpack over my shoulder. The cat stood on its hind legs and pawed pitifully at my knees until I reached down and picked her up, curling her in my arms. “I don’t want to keep calling her ‘cat.’”

He smiled, stroking the fur on her head. “I don’t know. She’s yours; you should name her.”

The cat purred then, turning in my arms to expose her underbelly, where a patch of brown fur rested in the middle of white, shaped like a small star. I looked up, grinning. “Stella.”

Jason laughed. “It’s perfect, man.” He clapped me on the shoulder, pulling me in for a hug. “Come by when you can, alright? Stay out of trouble.”

I nodded, switching Stella to one arm and hugging him back. “Thanks for everything, Jason. You have no idea how much I appreciate it.”

He waved it off, wishing me luck, and walked back to the shelter. I turned, hitching up my bag on one shoulder, and set off for Manhattan.

I never made it.
For the first hour, everything was fine.

I stuck to the main streets, blending in with the usual throng of New Yorkers milling around. My clothes weren’t awful; there were only a couple small holes in the shirt and knees of my jeans. It may have looked weird that I was carrying a cat around like a baby, but hey, weirder things have happened in New York (cough cough alien invasion).

The soup had done little to fill me up, but I was down to a few dollars and some change, and I really didn’t want to spend any. I figured I probably should, considering I was actually a little dizzy, but oh, well. Dizziness had been a constant companion of mine even before being homeless. I figured I’d get some food as soon as I got to the shelter. I just had to keep moving.

I made my way to an alley that created a bit of a freeway to Manhattan, since it ran through a deserted block still shut down from the invasion a few years ago. They said it was still radioactive or something below the surface, but it was fine. Probably.

Pretty soon, there was no one around. I picked my way through the street, avoiding glass and metal, as my shoes were worn, and the soles were questionable.

There wasn’t supposed to be anyone there. No one was ever here; this place was deserted. Of course, Parker Luck couldn’t let things go my way.

A man stepped out of the shadows of the building, blocking my path. I stopped instantly and stiffened, clutching Stella to my chest and backing up reflexively with slow steps. I heard movement behind me and realized three more men had blocked my route going back, their faces hidden in the dim light of the alley, out of the sun.

“If it’s money you want, I don’t have much, but I’ll give you what I have,” I said, surprised at how steady my voice was. My hands were shaking. Stella had stiffened up against me, sensing my panic.

The man in front of me laughed, taking a few steps forward so I could see his face. He was tall and well-built, and fairly intimidating, with the edges of a tattoo creeping above his collar. I decided to call him Tattoo for the sake of my sanity. He was dressed in regular street clothes, probably to blend in, but his eyes were full of gleeful cruelty. “Unfortunately, I don’t want money.”

That sent my panic into overdrive. Were they after the data? I couldn’t protect it, not physically. I could hide all I wanted, but if it came down to a fight…

Stella hissed as Tattoo stepped closer, close enough that I had to back up a few steps. I turned, and the men behind me were advancing, too. Pretty soon, they were close enough to reach out and grab me.

My heart thudded frantically in my chest, and I’m sure my fear was written across my face, because Tattoo smiled triumphantly. “You know what we want, Mr. Parker. Just give us your parent’s research, and we’ll let you walk away.”

I could feel the thick envelope in my sock, still. If they searched me conventionally, they
wouldn’t find it.

“I-I don’t have it,” I said as firmly as I could manage. “M-my uncle told me about it, but I never found it.”

The man’s eyes darkened. He took a step closer, and then, I felt hands grab me, ripping my backpack, followed by my jacket, off my shoulders and pulling my arms behind me, one man on each arm. I cried out in pain and surprise, struggling, but I was small, and living on the streets had made me thin and weak. Stella dropped out of my arms, landing on her feet, and hissed angrily, but Tattoo seemed more amused than anything, and ignored her.

While two men held me and the other tore through my backpack, Tattoo stepped forward and grabbed my jaw, forcing me to look up at him. I met his gaze with as much defiance as I could muster.

“Do not test us, boy,” he said in a low voice. It was then that I noticed a slight accent, imperceptible at first. “You have the information. You will hand it over, or we will make you.” He grinned. “I doubt that is something you want to experience.”

I tried to jerk my head away, but his grip tightened. “I don’t have it,” I said again, praying that someone would walk by, someone would do something. “I promise, I don’t have it.”

The man who had been searching my backpack came over, leaving my possessions scattered. “Nothing in the backpack, sir,” he said briskly. His accent was much more noticeable. Now that I could hear it more clearly, it was distinctly German.

Obviously, that wasn’t what he wanted to hear. With an angry grunt, he backhanded me so hard I saw stars and felt blood run down my chin from my split lip. I sagged in my captors’ grips for a second, stunned, then he grabbed my jaw again. “Where is it?”

It took me a second to focus back on him. I was about to say something back when Stella, who had been hissing angrily from the sidelines, ran up and freaking bit the guy’s ankle.

God, I knew I loved that cat.

It couldn’t have hurt much, but it surprised everyone enough that he let go of me, stumbling back in an attempt to shake her off, and the men holding me loosened their grips ever so slightly. Not wasting a gift, I stomped on one guy’s foot, probably breaking something, and shoved him away as he grunted. The other guy made a grab for my other arm, but I socked him in the face before he could get a firm hold.

Unfortunately, a broken nose just made him angry. He snarled and kicked my feet out from under me in a way that left me virtually suspended for a second, slamming me into the ground so hard I felt my lungs collapse, the air leaving my lips in a whoosh. He kicked me in the ribs, and I curled in on myself on one side, struggling to draw breath as my arm wound around my torso reflexively, trying to ease the burning pain.

Tattoo had shaken Stella off by then. She was lying against the wall, and I felt a wave of worry in my haze. I thought I saw her breathing, so that was good.

After a few seconds, I managed to wheeze a breath, choking on it and letting out a pathetic cough. Tattoo crouched in front of me, fury etched into his face. My eyes flickered to his hands and saw a gun, and my breath hitched.

That night had left me terrified of guns.
If he noticed, he didn’t comment. “Peter Parker,” he growled, “you are going to tell me where the papers are, or I am going to kill you. Do you understand me? You will die. Today, right now. There will be no second chances.”

And I was about to answer. Really, I was trying to, but I couldn’t draw enough breath. Luckily, I was saved from having to when a huge shadow fell over us, and a loud, sarcastic voice shouted, “You know, four against one doesn’t seem all that fair. And four grown men against one teenager is downright cheating.”

I looked up and saw a small aircraft hovering maybe fifty feet above us. The voice had come from one of the two metal suits flying alongside it, which touched down maybe thirty feet from us. Another man with metal wings swooped in, landing directly across the suits on the other side of me and the men.

Oh. Um, that’s Iron Man. And War Machine. Huh. And Falcon.

I was shocked, to say the least, but Tattoo’s reaction took the cake. He sputtered—literally sputtered—and rose to his full height, taking a step back. “W-what are you doing here? This is no concern of yours!”

“Oh, yah, it is. HYDRA is, like, our arch nemesis, so it’s very much our business,” Iron Man said as five more figures dropped from the aircraft, forming a circle around us.

One was a tall woman with fiery red hair, looking like she could kill you with just her stare; Black Widow, if I remembered correctly. Next to her was a man in a purple vest with an arrow notched on a sleek bow, looking ready for a fight; Hawkeye. A mountain of a man with a wicked looking eyepatch dropped across from the woman, and his arms looked thicker than my chest; that was Thor. Beside him dropped a man with long brown hair and a metal arm, clutching a gun and aiming it straight at Tattoo; I think I’d learned about him in history as Bucky Barnes, but now he was the winter soldier or something. The last person was Captain freaking America, the one the serum actually worked on.

“Now,” Iron Man said, taking a threatening step forward and raising his arm. I heard the repulsor in his hand charge up. His voice had dropped, and was now very no-nonsense. “Step away from the kid, all of you.”

By this time, I’d managed to make it to a sitting position, holding myself up with one hand on the ground and the other wrapped around my pulsing ribs. Tattoo looked at me, his eyes menacing. I fought the urge to shrink under his gaze. He moved one foot back, raising his hands slightly, scowling.

I let out a shaky sigh of relief, and that’s when he grabbed me.

I shouted in surprise as he hauled me up and clamped an arm around my neck, shoving the gun against my temple. I heard curses come from the heroes circling me, but my heart was beating too loud in my own ears to register it. I heard the three other HYDRA agents train their guns on the heroes. They were outnumbered, but they had the advantage of a hostage.

Breathe, I thought, trying desperately to ignore the gun. It’s…who am I kidding, it’s not okay. I thought of anything, everything but the gun next to my head. I ignored the cold circle of metal digging into my temple, choking down the scream bubbling in my lungs, burying it deep in my mind, praying that the gun would just…evaporate.

Tattoo tightened his arm around my throat to the point where I could barely breathe, which
even though it sucked, was a good distraction from the gun. I tugged at his arm, clawing at his exposed skin, but I could only manage a pathetic wheeze.

“Now,” Tattoo said, and damn him, I could hear the grin in his voice. “Unless you want this boy dead, back off, Avengers.”

After a second of tense silence, Iron Man’s repulsor fizzled out, and he stepped back. My vision was blurring at this point, and I pulled harder, but nothing was working; I couldn’t get a breath. I felt myself sagging backwards, felt my grip on his arm weaken and my eyelids flutter involuntarily.

“At least let the kid breathe,” a gruff voice ground out, and I realized it was the Winter Soldier. “You’re going to strangle him.”

Tattoo seemed to debate, then huffed, like he was freaking *inconvenienced* by my need for oxygen, and loosened his arm a bit. I gasped greedily, sucking in air so fast I saw stars. I panted as the conversation around me progressed, getting my bearings back.

“Listen,” Captain America said in a commanding voice. “If you let him go and surrender now, maybe SHIELD can cut you a deal. Okay? That’s your best option.”

“You’re not getting out of this one,” Widow said, lifting her gun. *It’s not aimed at you. She’s trying to help you. You’re okay, for now.* “It would be much easier if you just gave up now.”

And suddenly, all of the Avengers had weapons pointed at us. Suddenly, there were cries behind us, and three distinct thumps. I assumed the minions had been taken care of.

Tattoo looked around frantically, eyeing each of the Avengers individually, before hissing angrily. He bent down and whispered to me, “With or without the research, HYDRA will break you, Peter. They will use you and examine you until you are reduced to a mindless animal.” I heard him chuckle and shivered violently. “I look forward to seeing you in hell.”

Then he shoved me away roughly. I stumbled forward, coughing violently, into the waiting arms of the Falcon dude, who immediately moved between Tattoo and me, but there was no need. As he’d pushed me, Tattoo had shouted, “Hail HYDRA!” And now he lay on the ground, foam erupting from his mouth as his body seized and then went limp, his limbs flopping lifelessly.

I stared at the man for a second, stared at the gun on the ground beside his hand, thanking God that it was no longer pointed at me, before I realized that Falcon was shaking me. “Kid? I need you to look at me, okay? Can you do that?” My eyes flicked up to his and I nodded, my hands shaking. “Okay. Can you tell me your name?”

“P—” Reflexively, I almost did. But I hesitated. These were the Avengers, yeah, but did they know who I was? Did they know about my family, and the data I carried? I mean, Steve Rogers was the living success story, but rumor had it they hadn’t been able to derive a new serum from his blood. Which meant they were trying to get the serum. That wasn’t unusual—it seemed like everybody and their mother was trying to get the serum somehow—I didn’t know why, though, and that was the important part.

*Stay safe. Protect the research.*

“I don’t want to,” I said quietly.

Falcon seemed surprised, but he didn’t force me. “Okay; okay, that’s fine, as long as you don’t mind being called ‘kid.’”
I smiled a little at that. I noticed Falcon’s wings had spread, blocking my view of the bodies so the other Avengers could dispose of them. Clever.

“Can you tell me why HYDRA was after you?” He asked gently, keeping my attention on him.

“No,” I replied, looking a little further down the street towards my disemboweled backpack. It seemed Colonel Rhodes had exited the War Machine armor and was stuffing things back into it. Well, that was nice of him. I noticed metal braces on his legs, helping him move almost normally, albeit a little jerkily.

Falcon’s eyebrows furrowed, and he sighed. He didn’t look angry, just…frustrated. “Is there anything you can tell me, kid?”

I looked back at him sluggishly, still a little woozy from everything that happened. “Um…my cat. Stella. She was…”

“I wondered what she was doing there,” a new voice said, coming from behind Falcon and walking around his wings. It was the purple vested guy with the bow—Hawkeye—holding a squirming Stella.

Stella managed to wriggle her way out of Hawkeye’s arms and into my lap, where she mewled and rubbed her head against my stomach, purring when I scratched her ears.

“Thanks,” I said, giving the archer a genuine smile. “I didn’t know if she was okay.”

He chuckled. “Just got the wind knocked out of her. She’ll be fine.” Falcon stood up, and the two of them gently took my arms and helped me stand. I stumbled a little, so Hawkeye took the arm not holding Stella and wrapped it over his shoulders, supporting some of my weight. “You got a name, kiddo?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but Falcon said, “He doesn’t want to say.”

I blushed, looking down to avoid Hawkeye’s gaze. “Hm. Well, kiddo, get used to being called ‘kiddo.’”

I smiled a little as Stella snuggled against me. The bodies of the HYDRA agents were nowhere to be seen, and the other Avengers had either already boarded the aircraft, or were in their respective flying contraptions waiting for takeoff.

“Um…” I said hesitantly, stopping. Hawkeye probably could’ve dragged me forward with two fingers, but he stopped, waiting for me. “I don’t…can I leave?”

I was crazy. Asking to get away from the Avengers was literally a certifiable reason to go to a mental institution. But the envelope in my sock was heavier than a ball and chain weighing me down. I didn’t want to be in a position for them to find it.

Both Hawkeye and Falcon looked unsettled. “Kid, those were HYDRA agents after you,” Falcon said. “There are more where they came from. We’re not going to hold you against your will, but we need to take you into protective custody until we can at least figure out why they were after you.” Falcon paused. “It would go faster if you told us.”

I looked down, and they had their answer. Hawkeye smiled reassuringly. “It’s okay, kiddo; I get it. You don’t trust us, but that’s okay. We’ll keep you safe.”

I gave a small, grateful smile, and we continued to the aircraft.
Hawkeye gave me a push up the ladder, and Thor and Black Widow grabbed my shoulders and helped me in. Widow immediately pushed me firmly onto a cot, instructing me to lay down. When I hesitated, she gave me an awkward, benign smile. “You’ll be fine sleeping. You look exhausted, and you couldn’t be safer. We’ll check out any injuries you have when we get to the Compound.”

She was right; I was utterly exhausted, my throbbing side dulling in comparison to the fatigue. Stella kind of made my decision for me when she jumped from my arm and curled up against my leg, snuffling slightly. I smiled fondly and looked up once more. Widow smiled reassuringly, gently pushing me to lie down.

I yawned and curled around Stella, and suddenly, the fatigue hit me all at once, and I couldn’t think about the eyes of the Avengers on me, or the muted conversation that I knew was about my unwillingness to talk. All I could think about was how much softer this cot was than the ground and how tired I was.

I felt someone draping a blanket over me, and I burrowed into the precious warmth, falling quickly, deeply asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys for coming to chapter 2! I'm 46 chapters in right now, so I'm hoping to post a chapter every day until we're done. So that's good! I hope you liked it, and please leave a kudos or comment if you liked it! PS I apologize for the funky spacing I'm still trying to figure everything out XD
I awoke to something soft patting my face repeatedly. Opening my eyes blearily, I saw Stella pawing my face, meowing happily when she saw my eyes open. I smiled tiredly, reaching up sluggishly to stroke her fur. She rolled over and stretched, purring.

I was still exhausted. I wasn’t moving anymore, so I could tell I was no longer on the aircraft; I guess they’d moved me inside the compound. Sitting up slowly, minding the ache in my ribs, I looked around the room. It looked…like a normal guest room, honestly. There was an oak dresser against the wall, and a matching nightstand next to me, with a glass of water. I reached for it and drained it almost immediately, easing the tightness of my throat.

I noticed my backpack propped against the foot of the bed. The bed I was on was pushed in the corner opposite the door, with white sheets and a stark (hehe) white comforter that was softer than anything I’d ever felt. I looked down, noticing I’d been changed into a soft white shirt and some thick black sweatpants with the Avengers logo; *figures*. I lifted the shirt; my ribs felt tight, and I saw it was because someone had wrapped a tight, thin layer of bandages around my torso, I guess because something was broken. That sucked. I reached up. My split lip had been stitched, too; the spiky stitches made it awkward to close my mouth, but it hurt less this way. My bare feet rubbed against the sheets, and I was really, really warm. I thought—

My feet. My *bare feet*.

No. No, no, the *research*!

I grabbed Stella, startling the poor cat, and ran to the door, throwing it open. I put Stella down, and she followed me as I ran around the corner, towards the sound of voices. I literally slid to a stop in the doorway of what I assumed was a common room, startling the Avengers spread around the room and in the connected kitchen.

“My clothes,” I panted, probably looking like a madman and not having the will to care. I felt my legs shaking beneath me, and ignored them. “Where are my clothes?”

“Uh…I think Tony gave them to someone to wash,” Colonel Rhodes said, standing jerkily with the braces and walking towards me. “You may want to sit down, you look kind of unsteady—”

“No, I don’t want to sit down, I want my *clothes*,” I said heatedly, backing up when he reached for me.
I could tell they had absolutely no clue why my clothes meant so much to me, but dammit, I needed them.

Tony Stark sauntered out of the kitchen at the noise I was making, looking concerned despite his casual stance. “What’s with the racket?”

“I need my clothes,” I said hurriedly. “I have something important in them, and I need it now.”

His eyes widened in understanding, and he fished around in his pocket, pulling out a thick, crinkled envelope. One very, very familiar. “Yeah, the guy I asked to do your laundry found this in your sock and gave it to me. Is this it?”

“Yes,” I all but shouted, sprinting forward and making a grab for it. Panic rose in my throat as he smirked and held it above my head.

“Wanna tell us what’s so special about it? I haven’t read it, but it must be good for you to be so worried.” He said slyly, pushing lightly on my chest to keep me back. My ribs twanged from the pressure. “I hope you know my natural curiosity has been suffering greatly, but I’ve exercised self-control because Clint and Sam said it would help you ‘trust us.’”

Oh, hell no, I thought angrily. I all but tackled him, grabbing for the envelope, ramming him back into the couch in anger. He seemed surprised I’d physically attacked him. The other Avengers got to their feet and moved towards us, probably to tear us apart, but a strong hand closed around the neck of my t-shirt and hauled me back, away from Stark.

I jerked, but the guy had a strong grip. Turning, I realized it was Captain America, and he was giving both me and Stark disappointed looks.

“Son, that’s not how you treat someone who protected you and gave you a safe place to sleep,” he reprimanded, maintaining his hold on my shirt. Turning to Tony, he said, “And Tony, don’t be an ass.”

He snatched the envelope from Stark’s disappointed hands and gave it to me, letting go of my shirt. I snatched it from him and backed up, frantically opening the thick envelope, checking that everything was there. It was—my parent’s letter, the schematic papers, the research. I sighed shakily in relief and leaned against the wall, my previous exhaustion returning full force as I
clutched the envelope to my chest. Stella weaved between my legs worriedly, looking up at me.

The Avengers, unsurprisingly, were staring at me like I was crazy. Still clutching the envelope, I glanced up at them, fully aware of the crushing weight of their stares.

“Um…good morning?” I tried.

Colonel Rhodes took my arm before I could pull away and led me to the couch, pushing me down. “You need to rest, okay? Your legs are shaking so badly I could beat you in a race, and I’m paralyzed.”

I smiled nervously, looking down. Stella pounced on my lap, sitting up and alert like an adorable, harmless guard dog…cat…whatever. “Um…sorry, Mr. Stark, for shoving you. Thanks for letting me stay here.” I said it more out of necessity than guilt, but hey, they didn’t need to know.

Tony Stark waved a hand, sitting in a leather recliner. Falcon turned down the TV. “No sweat, kid. I was being immature; I should’ve given it to you. But if you still feel guilty, you can make it up to me by not calling me Mr. Stark. Just Tony.”

Scratching Stella’s fur, I leaned back against the couch, feeling my eyes droop. “How long was I asleep?”

“Eleven hours, young Midgardian!” Thor boomed, folding his arms. “We were beginning to wonder if you would ever awaken! Your small friend was quite distressed!” I assumed he meant Stella, and smiled fondly. I’d only had Stella for…hours, at this point, and already I felt like she’d been with me for years.

“It gave me time to treat you, at least,” a small man with curly brown hair, closing his book and pushing his glasses up a bit. I didn't know him. I assumed he was an Avenger, but there was only one missing, and it happened to be the Hulk, so...yeah, multiple things didn't add up there. “You weren’t badly hurt. You have one broken rib that’ll be sore for a few weeks, but it’ll be fine as long as you don’t do anything strenuous. You know, like what you just did. Your lip will heal soon. I can probably take out the stitches in two days. I’m most concerned about your body weight; you’re underweight to the point that some would call it neglect.”

The Avengers’ eyes turned to me, concerned. I looked down, feeling my cheeks redden. “It’s not neglect. I don’t have a lot of money.”
“Your parents don’t buy you food?” The one who’d treated me asked, leaning forward. “Speaking of which, are they expecting you? Should you call them?”

I shook my head. “I live on the streets. My parents died when I was six. I lived with my aunt and uncle after that, but they were killed during a break-in a few months. I ran away from Child Services and have been traveling between shelters.” I couldn’t really lie without raising questions I couldn’t answer. If they turned me over to Child Services, I’d just run again. I knew how to give them the slip, and it wasn’t like they could physically restrain me. I think.

The Avengers looked understanding, but not pitying, which I appreciated. “Where were you during the break-in?” Falcon asked.

“I was there,” I said, scratching Stella’s ears. She was still on high alert. “My uncle and aunt were protecting me. The police came in before they got to me.”

“Sorry for your loss,” Falcon said, leaning back, looking contemplative. I shrugged. “Can you tell us your name yet, kid?”

“Well, not if I don’t have to,” I said, squirming uncomfortably. I still didn’t quite trust them. It wasn’t that I felt I couldn’t…in fact, it was the opposite. I really, really wanted to shove the research into their hands and tell them to deal with it. But months of constant running, trusting no one but myself, had left me wary of even those with the best intentions. “It’s just…I don’t…I don’t think I can.”

No one said anything, then Stark whipped out his phone and snapped my picture.

After a second of shock, I regained my bearings. “What the hell?” I shouted incredulously as he tapped away. “Don’t just take my picture! If I don’t want you to know who I am, then don’t just —”

“Peter Parker,” Tony said triumphantly. My stomach dropped. “SHIELD’s got a thick file on you, kid. Fifteen years old. Son of the deceased Mary and Richard Parker, ex—whoa. Ex-HYDRA scientists. Guardians were May and Ben Parker, deceased eight months ago. Escaped child services immediately after that. Sighted multiple times around NYC, going randomly between homeless shelters all over the city, returning to one on the edge of Queens regularly. Mostly to check in with a guy named Jason. Seems like a solid dude,” Tony Stark rattled off, scanning his phone screen nonchalantly.

I got tenser the longer he spoke. Well, this wasn’t good. They probably knew…well, everything,
“Wait, did you say HYDRA?” Captain America asked, looking at Tony incredulously. “His parents worked for HYDRA?” I saw the metal arm Soldier dude stiffen. Captain America placed a hand on his shoulder to calm him, turning to me disbelievingly. “You understand what HYDRA is, right, son? How dangerous they are?”

“His parents were under the impression they were working on medical improvements, and they didn’t know anything about the dark side,” Stark continued, narrowing his eyes to study the text, then looking up. “Once they figured out what their research was really being used for—to recreate the Super Soldier Serum and make evil Steves—they destroyed it all and went into hiding, dropping Peter with his aunt and uncle. According to SHIELD’s files, they were going to warn SHIELD about their research and that HYDRA had been close to recreating it, and that they knew how to make it, but they were killed before they got there.”

I was a statue. My hand had stilled in Stella’s fur, which was on end, as if she could sense my fear. I didn’t dare look up. My hands shook in my lap as I clutched the envelope, wrinkling the worn paper even further.

“It was rumored.” Tony said slowly, eyeing the envelope, “that their research was on recreating the super soldier serum to isolate the healing factor, and they discovered how to replicate it, instead; maybe even improve it. It’s also rumored that there’s one surviving copy of the research that no one can find.”

And that was it—the magic wrds. All eyes in the room turned almost reverently to the papers clutched in my hands. I knew how big this was. For seventy years, the brightest minds had been scheming and collaborating to recreate this formula, with no success. Access to this made someone the most powerful person in the world, if they found someone to make it, and use it.

And all they needed for that was in my hands.

“Son, be honest,” the captain said slowly, being the first to break out of his shock. “Is that envelope…is it your parents’ research? Is it the formula?”

The Avengers waited with bated breath. Well, geez, I couldn’t exactly deny it, could I? It was pretty obvious from my reaction.
“They…HYDRA broke into my house, eight months ago, and killed my aunt and uncle in front of me for this,” I said quietly, my voice shaking in fear and pent up rage. “They died for this. They killed my parents for this. The killed everyone I loved for a few pieces of paper,” I almost yelled, snapping my eyes up to meet theirs. I conveyed as much anger as I could. “I’m not giving it to you. They—my uncle told me to protect it, to keep it with me, and I’m not giving it to you.”

I was almost shouting by the end. Eye contact was dangerous—something I’d learned in the first few weeks on the streets—but I used it now, looking at each of them letting them know how serious I was. I may be young, and skinny, and weak, (and scrappy and hungry :) ) but they’d have to pry it from my cold dead hands if they wanted it that badly.

Widow and Hawkeye were the only ones doing an okay job of hiding their emotions, though Hawkeye’s eyebrows were a little pinched. The Winter Soldier was still reeling from the mentions of HYDRA—I figured there was history there, but for the life of me, I couldn’t remember it, if we’d learned it in history class. Stark looked…troubled, but impressed. I guess ’cause I was a scrawny kid yelling at Earth’s Mightiest Heroes. Falcon’s jaw was hanging open, probably from the initial shock that I actually had the formula. The doctor guy—whose name or alias I still didn’t know—looked like his mind was going a million miles an hour, thinking of the formula itself, maybe. He seemed like a scientist. Thor, bless him, looked utterly confused, probably not even knowing what the serum was, since he didn’t spend most of his time on this planet. War Machine’s eyes were literally saucers glued on his head, and they stayed like that for a long time. His knuckles were white. And Captain America was rubbing his jaw, looking contemplative and concerned.

There was silence for a minute or so, as everyone processed the fact that the serum, sought after and chased for decades, was in the room with them, scrawled messily on a sheet of wrinkled paper in the hands of a stubborn teenager. Captain America let out a long sigh.

“I told you we should’ve read it!” Stark blurted. The sound was so sudden I actually flinched. “But noooooo. Respecting privacy! It’s all your faults!” He pointed an accusing finger at every other Avenger in the room, who glared at him. They then ignored him.

“This is…this is big, Peter,” the Captain said, facing me. His blue eyes looked like they were boring into my soul, and I suddenly understood how he was able to rally an army behind him. “I know you’ve been protecting this for…for months. I know this is what your life has revolved around since you ran away, but…sometimes you need to let others take over, son. They’ll never stop coming after you. You’ll never have a life. We have the resources to protect this information so that no one will ever be able to access it; we can use it to help people, to do what your parents were trying to do. Or, if we deem it necessary, we can destroy it and never look back. Okay? We’ll take care of it, and we’ll protect it and you.”

“I can’t,” I said immediately, shaking my head. “I won’t. I don’t care who you are, I don’t know
“You, and I don’t trust you. You think, just because you took down the bad guys, you’re entitled to this?” I asked, my voice rising again. My emotions were blazing. I hadn’t been able to express anything for so long. Everything, every negative emotion, had stayed locked down nice and tight. Now, cracks were spreading through my façade, emotions ricocheting off my mental walls, until the dam broke and it all flooded out. “You’re not entitled to shit. It’s my parent’s research. They left it to my aunt and uncle, who gave it to me. Just because you’re SHIELD doesn’t mean you’re God. It doesn’t mean you have any right to this. If they were going to give you everything they had on the serum, all their research and everything, they wouldn’t have felt the need to leave this behind. They didn’t trust SHIELD, either. And so I won’t.”

That obviously wasn’t what anyone wanted to hear. Briskly, Widow stood up and addressed the Captain. “I’m calling Fury, Steve,” she said tersely, making her way to the door. “I’ll tell him to tell no one but Hill and Coulson, but he needs to know.”

Steve sighed, rubbing his forehead. “No, I agree, Tasha. Go ahead.”

She nodded and left, rapidly dialing a number on his sleek phone as she left. Steve lifted his head. “Kid, you’re too young to understand how big this is. You can’t just—I know you think it’s yours because it went through your family, and your parents made it, but a SHIELD scientist made it first. Your parents only derived what they did from information provided by SHIELD in one form or another. That makes it, at least partially, SHIELD property. I don’t want to force you, son, but you can’t protect that information. It needs to go to someone who can.”

“I’m not going to change my mind,” I said, holding the envelope even tighter, eyes flicking between all of them in case they tried to take it from me.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Stark said, standing and stretching. “Kid, go back to the room you woke up in, think over what we’ve said, okay? It’ll take like an hour for the SHIELD agents to get here. Fury will talk some sense into you then.”

Stark looked at the others, daring them to object. Colonel Rhodes sighed. “Tony’s right. Peter, just…at least think about what we’ve said, okay? I promise you, we have your and the world’s best interests in mind. I know you haven’t known us for long, but…try to trust us a little, okay? We did save your life.”

“You saved me because you didn’t know who I was or what I had.”

“We saved you because you’re a defenseless kid being hunted by HYDRA,” Winter Soldier cut in, crossing his arms. His metal one made a small whirring sound as he did so. “I wouldn’t have cared
any more or any less about you if they’d wanted your damn shoelaces.”

The light comment caught me so off guard I had to smother a snort behind my hand. Clearing my throat, I picked Stella up off my lap and held her against my chest, reveling in the comfort it brought me. These eight months had been lonely, and it was nice to have Stella with me. At least she didn’t want the damn formula.

Stella purred and pawed at my chest. “How long have you had her?” Falcon asked, trying to diffuse the tension a little.

I shifted, nestling her tighter against my chest. “Less than a day, actually,” I said, stroking the star on her belly. “Her name is Stella.”

Falcon grinned. “That’s a good name,” he said, reaching out slowly, stopping when I flinched back. “Can I pet her? I won’t try anything.”

Hesitantly, I nodded. He stroked the fur behind her ears, and she playfully batted at his hand. I smiled a little.

“I’m Sam, by the way,” he said, taking his hand from Stella and extending it to me. I made sure both Stella and the letter were secure in my left hand and shook his hand. “I guess you know me as Falcon.”

“I’m Bucky,” the Winter Soldier said next. It went like that: everyone went around the room and introduced themselves, until I was on a freaking first name basis with all the Avengers. Geez, this was every teenager’s dream. And the famous Bruce Banner--I had DEFINITELY read all of his papers but I wasn't fanboying, nope, nope not at all--was actually the Hulk. Okay, well, that's fine too. No judging. But. Um.

I did not expect that.

“What’s Black Widow’s name?” I asked, as she still hadn’t returned from her phone call.

“That’s Natasha,” Hawkeye-dubbed-Clint said, perching on the edge of the couch. “Don’t call her anything but that; she only takes nicknames from people she’s on very good terms with, and those who’ve tried without permission mysteriously disappeared.”

I swallowed. “Got it.”
“Okay, as lovely as this has been, I wasn’t kidding about you thinking this over until the SHIELD guys get here,” Stark said, standing and gesturing for me to do the same. “Do you know how to get back to your room?” At my nod, he continued, “Good. Try not to leave your room, if you can help it; Fury’s a stickler for protocol, and we don’t know much about you yet. There’s a bathroom in there, and a mini-fridge with some drinks and snacks. If you need anything, ask FRIDAY.”

“FRIDAY?” I questioned.

“My AI,” he said proudly. “She’s installed in every room of the house. Oh, and she’s watching you through hidden cameras, kid, so don’t do anything stupid.”

“Even in the bathroom?” I asked, screwing up my face in displeasure. “That’s weird.”

“Dude, no,” Stark scoffed. “Not in the freaking bathroom. I’m not a stalker, you know.”

“But you essentially just said that you could watch me sleep, which is weird,” I said, cradling Stella as I left. “I’m going to shower. Don’t peep.”

I left the room, listening the Stark splutter as the others laughed. Holding Stella, I all but ran back to my room, locking the door behind me and locking myself in the bathroom, as well. In case anyone felt the need to check, I turned on the shower and left it running. I pulled out the sheets of paper from the envelope and laid them spread out in front of me, studying them all.

I’d read them every day for eight months. I’d studied them, practiced them, learned them. Ever since I was young, I’ve had an extraordinary memory, so much so that I’d once memorized a two-hundred-page technical book on nuclear physics in three days. I knew these papers like the back of my hand. I’d studied them enough to copy them, word for word, all at once. I knew the diagrams like my own name, I was smart, too; my parents discovered this, after all. I understood it. I hadn’t just memorized it; I understood what needed to be done and how everything worked and fit together.

I was shaking. This was…probably the stupidest thing I’ve ever done in my entire life. I was an idiot. This was so, so dangerous, and…well, SHIELD would probably try to torture it out of me, or HYDRA, or somebody else, but Steve was right. I couldn’t hide the papers in my sock forever.

So, I decided to memorize the information, and destroy the papers.
Thanks so much to everyone who's left comments and Kudos--it makes me really happy to get notifications about them, so I'd love it if you'd leave one, if you're enjoying the work! Thanks so much!!

PS I am slowly getting the hang of the whole formatting thing so bear with me please X'D
Chapter 4

The best way to get rid of the papers was to burn them. People could theoretically replicate papers no matter how small you minced the pieces, but they couldn’t do much with ash. Now, where to get a fire…that was the problem; I didn’t know if I could make a contained flame. So, this was going to be a very unconventional destruction.

I leaned forward and opened the cabinets under the sink, and found a plastic bin full of toiletries, three cotton towels, and a hairdryer. Okay…I could work with this.

First of all, I dumped out the toiletries and filled the bin with hot water, then put the papers in it (I left my parent’s letter on the side; it was one of the few things I had left of them, and without the other papers, it didn’t give anything vital away). The papers were fragile; they were years old, after all. If I left them for a while, the ink would start to break down a bit, and then I could put them under the pressure of the shower stream, and the ink would bleed, and the paper would disintegrate to make it unrecognizable. Then, just to be extra safe, I’d electrocute the paper bits, hopefully frying anything left to be utterly useless.

Leaving the papers to soak, and adding some shampoo on a whim to help with the ink decomposition, I took one of the razor blades I found among the toiletries and carefully cut through the rubber insulation on the hairdryer cord, stripping it away from the wire. I left a significant portion leading to the actual plug on, so I could take it out without, you know, dying. I checked on the soaking papers; yep, the ink was bleeding, alright. Most of it was handwritten, so the ink was more susceptible to damage, anyways.

Stuuuupid. Stupid. Stupid. I was an idiot. But you know what, too late now.

It had probably been fifteen minutes since I’d left the Avengers. If they were monitoring me in any way, they would’ve shown up by now. They’d hopefully think my long shower was because I hadn’t had a decent one in so long.

Which, dammit, I really wanted a shower.

I took the soggy papers from the bin and moved to the shower, putting the papers directly under the stream, struggling with the handle until the water pressure was up as high as it could go—which, for a rich man like Tony, was pretty high. I watched as the stream pelted the papers, tearing it in some places, but ultimately bleeding the ink until there were only gray splotches bleeding across the paper.

I wasn’t stupid. I knew with the right machinery you could study the papers and look for the chemical change in the paper caused by the ink if you factored in the years the paper had existed, ultimately recreating the text, but hopefully, the electrocution would disrupt that. After a few minutes, I started to worry about the time. I took the soggy papers—which now resembled Swiss cheese—out of the shower. I proceeded to rip the paper I’d protected for so long into itty bitty pieces, which was actually slightly traumatic. By the time I was done, the paper was in literally hundreds of pieces.

I dumped the paper bits back into the plastic bin. Making sure Stella was safely curled up behind me, away from the wire, I wrapped my hands in a cotton towel each. Cotton doesn’t conduct
electricity, so hopefully a thick layer would keep me safe. I put the bin up on the expansive granite countertop, and carefully grabbed the hairdryer.

Kids? Don’t try this at home.

I plugged in the hairdryer, turned it on, and dropped it unceremoniously into the water.

The effect was instantaneous. The water arced with electricity, blinding me temporarily with the bright flash. Once I forced myself to look, I saw the pieces of paper blotched with black, disintegrating even more. Now, I thought to my bright, smart self, how do I get the electricity to stop without dying?

Stella was hissing behind me as the electricity continued to sputter. I could see the plastic starting to melt, and realized it would probably be good if I stopped it soon.

I was glad I’d left some rubber insulation on the part of the cord connected to the plug knowing I would probably screw up. I grabbed it and yanked, feeling the hair on my arms singe a bit.

The electricity stopped. Breathing hard, I dropped the plug and turned off the shower, mopping up any spilt water with the cotton towels. I decided to leave the partially melted bin and the paper bits —now blackened and, I was confident, useless—and exited the bathroom, folding my parent’s letter and putting it in my pocket.

“Mr. Stark has been notified of the disturbance, and he and several other members are on their way,” a female voice said out of the blue.

I shouted in surprise and jumped out of my skin; poor Stella jumped straight up four feet in the air, her hair standing on end. I scooped her up, holding her reassuringly. “Uh…are you FRIDAY?”

“Indeed,” the voice said again, sporting a slightly Irish accent and a hint of sarcasm. “Mr. Stark seems to be displeased that you have partially destroyed his guest bathroom.”

“Well,” I said, sighing heavily and unlocking the bedroom door so they wouldn’t knock it down trying to get in, “nobody’s perfect.”

I sat on my bed and leaned against my headboard, legs crossed underneath me, petting Stella until the stampede was heard down the hall. The door was flung open and half of the Avengers stood there, looking at me incredulously.

“FRIDAY said you destroyed my bathroom!” Tony shouted, stomping in and throwing open the bathroom door.

“Don’t touch the hairdryer,” I called quickly as the others followed him in. “And I think destroyed is a bit generous.” I’d literally melted one plastic bin, and maybe scorched the wall and the outlet a bit, but that was beside the point.

Tony came back out, a hyper ball of fury. “What the hell were you even trying to do?” He shouted, looking at me like I was insane. “You could’ve electrocuted yourself! Or your fur ball! Were you trying to die?”

“No,” I huffed, setting Stella down. “I…” All of the sudden I didn’t want to tell them, because they’d probably murder me. Forget protection, they’d just shoot me here and get it over with. Well, maybe not shoot me…they were the Avengers. Maybe ship me off to some secluded prison in Siberia.
“You what?” Tony screamed impatiently. Clint, Steve, Bucky, and Sam, who’d come with Stark, were still in the bathroom when I heard Clint swear like a sailor.

Clint roughly pushed past Stark and grabbed my collar, shoving me against the wall, fury in his eyes. His grip was strong enough that the heels of my feet left the floor. He wasn’t exactly hurting me, but I was too scared to retaliate. “Tell me, right now,” he breathed quietly, looking like he might really kill me, “that those papers are not what I think they are.”

I swallowed. “I can’t,” I said, trying to push him away from me, but still not wanting to antagonize him. “They are. I… I couldn’t let SHIELD get them. This way, no one gets them.” I closed my eyes tightly and shook my head. “I couldn’t risk them falling into the wrong hands.”

“You idiot,” Clint hissed, pulling me away from the wall and shoving me back on the bed, where I backed up into the corner formed by the wall and the headboard. Stella hissed at Clint angrily, standing at my feet.

“What?” Sam asked, trying to calm Clint down, tugging him away from me as he did so. Steve subtly came to stand between us. “What happened?”

“He destroyed the f*%#*ing papers it what happened.” Clint screamed, punching the wall. The drywall crumbled beneath his fist, and I flinched. “That black sand stuff floating in the water is the serum formula.”

Sam swore quietly, shooting a meaningful glance at Steve before dragging Clint gently out of the room, but not before shooting me a disappointed look. Stark started swearing colorfully. Steve was… well, he was silent, and that was almost worse, because he gave me a look that was a weird hybrid of disappointed parent and kicked puppy. Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, but he looked almost… amused. That was weird. He shouldn’t be amused, I just destroyed freaking government secrets.

“Tony, Bucky, can you give us a minute?” Steve said, his voice dangerously calm. “I need to speak with Peter alone.” Tony vacated the room quickly, throwing his hands in the air and muttering very unflattering things about yours truly.

Bucky was more hesitant. “Stevie,” he said gently, putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Go easy, okay? He’s just a kid.”

Steve took a deep breath in through his nose. “I know, Buck. It’ll be fine.” With a look at me, Bucky left the room, shutting the door softly behind him.

For a moment, there was silence as Steve paced, his hands behind his back. I figured this was a habit from the army. I wanted to say something, anything to break the thick silence, but I thought it best to leave him to his thoughts until he decided to speak.

“Do you have any idea,” he hissed angrily, coming to a stop at the foot of my bed, “what you’ve just done?”

I fought the desire to bring my knees to my chest, instead pushing myself farther into the corner. Steve didn’t seem to notice, or if he did, he didn’t care. “Those papers were the key to saving millions of lives,” he shouted. “What do you have to say for yourself, hm? Say something, because I’m this close to handing you to SHIELD on a silver platter, you hear me?”

“I… I couldn’t, Steve, I… it was too much of a risk,” I pleaded, trying to get him to understand. Why wouldn’t they listen when I said that all it did was hurt people? “I’m sorry I went behind your
back, but—” I stopped talking then. I had nothing else to say.

“God, kid,” Steve said, his anger replaced by weariness. “I just…they’ve been working on that formula forever,” Steve said, sitting down on the foot of my bed.

“Yeah, did you ever ask why?” I prodded. “They told my parents it was for medicine, when in reality they were going to make more people like you, only evil. How do you know that’s not what SHIELD’s doing?”

Steve paused. “I know the scientists, kid, and I know the director. They’d never let that happen.”

“Yeah? What if they didn’t have a choice?” I kept going, because I saw I was making some headway, and I wasn’t about to give up now. That, and I had the brilliant flaw of not knowing when to shut up.

“You’ve always got a choice, son,” Steve said, rubbing his temple. “Even if it’s a hard one.” I should probably shut up. Even Captain America had a breaking point.

“Well, now they never have to make it,” I shot back. Thank you, mouth, for not listening to the brain. You’re a real team player.

Steve stood angrily, pacing again. “Peter, you—do you have any idea how many lives you’ve just thrown away? It took decades, and now all that work is for nothing. It’s all gone.”

I hesitated. “Well…I mean, I’m not stupid, Steve. I know it’s important, but having it on paper was too risky; anyone could take it from me.”

He stopped dead in his tracks and looked at me incredulously. “So, what, you made a copy? Did you put it on a…that little stick…what’s it called, FRIDAY?”

“A flash drive, sir,” FRIDAY responded dutifully.

Steve snapped his fingers. “Right, one of those? Or…on the Interweb…Internet…that thing.”

“No, I didn’t put it online; that would make it easier for people to get it,” I scoffed, feeling a little insulted. “That’s literally the stupidest thing anyone could do with sensitive information.”

“Okay, then throw me a bone, Peter!” He shouted, exasperated. “Where’s the info?”

“Um…I memorized it.”

Steve stopped, then, and stood very still. “You memorized it,” he deadpanned.

“Oh…yeah. I’ve read it every day for the past eight months, and my memory is exceptional—not to brag, it’s just what the doctors said! I understand the formulas and how they work, how to recreate them, what to watch out for, I memorized the diagrams and schematics…I memorized every word and letter on every sheet of paper in the envelope before I destroyed it.” I paused. “If…if for some reason, I start trusting you guys…if you show me you’ll do right by it, or if it’s the only way to do something good…I’ll give it all to you. But until then, I won’t tell anyone.”

I’d like to say that I’m proud of having shocked Captain America speechless. After all, not everyone can do that.

It was silent for so long, in fact, that I started shifting uncomfortably under the weight of his gaze. Finally, he took a deep breath through his nose and sighed, and then he…laughed?
Yeah. He was laughing, alright.

“You never cease to amaze me with the stupid stuff you seem to do,” he said, looking somewhere between impressed and hysterical. “Come on. We’re going to tell the other Avengers what you’ve done, and then they’re going to help me tell you all the reasons it’s going to come and bite you in the ass.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for coming back for chapter 4! As usual, please leave a Kudos or comment if you enjoyed it :) It starts kind of picking up around chapter 8, for those of you wondering. Let me know how you think it's progressing! Thanks so much!
Oh. This was bad. This was really, really bad, because all the Avengers were looking at me like I’d murdered their best friend. Earth’s Mightiest Heroes were all staring at me with those stares people get when they’re so freaking mad about something they can’t even comprehend that it actually happened, and I could feel it and so my squirming did not stop. Wow, this was uncomfortable. I was waiting for Steve to speak, but I think he was just letting me suffer first.

Stella was curled in my lap, her head burrowed under my hand. I appreciated the comfort.

“So, Peter,” Steve said, sitting down and leaning back, crossing his arms over his chest. “Want to tell everyone what you’ve done?”

“No,” I said, only half-joking. After multiple glares, I swallowed. “I…destroyed the papers. I’m sorry, I know you saved me, but…I…don’t trust you. I think I know that you guys specifically would use the research for the right reasons, but…you said you were going to give it to some organization, or something, and…I don’t know anything about them, or where they come from, or what they do, and I don’t know the people who run it. The last thing my uncle ever said to me was ‘with great power comes great responsibility,’ and…those papers held a lot of power, and they were my responsibility. And I just…I just had this horrible feeling that…if the papers got to someone who could actually do something with them…bad things would happen. So…I destroyed everything except my parents’ letter, because that doesn’t have any actual research, so, I kept it…um…”

I realized I was rambling, and trailed off to a stop when Steve held up his hand. I hesitantly glanced around at the other Avengers. Oh, wow, yeah, they looked pissed. Clint was fuming. That was a given. Natasha looked…neutral, but she was a super spy, so that wasn’t unexpected. Everyone else just had relative levels of anger on their faces, and it was unpleasant.

“Oh, no, there’s more guys,” Steve said sarcastically, waving a hand. “Come on, Peter, tell them the rest.”

Steve, you’re a jerk, I thought with a tepid glare in his direction. So much for Captain America, justice for all.

“I…well…I know how important that research was, so I memorized it before I destroyed it. And before you guys say I’m gonna forget it, I won’t. I went to some special doctors when I was younger because my memory was so good they wanted to run some tests to see if I was one of those photographic memory kids. I wasn’t, but I’m really close. I’ve read it every day for the past eight months, and I memorized everything. So if I…if I think this organization you trust can protect it, I’ll give it to you. Or if the fate of the world depends on it or something. But not until then.”

“Dude,” Stark said, mouth hanging open. “You know HYDRA’s gonna be hauling ass to get you now. They have no qualms about torturing kids to get what they want.”

I swallowed. “I know.”

“Идиот,” Natasha muttered under her breath. “You don’t know. You have no idea. It’s entirely different, protecting paper from protecting one’s mind. HYDRA has every technique in the
book, and they will use them all. You’re not trained for that. You are in no way equipped to handle torture.”

“I know,” I said heatedly. “I know I’m in over my head, but I didn’t really get a choice in the matter. I’m a kid, I get it, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to do what has to be done. Papers are…easy to get. Any one of you could have taken them while I was asleep. Hell, you did, I’m just lucky you didn’t read them. But…my mind is my own. I know I can trust myself. I’ve trusted no one but myself for eight months, and you can’t expect me to change that at the flip of a hat. Now, I’m sure, all the time, no one’s going to just waltz up and take it from me. I’ll protect it until I give it to you, or until…until somebody kills me for it.”

I’d put a lot of feeling into my words. I’d never been able to express my resolve to anyone, because I could never tell anyone I actually had it. So, eight months of frustration and dedication came out in that rant, and I was feeling pretty satisfied with the looks of surprise on their faces.

“Well said, kid,” a new voice said from the door. I jumped, looking towards the door to see a tall, bald man with an eyepatch on. He was flanked by a woman with brown hair in a stern bun, and a balding man in a sharp suit with a benign expression on his face. “You know, any other day I would lock you in federal prison, preferably in the depths of Siberia or the like,”—and I TOTALLY called that—“until you told us what we wanted to know. But today, I have to thank you for destroying that info.”

A chorus of indignant “What?”s and a slew of flabbergasted looks immediately filled the room, mine included. The man walked up to me and stuck his hand out. “Nick Fury, Director of Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division, also SHIELD. Nice to meet you, Mr. Parker.”

Hastily, stunned, I stood and shook his hand. He had a strong grip. “Uh…nice to meet you too, Mr. Fury.”

“Director Fury, if you don’t mind, kid,” he said nonchalantly. “That’s Coulson and Hill, behind me.” They nodded to me. “Now, Avengers, let’s get down to business.” (A/N: Cue Mulan sing-along, if you so desire. :D) “You should all be thanking this kid for being impulsive and reckless, because if he’d given us the info, HYDRA would already be working on it.”

Steve choked. The Avengers had similar reactions, but Steve’s was the funniest. After a second of recovery, he squeaked, “Fury, you would—”

“No,” Fury said with a wave of his hand, sitting down on the couch next to me. I scooted over a little to make room. It was definitely manners, not because I wanted to get away from the scary dude with one eye who probably knew twelve ways to kill me with his eyepatch. “I wouldn’t, but I’ve discovered very recently that we have no less than fifty-two HYDRA spies inside SHIELD. I don’t know who they are or where they work, but they’re there, and I have no doubt that one of the scientists who would have handled the information is one of them.”

I definitely didn’t want to say I told you so. Nope, not at all.

The Avengers were shocked into silence for a moment. Poor guys, they’d had so many surprises today. Finally, Stark, being Stark, quipped, “Well, I’ll be damned,” and then pulled out his phone. He had an intense look of concentration on his face, and I thought he might be enacting some super-secret emergency protocols before I realized I could faintly hear the background music for Flappy Bird.

I tried not to snicker, instead smothering it as a cough. I didn’t bother hiding my snort when
Natasha calmly got up, plucked the phone out of his hand, produced a knife from somewhere on her person, and handed the freshly impaled phone back to a slack-jawed Stark.

Natasha sat back down as if nothing had happened, ignoring Stark’s indignant spluttering.

Fury seemed completely unfazed, which I considered a talent. “We need to talk about how we’re going to move forward with this, now that the only copy of the research is in a teenager’s head,” he said, not sparing me a glance. I didn’t mind that so much. “There’s a special bunker under a secluded military base in Nevada, for training new SHIELD recruits. He’d be well protected from HYDRA, and it’s impossible to get in or out of unless you know how, so we wouldn’t have to worry about you sneaking out, either,” he said with a pointed glance in my direction.

Nevada.

Nevada…was very far away. I wanted to stay in New York. I wanted the comfort of the incessant traffic noises, the reliability of rude people who didn’t talk to you, and I wanted…I wanted to stay here, because all my family was here…buried, but still here, and going to Nevada, I would be completely, utterly, alone. At least here I still knew people. I knew Mr. Delmer, that nice sandwich guy, even if I didn’t speak to him much anymore. I knew Jason, I knew some of the other homeless shelter regulars, I knew…I knew New York. I was about to voice the fact that I wanted to stay here, when Clint spoke.

“Didn’t you just say you had spies everywhere in SHIELD?” Clint questioned hesitantly, shooting me an unreadable look. The Avengers had to see my fear at the prospect of moving so far away. “Wouldn’t he be in more danger there?”

“Well,” Fury said casually, leaning back, “that’s another part of this; he can be bait for any spies in that facility. Once we out the ones in that facility, we can keep it under wraps and move him around the different SHIELD stations, until we have all our spies. Two birds with one stone.” Me being the very skinny stone.

Oh, wow, yeah, no. That was not going to fly with me. I was about to open my mouth to say so, too, but like ninety percent of the Avengers beat me to the punch.

“Fury, what the hell—”

“—just a kid—”

“—wouldn’t last five minutes—”

“—trying to kill him—”

“Cold, Eyepatch.”

And similar expressions of dismay and disapproval. The only ones who didn’t say anything were Clint and Natasha, though Clint looked weird. I was almost thinking about making a break for the door. I didn’t think he could outrun the Avengers, three of whom could fly, two of whom were super-spies, one of whom was superhuman, one of whom was a god, one of whom had a metal arm that could probably help to catch me, and…well, I’d heard somewhere that Bruce—excluding his greener counterpart—was a pacifist, so maybe I wouldn’t have to worry about that. Yay.

I was screwed. I realized it suddenly, then, and very surely. I was royally screwed. HYDRA would never stop hunting me, and SHIELD would never let me go. Eventually, they’d get sick of playing nice, playing the waiting game for me to trust them enough, and they’d demand the
information, and when I refused—because by God, I would—they’d employ other means.

Short of Stella, who was so cute I didn’t think even the most cold-hearted person on earth could hurt her, I had nothing in the way of leverage. I’d already lost everyone. There was only me. I highly doubted they’d look far enough into my life to go after people I’d known years prior, when they could just as easily use me.

And in that moment, I was…resigned. I’d done my duty. I’d kept the information from anyone who could use it negatively. I’d done what my Uncle Ben and Aunt May and Mom and Dad had asked of me and…I didn’t want to anymore. But I would, for them. So Fury could ship me off to Nevada or God knows where else, and use me to draw out the spies who could very well kill me, hurt me, torture me. I…was tired. I didn’t really want to care anymore. It was exhausting, and the fatigue hit me like a freight train, months of grief and pain and terror. I was too tired. I was too young to be this tired.

I leaned back, rubbing Stella’s fur absently, staring at the pristine glass table, my mind drifting. Drifting far away, anywhere but this cloying living room full of people I didn’t know who wanted what I had. Somewhere safe, somewhere warm. Somewhere…away.

I numbly recognized the conversation continuing around me, the Avengers listing several reasons why Fury’s plan was bull, Fury shooting back that he was the boss. When all else failed, Fury was clearly irritated and shouted, “If it’s such a damn bad idea, then you people come up with a better one.”

For a second it was silent, and I was waiting for the punchline. Waiting for Fury to tell me to pack my bag(s), that we were high-tailing it to Nevada and wherever else he dictated, because he could. Waiting for the inevitable. I didn’t even bother to look up at the scrambling Avengers, just kept my tired eyes trained on Stella, who was purring reassuringly, looking up at me almost in sympathy. And then…

“What if he stayed here?”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I forgot to post yesterday! I’ll give you guys two chapters today to make up for it :) thanks!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What if he stayed here?”

That…wasn’t the inevitable I’d had been expecting. And once I thought about the words, it was even more surprising, because...here? In Avenger’s Compound? With the Avengers? And to top it all off, the one to suggest it had been Clint. I thought that after destroying the papers and stuff, Clint hated my guts.

Now, slightly less resigned, slightly less tired, I was just confused. (And intrigued.)

The other Avengers stared at him incredulously, but Clint’s eyes were determined, holding none of the anger I’d seen previously. “Come on. This place is completely off the record. We could homeschool him, so he’d be getting a more than decent education, for after this whole thing blows over. He’d be with people he’s at least slightly familiar with, instead of surrounded by total strangers. Plus, he’d be with us, and at least we’d keep him safe, since I’m ninety-nine percent sure none of us are HYDRA spies.” The last part was said jokingly, but the humor in his eyes was replaced with seriousness very quickly. “We’ve got plenty of room, and we can monitor his health and stuff, because let’s face it little dude, you look like you’re going to keel over at any second,” he said, turning his gaze to me.

I mean, he wasn’t wrong. I was like 5’6” and a hundred and five pounds or something. Eight months with spotty meal schedules did a number on a person. My ribs were very visible with my chest exposed, and I was stick-thin. But seriously, little dude?

“I think it’s a good idea,” Bucky said suddenly, sitting up a little straighter as all eyes turned to him.

“Me, too,” Sam voiced. The others soon followed, until every Avenger had made some form of assent, unenthusiastic as it was (cough cough Tony).

Nick Fury glanced around at the Avengers, his barely concealed surprise flitting across his face. Then his eyes (eye?) narrowed. “I don’t need you guys picking up strays. You’re hard enough to deal with already.”

A barely tamed noise of indignation found its way out of my mouth. “M’not a stray, thanks,” I muttered unhappily, scratching Stella’s fur. She nipped gently at my finger, as if saying What’s wrong with strays? I huffed in response.

“You’re a stray,” Tony said dismissively, waving a hand.

“Anyways,” Fury said authoritatively, “I don’t need you getting attached to him. I know how you guys are, and that would just cause complications. He’s just a job.”

Ouch.

I wasn’t disappointed. Nope, not in the slightest.

A lot of the Avengers didn’t look entirely satisfied with that, but there wasn’t a whole lot they could do about it. Fury still looked hesitant. And I didn’t really have a choice, so…
“Fine,” Fury said. “But I reserve the right to move him at any moment. And I’m going to have some agents interview him for the specifics.”

“Told you, I’m not giving you the formula,” I muttered. Fury glared at me. “Shutting up.”

Fury sighed deeply through his nose. “I know you’re not, but I want to know what that agent said to you before he killed himself. The HYDRA agent who attacked you. And I have a few more questions, too.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised. “I mean, he stopped me in an alley, and I offered him money, but he said he didn’t want money, which was super ominous, by the way, and then his friends—”

“No, kid, what he said to you right before he let you go.”

“Oh. Oh, that. I’d forgotten about that.” Because I really had. Everything had been crazy, and with getting the papers back and everything going on since I’d woken up, I hadn’t really had time to think about it. Now that I did, though, what he said was…well, terrifying. “Uh, he said…he said that with or without the papers, HYDRA was going to…do something to me. Uh, experiment? Examine? Something like that. He said they’d use me, and…break me. And reduce me to a mindless animal.” I swallowed thickly, not meeting their eyes. I didn’t want them to see how much what he said rattled me. “He said…he said he’d see me in hell.”

There was thick silence for a moment, broken only by Stella’s frustrated meow when I stopped petting her.

“That’s worrying,” Fury said, though he didn’t look particularly ruffled. “And this was before you memorized the research?” I nodded. “That means they need you in addition to the research. But why? Did your parents or your aunt or uncle ever tell you anything about the research? Anything that would directly depend on you?”

“Oh, no,” I said, a little scared of where this was going. “I’m 100% human, thank you.”

“Peter, has there ever been anything…off, about you? Any medical conditions they couldn’t explain?” Bruce asked, adjusting his glasses and leaning forward. “Anything that stumped the doctors?”

“Um,” I said, thinking back, a little uncomfortable. “I get dizzy spells a lot, that no one can really figure out. And I’ve got the memory thing. There was…it probably doesn’t matter,” I said, continuing to think. “Uh…”

“No, what was it?” Bruce asked. “Anything could be important.”

“Uh, well, there was this one time my aunt and I got into a really bad car accident. The engine was on fire and the doors were jammed shut, so I…broke the door off. But the paramedics said that might’ve been an adrenaline thing. Though they seemed kind of weirded out by it, since I was so young.”

“How old were you?” Bucky asked.

“Eight.”

Bruce pursed his lips in thought. “Even with an adrenaline rush, you could’ve damaged your arms beyond use at that age. Were you achy or sore the next day?”

“I remember I was dizzier than usual, but the doctors said that it might’ve been the
aftereffects from shock, or something.”

Bruce rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “Hm. I’ll look into that later.”

Tony raised his hand like a grade-schooler. “I want in on that!”

I shuddered. I didn’t want this guy anywhere near me with medical equipment.

“Okay, and?” Fury asked impatiently, eye narrowed. “Anything else?”

“Oh, I mean, I’ve always healed a little bit quicker than normal, but not noticeably, you know?” I said uncomfortably, getting frustrated. “I’m normal. I just…I’m normal, okay?”

“It’s okay to not be normal, you know,” Sam said, leaning back. “Every single Avenger is very not normal. We get it.”

“Yeah, but I am normal,” I said vehemently. On top of everything else wrong with my life, I didn’t want any physical problems to deal with.

“No one’s saying you aren’t,” Sam said placatingly.

“Okay, enough of this,” Fury said dismissively, standing and adjusting his coat. “Peter, I’ll have some agents stop by tomorrow to interview you fully. Don’t withhold any information, tell the complete truth, etcetera. I get that the formula won’t be included in that, but if you change your mind, hell, spill. I’ll leave you in the Avengers’ capable hands.” He didn’t sound like he believed himself. “Don’t break him.”

With that, Fury swept out of the room as abruptly as he’d entered, leaving nothing but more questions and a lot of worry.

I kept my eyes on Stella. I didn’t want to look at anyone. My earlier bravado had evaporated, and now I was just scared. These people were the good guys. There wasn’t any reason to be scared, but…I was. These people controlled my entire life now. How could I not be scared?

“Okay, well…that was productive,” Clint said, standing. “Kid. Peter. Little dude. You can look at us, we won’t eat you.”

Hesitantly, I met his eyes. His earlier fury was nowhere to be found. He noticed my apprehension, I guess, because he smiled knowingly. “Don’t worry. I was pissed, yeah, but you had your reasons, and it all worked out okay, right? I know how kids are, trust me.”

That was…unexpected. Was this guy bipolar? “I…guess?”

“Okay, first of all, we need to get a couple things straight,” Tony said, still looking a little mournful over his impaled phone. “I guess you can just stay in the room you woke up in, for the time being, at least. All of our rooms are somewhere along that hall, so we’ll be right there if there’s an emergency. You’re welcome to anything in the kitchen. I’ve got the money, trust me. We do need to figure out your schooling.”

There was a pause. This was all a little overwhelming for me, so I waited for someone else to speak. Ultimately, it was Bucky who figured it all out.

“Steve and I can teach him history,” he said thoughtfully, his mind somewhere far away. “We know enough. Sam can teach him psychology, Bruce and Tony can teach him physics, chemistry, biology, whatever science he needs. Rhodey, you’re good at calculus, right? You can
teach him math. Clint can teach him English, Natasha can teach him some Russian, maybe some Spanish.”

“I would also like to partake in this ‘school!’” Thor said heartily, beaming.

Bucky chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder. “You can teach him about Pop-tarts, Thor.”

Thor grinned even wider, if that was possible, then turned to me. “Young Midgardian, you will soon understand the wonders of Pop-tarts! I will not fail you, my bright pupil! I will be the greatest instructor of Pop-tarts ever to grace Midgard!”

I blinked. “Um. Thank you?”

He seemed pacified. I counted it as a win.

“Okay, well…that solves the living situation and school,” Natasha said thoughtfully. Her expressionless eyes turned to me. “How many sets of clothes do you have?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Besides what you’re having washed? Two other shirts, and another pair of jeans. Those are my only shoes, though, and my only socks.”

Natasha nodded. “Bruce, you’re the smallest.”

“You can borrow some of my clothes for a while,” Bruce said with a warm smile. I decided Bruce and Bucky were my favorites. They hadn’t insulted or scared me yet. Thor didn’t count, he was like a puppy.

I smiled gratefully. Stella, who obviously hadn’t been getting enough attention, meowed and pawed my chest, stretching. I stroked her fur, and her tail curled around my fingers. My eyelids drooped, and I yawned behind my hand.

“So, that’s clothes taken care of. Peter, do you need anything else?” Steve asked. “You’re going to be living here for a while, so if there’s anything you need, let us know.”

I thought for a second. “Can I get some stuff for Stella? A litter box, cat food, stuff like that. And, um…some books, maybe?” I asked tentatively. I’d read a ridiculous amount as a child, but in the past few months on the run, I hadn’t really had the time nor the money for reading.

Steve smiled. “Sure. Any genre?”

“Science fiction,” I answered immediately. “Some science journals? Though I figure you probably have those lying around.” I added, eyeing the two famous scientists. It hadn’t really sunk in yet, what with everything that had been happening, but I’d read all of Bruce Banner’s papers. He was one of my favorite scientists. And Tony Stark’s inventions were incredible. If this had been any other situation, I’d be completely freaking out at just being in the room with them, let alone speaking to them.

Tony laughed. “Kid, we’ve got a library between us,” he said, gesturing to Bruce. “Any time you want, take one.”

I smiled timidly. This was getting surreal. Everything was sinking in, and with my exhaustion, I couldn’t tell if it was a dream or not. It fit what a dream of mine would be: rescued like a freaking damsel, taken in by my heroes. They were nice. They’d saved my life, and they seemed to care about what happened to me, at least a little. They were letting me keep Stella, and giving me clothes, and books, and food, and a bed, and—
The realization hit me. Not suddenly, just…I understood. They were bodyguards, and I was crashing at their house. They were treating me like any other guest. Like any other job.

I couldn’t get my hopes up. They’d just get shattered, like everything else.

They must have sensed the change in my attitude, or something, because they looked not-surprised when I cleared my throat a little awkwardly. “I’m…really tired, still. Can I go back to the room?”

Tony waved a hand. “Sure, sure. Gotta get that beauty rest. Don’t go in the bathroom; I’ll have some people fix everything tomorrow. If you need to, use the one down the hall on the right.”

I cringed. I’d forgotten about the bathroom. “Sorry about that.”

“No sweat,” he said. “It’s pocket change.”

I gathered Stella in my arms and stood quickly. That was a bad idea, because the room started spinning at thirty miles an hour. Stella leapt out of my arms as I reached up to grasp my head, shutting my eyes at the stretching, shrinking, warping forms of the Avengers. I heard someone say my name, but the voice was enormously far away. I sat back heavily on the couch, eyes shut, panting as the world spun around me.


The frantic talking stopped, but the hand remained. Eventually, the world stopped spinning, and I moved my hands from cradling my head to drag down my face, slowly opening my eyes. The light was a little much, but I adjusted quickly.

I looked up. Everybody was looking at me, looking a little unnerved. “It was just a dizzy spell,” I said, my breathing still a bit labored. “It just happens, sometimes.”

“When was the last time you ate?” Bruce asked, sitting beside me and gently taking my wrist. He felt my pulse, his brow furrowing. “It’s a little fast, but nothing to worry about.”

“I had…a cup of tomato soup yesterday,” I said, thinking. “And the glass of water you left on the nightstand. And…I think that’s it, at least in the past while.”

Bruce stared at me incredulously then headed to the kitchen. Sam looked absolutely appalled. “That’s not nearly enough for you,” he said. “Is that how much you normally eat? No wonder you get dizzy spells.”

Well, that was a little insulting. “I didn’t really have a choice, what with the limited resources and, you know, being homeless and jobless,” I bit out between clenched teeth. Sam’s teeth clicked together audibly, and I felt a small rush of satisfaction. Bruce returned from the kitchen with a water bottle and a sandwich. “And I got them even before then, they’ve just gotten worse since I stopped eating regularly.”

“Here.” Bruce handed me the water bottle and the sandwich, which was ham and Swiss. “Eat this, then drink. Eat as much as you can.”

It smelled heavenly. I devoured the first half, barely noticing the sting in my split lip as I ate, but the second was a struggle. I washed the first half down with some water, then realized I
was actually really full. I stared at the sandwich with no small amount of frustration, willing myself to be hungrier. I kept staring.

Rhodey laughed a little. “Something wrong, kid? You’re looking at the sandwich like it personally offended you.”

“It did,” I muttered unhappily. “I’m full.”

“Your stomach’s probably shrunk a lot,” Natasha said when she saw me struggling. “Don’t worry if you can’t eat it all. You can finish it later.”

I nodded, feeling full, warm, and sleepy. Stella hopped into my arms, and I stood slowly, not wanting a repeat of the *horrifyingly embarrassing dizzy spell* that had just knocked me on my ass in front of my heroes.

“Do you need help getting back?” Rhodey asked, preparing to stand.

“I’m okay,” I said, making my way to the door. I felt a lot better after the sandwich.

“I’ll walk with you,” Bucky said, and we left the other Avengers in the common room.

The walk was silent, but it wasn’t horribly awkward. I got the impression that Bucky was usually pretty quiet, anyways.

We got to the door of the room I’d woken up in, and I stepped inside. Bucky stood, hands in his pockets. “Do you need anything before I go?”

I shook my head, setting Stella on the ground. She ran and hopped on the bed, curling up at the foot of it. “I don’t think so.” I paused, shifting my bare feet. “Um…thank you. For everything. You seemed…not upset, about the papers.” I paused, wondering if I should continue. “You actually looked like you thought it was funny.”

Bucky smiled, a little. “You did what you had to, kid. What you thought was best. That’s all any of us can do. I thought it was funny because it seemed a lot like something Steve would have done before everything with…with HYDRA.”

I pretended not to notice him shiver at the name and smiled back, feeling better. “Thanks.”

“Get some sleep, okay?” He said, drifting back down the hallway. “You’ll need it.”

I shut the door, leaning my forehead against it briefly, my muscles dropping as soon as I was alone. God, I was tired. This was…a cross between a nightmare and a dream come true, and I wasn’t sure how to feel. I was exhausted, and scared, and just…done. How was this my life, now? How did I go from a white picket fence life, to hunted and homeless, to…this?

I drifted to the large bed, sinking into the soft mattress and burrowing under the warm blankets, my ribs aching a bit as I shifted positions. Remembering the AI, I said, “Um…FRIDAY? Can you turn off the lights?” My words were slurred with exhaustion.

“Certainly, Mr. Parker,” it (she?) said, dimming the lights completely. “Rest well.”

*Well, I thought as I felt myself drift off into safe, blissful, long sleep buried in the fluffy, warm blankets, maybe this isn’t all bad.*
Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, as always! Please drop a Kudos / comment if you enjoyed!
The next few weeks were... weird.

The interview with the SHIELD agents was awkward, to say the least, but I got through it. They didn’t ask me anything I didn’t know the answer to or couldn’t answer, initially. One of them stayed back without permission and asked for (well, demanded) the research, but I told her no emphatically. She was a tall, intimidating woman with stern features and foreboding body language, but Steve and Bucky were on the other side of the door, so I wasn’t all that worried. I doubted she’d physically harm me (unless she was HYDRA which was a definite possibility). When she threatened to ship me off under Fury’s nose unless I gave it to her, I gave her the metaphorical middle finger by strutting out the door and asking the Avengers to do something about the nosy agent.

Her facial expression was priceless.

Thanksgiving was interesting. It was not long after I’d gotten there, and the team apparently usually did something all together at the Compound. I honestly had forgotten the day, so when I walked out of my room, bleary-eyed and yawning, I didn’t expect there to be two kids and a toddler running around the common room playing tag, knocking stuff over, and being really, really loud. I stuttered to a halt in the doorway, hand halfway through my hair, staring.

Stella, on my heels, pawed up to the toddler on the floor, inspecting him carefully. The toddler inspected her right back, looking at her neutrally before reaching out with chubby hands and patting her fur. Stella’s spine arched, but she soon settled down, mewling and rolling over. The toddler laughed happily, grabbing one of Stella’s ears and pulling.

Stella didn’t like that.

She yowled and leapt away with a hiss. I picked her up, afraid she’d scratch the mysterious toddler on the floor. The two kids had stopped to stare at me curiously.

“Can we pet your kitty?” The little girl asked, one of her front teeth absent.

“Uh…” I stammered, still having no clue why these kids were here. “S-sure, I guess.”

I held Stella for a few minutes while the kids played with her fur, the toddler included. I shifted awkwardly.

A woman with brown hair, about 30 something years old, came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel. “Lila, Cooper, are you and Nathaniel okay?”

The little girl gave a hasty affirmative and went back to petting Stella, who I set down as I stood. I didn’t know who this woman was, and all these new people were kind of overwhelming. She noticed me, and her smile brightened. “You must be Peter! It’s nice to meet you, sweetheart. Come on, I made breakfast. There’s plenty.”

Dumbly, I nodded, not bothering to ask her name until halfway to the kitchen. Stella stayed
between the kids, enjoying the attention. “Um…not to be rude, but…who are you?”

She laughed good-naturedly. “I’m sorry, it completely slipped my mind. I’m Laura, Clint’s wife. That’s Lila and Cooper, and Nathanial is the little one.”

“Oh,” I said, not bothering to hide my surprise. Clint had a family? “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Barton.”

“Oh, it’s just Laura, honey, and likewise,” she said, leading me into the kitchen. There was so much food. I don’t think I’ve ever seen so much food in my entire life. It was everywhere. Bacon, sausage, French toast, cinnamon rolls, eggs cooked every way you could think of, pancakes, waffles, fruit, pastries, and stuff I couldn’t even begin to wonder about.

The Avengers were scattered around the kitchen, laughing and talking. There were a bunch of prep dishes set out everywhere, like someone was getting ready for some big feast.

“Morning, Peter,” Steve said politely.

“Morning,” I yawned, swiping a piece of French toast. “What’s the occasion?”

“Dude, it’s Thanksgiving,” Tony said, mouth full of scrambled eggs. “Thanksgiving at Avengers Compound is like feeding an army, just so you know. This,” he gestured expansively to the impressive spread, “will all be gone in, like, an hour, so eat now.”

“Oh,” I responded. I took a small bite of the toast, having lost my appetite.

Thanksgiving. Of course it was Thanksgiving.

Memories of the little Thanksgiving celebrations Ben and May and I had flooded my mind. There was never enough money for a spread like this, but we never really needed a spread like this, either. We normally ordered takeout, because anything May tried to make (except her apple pie) ended up smoking and inedible, and Ben wasn’t much better. We would curl up on the tiny couch, all three of us, and watch Charlie Brown Thanksgiving, and eat two of May’s pies between the three of us, then play some board games, or just…talk. It was never much. It was always perfect.

Yeah. I definitely wasn’t hungry anymore.

Discretely, I threw the toast away and scooped up a wandering-in Stella, who tried to lick my fingers when she smelled the syrup. Sam saw me throw the toast away anyways.

“Don’t like it?” He asked, sliding some fruit towards me. “Eat something else. There’s plenty.”

“Thanks, but I’m not really hungry anymore,” I said quietly. The room got quiet except for Stella’s purring. They knew I didn’t have any family left; I’d told them. They were probably looking at me like everybody else after the break-in. God, I hated those pitiful looks.

I cleared my throat awkwardly, more or less running to the door. “I’ll just be in my room. Sorry for—sorry.”

I stayed in my room for a while. I’d planned to stay the rest of the day, honestly. I just read some of the physics textbooks they’d gotten me. There was a minifridge in the room, so I snacked on some stuff from that if I got hungry and lounged in the very soft bed, Stella curled up against my side, purring contentedly. Absently, I rubbed her fur with one hand.
A knock startled me out of my thoughts a few hours later, around three. “Come in,” I said, sitting up against the headboard.

Thor came in, followed by Rhody. That was definitely not a combination I ever expected.

“Greetings, young Peter,” Thor said, smiling broadly. “We have been drafted to fetch you for the culmination of today’s festivities!”

Stella paced the end of the bed before sinking down and burrowing partially under the upset covers. After translating that into regular English, I sat up straighter. Confusion must have shown on my face, because Rhody smiled knowingly, jerkily making his way to the bed before sitting.

“Peter, you didn’t think we’d let you spend Thanksgiving alone in your room, did you?” He asked, folding his arms. “I know we don’t know each other very well yet, but we’re not gonna let a kid with nobody sit in a barely furnished room all day by himself.”

“I had Stella,” I defended weakly. “I wasn’t alone.”

“As companionable as your feline friend is, human company has no replacement,” Thor said solemnly, adjusting his eyepatch absentely. “I know that today must be a painful reminder of your losses, my friend, but today is a day of celebration and thankfulness. Honor those you have lost by appreciating what you still have.”

Well. That was easy to say coming from the prince of another world.

I scowled a little. “I don’t have all that much, you know,” I said sourly.

Rhodey, unexpectedly, smiled. “You have more than you think, kid. You’ve got your life, which is more than a lot of people. You’ve got food and clothes and a place to sleep, which you didn’t have until recently, so be thankful for that, if you want. You’ve got Stella. You can walk on your own.” Okay, yeah, that one made me feel like a jerk, coming from Rhody. “And you’ve got two eyes.” Aaaaaaand an even bigger jerk, as I glanced self-consciously at Thor. “And you’ve got us. We’re not replacements for anyone you’ve lost, but we can at least be your friends, if you want.”

Well. I couldn’t really say no after that, could I?

(That and I was hungry; snacks hadn’t really been everything I’d needed, and the smell was divine).

I ate dinner with the Avengers and Clint’s family. I didn’t talk much, but the banter was endless around me, and that was enough. I entered with a scowl and left with a smile, which was probably Rhody’s goal all along. After that, they dragged me to the living room, and we watched —of freaking course—Charlie Brown Thanksgiving.

I left halfway through, claiming I was tired. I managed to hold back the tears until I got to my room.

…

After that, I fell into a routine. I woke up in the mornings, got breakfast, got Stella breakfast. One of the team was usually in there, and awkward small talk had slowly evolved into intelligent conversations that left me feeling a little closer to each individual team member.

Just a job.
I had “class” with each member throughout the day. History with Steve and Bucky was
enthralling, though I’d never really liked history. It was all factual, and there was nothing to really
understand; it was just memorization. But learning from two guys who had been there and could
tell you things no history book could ever have information of, was really interesting. Bucky
seemed to open up a little more when he and Steve were joking about old times, and it seemed as
though they really enjoyed teaching me. I did my best to listen and understand, and when I had a
question, we stopped until I fully understood. They were patient, and kind, and knowledgeable.

I took physics from Tony and chemistry from Bruce. I’d been in AP classes for both before
the whole homeless thing, and I’d loved it; being on the streets, education hadn’t been an option,
and I’d really missed it. I devoured everything they threw at me, books upon books upon scientific
journals upon articles. They were both impressed by my natural intellect and by how quickly I
learned and embraced science, and pretty soon they told me I could have an “Honorary Science
Bro” membership. (I died from happiness a little, actually.) After that, Tony was…a lot nicer. At
some point, he started joking around with me and giving me some scrap parts to tinker with in my
spare time. He also started calling me “Pete”. I hadn’t been called that since Ben and May died. At
first, I didn’t know how I felt about it, but…it was comforting. Secure. Almost like—

Just a job, Peter.

Bruce was kind, intelligent, and had an awkward sense of humor that you couldn’t help but
love. He taught me chemistry at a fast pace, which I was incredibly happy with. He tested my
knowledge and pushed my limits, and when I didn’t understand, instead of explaining it to me
immediately, he’d ask me questions and give me some references and let me try myself first, and
then if I still had trouble, we’d go over it together. Sometimes he told me stories of experiments
he’d conducted and research he’d overseen, and other times he’d tell me about projects he and
Tony had in progress. He asked my opinion on some stuff, too, which was very ego-boosting. I
really liked Bruce. He didn’t pry, but I knew if I needed to ask a question or talk about something
(which I didn’t because I’m a stubborn teenager in denial of my issues, but hypothetically speaking)
I could go to him.

It wasn’t hard to tell that Natasha was a “tough love” sort of person. She taught me Russian
at a fast pace, but like science, I absorbed it quickly. By then end of a few weeks, I knew the
Russian alphabet like my own name and could stumble over several simple sentences from
memory. Natasha, every once in a while, gave me the smallest smile of encouragement, urging me
on if I stumbled over a word. She also taught me how to swear in Russian. Like a sailor with anger
management issues that would make the Hulk look like a child’s teddy bear. She also threatened to
make me disappear if I told Steve. Needless to say, I didn’t tell Steve.

When Tony told me at breakfast one morning I couldn’t have any more spare parts or books
until I got a perfect score on the absolutely utterly impossible physics test he’d drafted just to annoy
me, I told him he was being petty, then proceeded to cuss him out in Russian—adding a few words
I’d looked up on my own that Natasha hadn’t taught me—under my breath. I thought I stumbled
over a couple words, but apparently, it was enough, because Russian superspy Natasha Romanov
snorted a laugh into her coffee cup so suddenly that coffee splattered all over her sweatshirt and the
table.

Clint, Sam, and Tony—the only three present in the kitchen with us—stared at me with
slack faces in astonishment. “How’d you get her to laugh?!” Hawkeye screeched, sounding like a
real bird. “Only I can do that! And only sometimes!”

I grinned impishly. “You don’t really want to know.”
In the middle of cleaning the coffee off of her sweatshirt, Natasha leaned across Clint and
gave me a high five. “Every full-blooded Russian I know would be proud, kid.”

I most definitely did not beam.

She stood gracefully, moving to the door of the kitchen. “I’m going to change my
sweatshirt. And Peter?” I looked up from my bacon. She gave me a small, genuine smile. “You’ve
earned the right to call me Tasha after a dialogue like that.” She swept out of the room.

And nope, I was not beaming, definitely not. But Clint was definitely catching flies.

That was a good day.

Sam and I had some very…interesting talks. He was teaching me psychology, and let’s face it, I
was the poster child for deep-seeded psychological issues. My parents had died, I’d literally
watched my aunt and uncle bleed to death, and then I was forced to uproot my entire life and grow
up a little too fast for comfort. I lacked any real relationships (not thinking about the Avengers,
because you’re JUST A JOB Peter), my best friend was a cat I’d had for a few weeks, and I was
still a teenager with hormones. It was a fun time.

I think Sam was trying to avoid touchy subjects, but it’s psychology. From what I’ve gathered, it’s
basically a glorified encyclopedia on how childhood trauma screws you over. Despite that, it was a
pretty interesting subject, finding out why things were the ways they were, why I felt like this, why
I thought like that.

I also think Sam was trying to double as a therapist for me without my catching on (I noticed on
day 1, though, so…), but he always made it clear that if I had any questions, related to the subject
matter or not, I was free to ask. I never did, but I enjoyed class with him, because he never asked
me to talk about anything I wasn’t comfortable with, and he had a good sense of humor, too.

English with Clint was…an experience. There wasn’t much English involved, really. Whenever
another team member would pass through the room we were in, Clint would make up a question
about a book we’d both already read, and I’d answer just complexly enough to satisfy (or deter)
anyone’s curiosity before we were alone again. After that, we just played Mario Kart (until Steve
caught us and threatened to take over my English lessons, too, then we started reading and
rhetorically analyzing Dr. Seuss, which was a lot more entertaining than it sounds).

Calculus with Rhodey was easy. I grasped the concepts quickly, and he was a good teacher. We got
off on tangents a lot, talking about his time in the military and stuff, but mostly I baited him into
telling me embarrassing stories about a younger Tony. Rhodey was super chill and easy to talk to,
and he answered all of my questions thoroughly and patiently. He asked me about myself, not in an
interrogating way, but like he was genuinely curious and wanted to get to know me. And when we
hit one I didn’t want to answer, he didn’t pry.

Thor was very, very passionate about Pop-tarts. He took his lessons very seriously, too. I can
unwillingly recite every Pop-tart flavor known to man, recite the process of unwrapping and
consuming said Pop-tart, recite the process of making the Pop-tart, and basically every single thing
about Pop-tarts.

When I gently tried to tell Thor that this wouldn’t help me in the real world, I swear he almost
cried, and I immediately retracted everything I’d said and simply begged him to continue his
fascinating lesson on Pop-tarts, because I sure as hell wasn’t about to be responsible for making a
legendary Norse demigod cry. His eyes dried a little too quickly, and as penance, he asked me to
recite the five greatest Pop-tart flavors known to man (entirely Thor’s decision, no scientific
But it wasn’t all bad. He told me stories of Asgard, stories of the Valkyries and of ancient battles and fierce duels. He told me stories of pranks he pulled with his brother Loki (oh Lord, even I knew there was a story behind that one) and growing up with Odin for a father. He told me all about Heimdall and his friends across the other realms. I was fascinated by the otherworldly tales, and we sometimes spent hours talking in the living room. I would curl up on one end of the couch with Stella in my lap, and he would stand and “regale me with the ancient tales of heroes” (his words).

Also, every one of them was constantly giving me food. I hadn’t put on much weight, but it had only been a few weeks. They’d caught me shirtless when Bruce was inspecting my broken rib, taking in my concaved stomach and jutting ribcage and hips, my stick-thin arms and narrow shoulders. Someone always fixed my plate for me at every meal, and they loaded it up with every kind of food there was. I usually couldn’t finish it, but they made games of it, teasing me lightly until I ate just a bit more, or until they were pacified. Bruce was always telling me to drink more water, and Sam and Steve were always making me any food I asked for. Bucky knew how to make some killer smoothies, too, and they got me any ice cream flavor I wanted.

It may have been so gradual I missed it, or maybe it happened suddenly. At some point, though, I noticed just how much I’d started laughing. Maybe Tony did something stupid. Maybe I beat Clint at Mario Kart, and he pouted. Maybe it was Steve disciplining Tony like a teenager, and Tony arguing back like a teenager. Maybe it was Rhody cuffing Tony on the head after saying something stupid, Steve commenting on someone’s language, Sam burning something in the kitchen. Maybe it was Bruce’s clumsy attempts at humor that were even funnier than whatever joke he’d been trying to make, and the way he’d take it in stride and laugh along at himself. Maybe it was Natasha’s dry humor or Bucky’s passive aggressive remarks, or Thor’s terrified reactions to the microwave. Maybe it was when Stella got scared by FRIDAY’s voice and jumped up to my shoulder. Or maybe it was when I said something funny, and the Avengers laughed with me.

Whatever it was, the laughter was a warm bubble of air in my chest, making me feel light.

Life with Ben and May had been good, but there were only ever three people around. The interpersonal dynamics were a little lacking (not that I had ever, ever minded). Now, I was constantly surrounded by extraordinary people with really ordinary habits and dynamic humor. Their personalities were so different it was comical. Tasha’s and Clint’s interactions were hilarious; Clint would do something stupid, maybe pester Natasha too much or say something to annoy her, and all Natasha would do was give him a steely look from across the room, and he’d get all flustered and shrink back like a turtle into its shell. Natasha, pacified, would return to whatever she was doing. But it was obvious that they’d die for each other in a heartbeat.

The relationships were mostly the same between the others. They teased, and slapped, and annoyed, and pestered, and scolded, but at the end of the day they were one big dysfunctional family with lots of issues and lots of affection.

And unwillingly, because I was just a job and I wasn’t supposed to get attached, and they weren’t supposed to get attached but I dared to hope that they were…I started settling in. I started thinking of that big guest room as my room, after I’d added a small bookshelf and put up some science posters Bruce and Tony had given me and set up a little corner for Stella. Tony even gave me some old picture frames for the pictures I’d hastily stuffed in my bag all those months ago of myself and Uncle Ben and Aunt May, and now they were on the dresser.

The others started treating me like they treated each other. They joked with me, and at me. They laughed with me and at me. When they had movie nights, or game nights, or any other night...
where they got together and did stuff, they made sure I was there and that I felt included.

I tried. I really, really tried.

But it was becoming really hard not to think of the Compound...of *them*...as home.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Thanks for coming back for chapter 7! Hope you enjoyed it. Please leave a Kudos / comment if you did and let me know what you thought!!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Warning. Dark chapter ahead. Peter has a flashback and I go pretty deep inside his head, so if that triggers you, please stay safe!

It was a Wednesday when my walls broke.

I had just finished up a history lesson with Steve and Bucky and was working on a paper on the French Revolution they’d asked me to write. So far, the extent of my research had been watching Les Misérables. Ten outta ten movie. Stella was licking her paws, sitting up elegantly like a queen. I chuckled and ran a hand over her ears as she purred; she’d become a little diva since getting so pampered.

Clint bounced into the room unexpectedly like a kid on a sugar high, closed the computer Tony had let me use, grabbed my arm, dragged me up and to the elevator, and definitely didn’t explain why. Stella ran after us, scampering in just before the doors closed.

“If my work didn’t save, you’re rewriting my paper,” I deadpanned, studying his face. I’d grown used to Clint’s odd behaviors. “Where’s the fire?”

“It’s a surprise!” Clint said mischievously, pushing the button of the floor we were headed to with renewed vigor. “The team’s been talking, and we’ve decided there’s a few important skills in which you’re lacking.”

I thought for a second. “Um…explain?”

“Well,” Clint said, clapping me on the shoulder with a grin. “You’re skin and bones, kid, and when those HYDRA agents got the drop on you, you were good about seizing an opportunity, but it was kind of wasted by your complete and utter lack of knowledge on how to defend yourself.”

I pursed my lips. “Jerk. S’not my fault. There wasn’t a guidebook for protecting government secrets.” I paused. “So, what, am I learning hand to hand? Is that what this whole big thing is?”

“Close,” Hawkeye said as the elevator slowed. The doors opened. I stopped breathing. The team was there, setting up. They smiled at me, but…oh, God, no, no, no… “You’re going to learn how to shoot a gun, kiddo. You’re still too thin for us to teach you anything physical; you’d tire too fast. Until you get some weight back on, we’ll just…Peter?”

I stumbled back, trying to get back inside the elevator, but the doors had shut behind me, and I didn’t have the presence of mind to push the button.

Guns. Guns, everywhere. On the walls, lined up in neat little rows, on the tables, disassembled, their parts gleaming. Extra bullets, everywhere.

This was my nightmare.
The sight of the guns released an onslaught of memories I’d worked so hard to keep choked down and disassociated, at least emotionally. I *remembered* them, sure, but…they didn’t *consume* me. Not until now. Memories of May’s lifeless face, the blood spraying as the bullets hit her body. The sight of the gun in the hands of the HYDRA agent, pointed at everyone I loved. Ben’s shaky breaths, his weak grip on my hand, his last words. Another gun, pointed at me, threatening my life for pieces of paper I didn’t even care about. And now, guns at my front, my back, both sides. Boxed in by deadly weaponry that had stolen my childhood, stolen my naivety, my innocence.

Murderers not only of my family, but of my reality, of the person I used to be.

There were so many, I couldn’t concentrate on just one, and that made it worse. They all caved in on one another, becoming one huge, disgusting *thing*, this entity that I could never hope to overcome. The pressure of them surrounding me was unbearable. The mass of my surroundings began pulsing with harsh light, assaulting my senses. Red covered my vision as I drowned in the memories.

Time died. There was only my existence. My vision faded until the outlines of the guns behind my eyes were the only things I saw, lying in a background of blood. May and Ben’s voices echoed in my head, drowning out any other sound I may have heard. I felt nothing but the thick, warm fluid covering me, head to toe. I smelled nothing and tasted nothing but the heavy essence of copper and iron, gagging on it.

I registered my breaths coming far too quickly. *Hyperventilation*, my panicked mind provided helpfully. *You’re going to pass out if you don’t get this under control.*

Oh, I was going to pass out? Good.

I breathed even faster. I didn’t care at that point. I wanted the images to stop. I wanted the screams and the broken final words to evaporate. I wanted to hear them laughing, and see them smiling. I wanted to smell Uncle Ben’s too-heavy cologne and Aunt May’s horrible cooking. I wanted to feel Ben ruffling my hair and Aunt May cuffing me affectionately on the head when I missed curfew. I wanted to taste Aunt May’s apple pie, the only decent thing she could make.

I wanted to go home, and if that meant passing out, well, someone clock me over the head *right now*.

The visions started fading, soon after that. I supposed the dizziness and the weakness were from the hyperventilation, and I kept it up. Soon, sounds faded, too, until everything was gone, sucked back into the void at the back of my memory, where everything was locked up nice and tight and *hidden*.

The world came back violently, the room spinning on a dangerous axis. I looked up from where my head was buried in my hands, seeing faces swirling in on each other.

“Peter?” I heard a worried—scratch worried, *terrified*—voice ask.

I couldn’t tell whose it was, but the sound dropped off at the end, my eyes closed, and I fell forward into sweet, amazing, blissful, *safe* unconsciousness.

…

“—pulse is getting slower, which is good. He’ll—in a few minutes.”

Voices…not May’s or Ben’s. I didn’t know whether to cry or celebrate.
“—happened in there?” A different voice. Deeper. Oh, Bucky. I belatedly realized the first one was Bruce. “—get panic attacks?”

Panic attack? I thought numbly. I didn’t get those. Those were…I didn’t get those. I’d had…an episode, but not a panic attack.

“—vitals are more active,” Bruce said, and there was warmth on my shoulder, and a gentle shake. “Peter, can you open your eyes? Are you awake?”

Slowly, I unglued my eyelids and opened them, the bright light uncomfortable, but not unbearable. I realized I was in the infirmary, judging by the thin mattress and the IV in my arm. God, I hated needles.

“Mm…morning, sunshine,” I mumbled, my limbs feeling weighed down and sluggish. I reached up with my non-impaled arm to rub at my eyes, but really, it was just so I wouldn’t have to look at any of them.

I’d broken down. I’d positively crumbled. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before, and it was terrifying. Not only that, it had happened in front of the Avengers. God, they probably saw me as a complete and total basketcase, now.

The “morning sunshine” comment had been me putting my walls back up. Deflecting concern with humor, with sarcasm. Healthy? No. Safe? Yes.

“Peter, look at us,” Tony said, his usual humor nowhere to be found. I sighed and reluctantly dragged my hand down my face, blinking a few times as I sat up. Hands rushed to help me, but I shrugged them off.

“Um. Personal space?” I said awkwardly. Every one of them was crowded around my bed, looking on with concerned eyes. Even Tasha’s face seemed a bit more pinched than usual. Hell, even Stella was on the bed next to me, purring pitifully with wide eyes that just screamed worried, if a cat could do that. I huffed, ignoring the way my hands shook, blaming the weak feeling on the episode. “Guys, I’m fine. Really. I just…didn’t expect…that.”

“What happened, Pete?” Tony asked, folding his arms. “You scared the shit out of us.”


“I just…I just don’t like guns, okay?” I said, shifting uncomfortably. These people dealt with guns every single day. Guns were a completely natural part of their world. They probably thought I was crazy. “And then I walked in and they were everywhere, and I…I…” I stopped talking, feeling the forbidden darkness at the back of my mind probing my consciousness.

I squeezed my eyes shut and held my head in my hands, trying to force it back. My breathing sped up without my noticing.

“Back, all of you, guys,” Bucky’s voice distantly said. A weight settled on the bed next to me, and strong arms wrapped around my shoulders. “Peter. Focus on my voice, okay? You feel the way my chest is moving? Good, breathe with me. This is my arms around your shoulders, grounding you. You feel that?” He squeezed the nape of my neck gently with his metal hand, the cold slightly jolting me out of the darkness. “This is real. You’re feeling this. Whatever you’re seeing, whatever you’re hearing in your head, it’s not real.”

Bucky’s deep voice was rough, but it was stern. I focused on it, feeling the darkness ebb a little. I felt his arms and his hand, and I felt his chest moving. I tried copying him, my breaths
slowing from panicked gasps to deep, slow breaths. My heart rate slowed down, and every ounce of energy I had left drained from my body almost at once.

I sagged against Bucky, feeling frustrated tears prick my eyes. What was wrong with me?

“Peter? You with us?” I heard Bruce ask tentatively.

“Yeah,” I choked, not moving my face from where it had fallen against Bucky’s shoulder. I didn’t want to move. Consciously, I wanted to stop being weak in front of them. But for some reason, I didn’t want to leave this spot.

“Peter, can you…can you explain why you don’t like guns? Only if you feel up to it,” Steve asked hesitantly.

I huffed a watery laugh. I honestly thought he was kidding. After a beat of silence, I realized he wasn’t, and shakily explained. “The break-in. The…the HYDRA agents had…really big guns. A lot of them. And…and they shot my aunt and uncle. I told you I was there, but I was, like…there. I tried…to stop the bleeding, but it…they…” I hadn’t noticed, but at some point, I’d started crying. Crying turned into shaking shoulders and quiet sobs into Bucky’s flannel shirt.

“They died, both of them, and I couldn’t…I couldn’t…”

I didn’t want to cry. Crying wasn’t okay. Crying meant there was something wrong with me, and there wasn’t. I mean, okay, there were a lot of things wrong with me, but crying would mean acknowledging that those things bothered me, and I didn’t want that. Bucky was a saint and didn’t say anything, didn’t move, didn’t even breathe too hard, just held me like I was, giving me the opportunity to move on my own if I decided to, but not making me feel like I had to.

I didn’t for a while.

I heard someone come up and put a hand on my shoulder. “You saw all that, and you didn’t talk to anyone about it for ten months?” I recognized Sam’s worried voice. Of course, he would be worried. We’d had a lesson on defense mechanisms in psychology just the other day, and one of them was repression and concealing information from others for the sake of appearances and the million ways it messed with your head. I was probably screwed six ways to Sunday by now.

“Yeah,” I croaked. “There wasn’t anyone to tell.”

“Well, that changes now,” Steve said resolutely, and I didn’t have to look at him to know he’d assumed his leadership pose, all folded arms and impeccable posture, expecting authority and respect, but never giving anything less than his best. “You’ve got us now, okay? Whenever this happens, whenever you feel like you’re going to panic again, come find one of us. Or ask FRIDAY, and we’ll come to you. Any one of us is more than willing to help you, Peter, whenever you need it.”

I clenched my fist and stiffened a little. Bucky noticed.

“You don’t believe him?” Bucky’s tone was surprised. A little hurt, too.

I didn’t want to say it. It was stupid, and immature. I’d sound like a little kid if I was wrong. And if I was right…that would be so much worse.

“Kiddo, you…how could you think we wouldn’t want to help you?” Clint asked incredulously. “I am personally offended. Appalled. Horrified.” I choked a laugh. “Seriously, little dude, you’re the annoying little brother we never asked for, but love anyways. You’ve seen that, you must have.”
“Aye, young Peter,” Thor said, his booming voice making me cringe reflexively, but it was comforting. “You are indeed…how does it go…the ‘baby of the family?’” I could practically feel him beaming when Sam told him that was the correct expression and couldn’t help a shaky smile into Bucky’s shirt. “Young Peter, you are precious to us all! We may not have known you long, my brother, but your wits, intelligence, and heart are enough to make us cherish you even so!”

**Brother. Brother? Like family. You…you consider brothers family.**

“What’s on your mind, малышка?” Natasha asked, lightly ruffling my hair. “Why don’t you believe us?”

I didn’t say anything for a minute. Bruce’s soft voice reassured me, saying, “It’s okay, Peter. We want to hear whatever you’re thinking. You won’t upset us.”

I choked out the words quietly. “Director Fury. He—he said when he left me here, I was just…just a job, remember? I f-figured you were just…doing your job. Trying to…to get the information, you know? I wanted to think it was more but I…I didn’t…I didn’t want to find something else worth keeping and then have it…taken away, again.”

No one said anything for a few long minutes, and I was afraid this was it. I was afraid they were going to tell me I was right. Bucky would release me, the charade over. We’d go back to polite, awkward conversation. I’d go back to drifting through life, doing nothing but waiting for someone to end it.

Unexpectedly, none of that happened. Somebody cursed. I think it was Tony, because there were several words in there I’d never heard together, not even from Natasha. Bucky’s arms tightened. Natasha’s hand settled fully on my head, fingernails lightly scratching my scalp, the way May would after a nightmare or when I was sick. I heard the others shifting closer.

“Sometimes I hate that f—”

“Language!”

“—pirate,” Clint said, emphatically interrupted by Steve. “No, Peter. That was…none of us were satisfied with that. You’re fifteen years old. You need people in your corner, kiddo, whether you know it or not. We agreed we’d try to make you feel welcome, try to be your friends, but I don’t think any of us expected you to grow on us like you did, okay? We didn’t plan this. I doubt Fury even knows how attached we’ve gotten to you. And we’re going to protect you no matter what, got that? No matter what it takes, even if it’s from Fury. You may not be quite an Avenger, kiddo, but you’re family. You’re not getting rid of us that easily.”

The more he talked, the harder it got to hold the tears in. That was exactly what I’d wanted to hear. *Exactly.*

My shoulders shook with suppressed sobs. Bucky took his hand from my neck and cupped the back of my head gently with his metal hand over Natasha’s warm hand, pressing my face deeper into his shirt. God, this man was a saint. I was ruining his shirt with snot and tears and the works and he didn’t even care.

I meant to say something witty. Something funny, to diffuse the tension. Something like “No need to get sappy, Clint, you’ll ruin your image” or “I didn’t know you had it in you, Birdbrain”. Funnily enough, it came out, “Please don’t leave me” and I promptly died of
embarrassment.

Nobody laughed, though. Nobody laughed, and nobody treated me like I was a clingy child. Bucky tightened his arms. “You don’t have to worry about that, kiddo,” he said.

The others gave similar responses. I couldn’t look at them—not with how vulnerable I was. I was perfectly content to stay buried in Bucky’s flannel, but they didn’t mind. They reassured me in their own ways, with a pat on the back or a hair ruffle or something else.

None of them left. I didn’t move for a really long time, and not one of them left. Nobody even said anything. We just…sat there, and I was so damn happy I couldn’t even contemplate moving from this spot for eternity. Bucky’s arms, even his metal one, were warm and comforting.

So comforting, in fact, that I fell asleep at some point.

Drifting off, I heard someone singing a lullaby. I couldn’t tell whose voice it was. Honestly, it may have been in my head. It sounded like May. But it was soothing and eased my mind into a deep sleep.

None of the darkness from earlier ever touched me, and I was sure that it was because of the arms around me and the people surrounding me.

Finally, after almost ten months of being completely, utterly alone, I was finally, finally home.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, again, for everyone continuing to read! Please leave a Kudos or comment if you enjoyed. Thanks so much!!!
After The Episode, I still had my doubts.

How could I not? It was only natural after everything that had happened. Thankfully, though, the doubts were tiny voices I could easily drown out, where before they had been screaming at me, demanding my attention every second.

Now, they were easy to ignore, and things around the Compound were so much easier.

I talked more. A lot more, about everything. I also spoke my mind more, putting out my opinions and my desires, whereas before I’d kept anything that could cause conflict to myself, not wanting to intrude. Any doubts I had were erased with just a few words from any of them. From any member of my dysfunctional family.

I was…I wasn’t content, per se. I mean, I was happier, so much happier than I’d been in months, but I still had the formula bouncing around in my head and the mysterious words of the HYDRA agent. I’d been so focused lately on finding my place among the ragtag group of superheroes that every other important issue I had weighing down on me had kind of faded. Now that I knew where I stood, they were back with a vengeance.

But I had the Avengers, now, to help me. They’d made it clear that I didn’t have to tell them anything I didn’t want to until I felt ready. If Fury or SHIELD came a-knocking for the information, they’d deal with them. I knew I could depend on them, too, like I knew my own name.

If HYDRA came, they’d protect me with everything they had, and they said so emphatically every time it came up to reassure me.

I smiled to myself, because I believed them.

HYDRA came one week after The Episode, on Christmas Eve.

…

I was lying on the couch reading *Lord of the Flies*, my head in Natasha’s lap and my feet in Clint’s as Tasha crocheted, the dangling yarn lounging lazily in my hair.

Yes. I was appalled, too. The fearsome Black Widow crochets. Very well, too. I had a soft blue scarf to prove it.

She’d stopped cleaning her guns in front of me. I had a feeling this was something she could do instead while she was with me.

Clint was looking over some blueprints for new nonlethal sonic arrows Tony had designed, and he looked like a kid in a candy store when he got to the simulations. Tony and Bruce were in the lab, working on something classified that I wasn’t allowed to help with. Rhodey was down in the gym with his physical therapist, doing PT; he never said it, but everyone knew he didn’t really like anyone there while he was doing PT. No one likes showing that much weakness in front of people who care about them. If ever asked, though, I’d say he’s one of the strongest people I know.
Steve and Bucky were sitting on the floor on opposite sides of the coffee table, playing chess. Steve was winning, but Bucky was holding his own. Thor had no less than twenty Pop-tarts in front of him and was devouring them at an impressive speed at the dining room table, adjacent to the common room, eyes fixed on the TV. He had developed a recent fascination for Nickelodeon, primarily SpongeBob. Sam was reading something on his StarkPad, sitting in an armchair next to my head. Stella was lounging happily in a spot of sun streaming through the window, where she’d been for hours, moving every so often as the sun gradually climbed into the sky.

We’d decorated. It had been really bittersweet, for me. I’d only ever decorated with Aunt May and Uncle Ben; I couldn’t remember any Christmases with my parents.

The Avengers and I had spent the entire day yesterday setting up a gigantic tree, covering it in ornaments and tinsel and more. The main fireplace was decorated extravagantly with tinsel and snow-globes and stockings, the fire crackling softly. Natasha gave me an early Christmas present that day, too—my own stocking, and a little one for Stella.

It meant more to me than any other gift she could’ve given me.

I’d felt tears blurring my vision, seeing my name stitched carefully across the lip of the sock, in red and blue thread. She knew those were my two favorite colors. Without preamble, I’d thrown my arms around her shoulders, holding on for dear life.

She’d stiffened. I don’t think she’d expected that. I’d started to pull back, embarrassed, but she’d just laughed quietly and hugged me back. “Merry early Christmas, малышка.”

Clint had “awwwed” annoyingly in the background, but that made it even better.

When I decorated with Ben and May, Ben would put me on his shoulders to put the star on the tree until I was eleven. I’d had a growth spurt when I was 12 (granted, growth spurt is a little generous) and he couldn’t lift me anymore. Then, the two of us had put May on our shoulders.

With the Avengers, they insisted I put the star on the tree, since I was new. Thor lifted me up with one arm and put me on his broad shoulders, and I put the star on the tree, biting my lip to keep the tears back so hard it bled.

God, it was all I could do not to cry, but I didn’t know if it was from nostalgia or happiness.

It was a peaceful day. Of course, it couldn’t last.

An alarm that I’m sure made my ears bleed sounded so suddenly I yelled and dropped the book, sitting up so fast I whacked my head on one of Tasha’s crochet needles. It was accompanied by flashing lights, not unlike those you’d see in a fire alarm, only brighter. Poor Stella scampered immediately to my side, hopping up in my lap and burying her head under my arm. I clutched her tight, appreciating the comfort.

“What’s going on?” I yelled over the alarm. The Avengers in the room had all stood abruptly, worried looks on their faces. “Is someone breaking in?”

“That’s the call to Assemble,” Steve said, fumbling with his phone. He pressed a button and the alarm turned off, but the blaring lights remained. “FRIDAY, have Tony, Bruce, and Rhodey meet us in the conference room. Peter, will you be okay by yourself for a few minutes? You can just stay in here.”

I nodded hesitantly.
The Avengers swept out of the room.

I sat for a few minutes, trying and failing to read through some more of my book, stroking Stella’s fur to calm her down, when I heard shouting from down the hall. Curious, I stood and made my way closer to the door, so I could hear what they were saying. They were loud enough that I could clearly understand them through two doors and down a hallway, so whatever was going on must have been pretty heated. Stella pawed at my knees until I picked her up and took her with me. I felt kind of bad listening in, but they weren’t exactly being quiet.

“—think they’re doing?” I heard Clint’s angry voice. “He’s just a kid, dammit!”

Oh. To my knowledge, I was the only kid they would be talking about. That gave me absolute eavesdropping privileges. My guilt evaporated.

“Maybe, but he’s a kid with very sensitive information, and apparently something else they need,” Fury’s voice said, slightly staticky through the speakers. I could hear them from down the hall, they were so loud. “It would be a good idea for you all to investigate this HYDRA cell before it gets any bigger. It’s here in New York, actually. I doubt it’ll take more than a day.”

My breath hitched. I knew there were HYDRA agents here, but a whole cell? Had they been watching me ever since my escape from CPS? Had I just been fooling myself into thinking I’d been evading them?

“Oh, great idea, Fury,” Tony said sarcastically. “Leave the defenseless teenager being ruthlessly hunted by the evil organization we’re going to take down alone in the Compound with nothing but a cat to protect him.”

“Can it, Stark,” Fury growled. “I thought I said not to get attached.”

Nobody said anything.

“Shit,” Fury said into the line. “You guys. You’re not a foster home or a babysitting service. You’re a group of elite soldiers who don’t have time to raise a kid. As soon as he gives you the information, he’s out, you understand me? I’m sending him to Nevada or wherever else we need him. I don’t really care if you guys try to stop me, either. And if he takes too long, you can bet he’s not going to stay with you out of spite. I’ll move his ass across the country so fast he’ll get whiplash.”

A beat of silence. My heart dropped. I felt like I was falling, my heart below my stomach and my stomach in my throat, everything mismatched and wrong. Stella turned and pawed at my chest, sensing my stiffness, but I couldn’t even look at her. I picked a spot on the wall and stared at it as I felt my vision tunnel. My legs were shaking underneath me, so much so that I sat down right where I was in the middle of the hallway before I fell.

I knew it.

It didn’t matter what I did. It really didn’t matter, did it? I could be the perfect kid. I could give them every shred of information I wanted. I could hand them everything on a silver platter, gift-wrapped and signed, and Director Fury still wouldn’t let me stay. Or I could be the rebellious
kid I was and hold on to the formula for as long as I wanted, and it still wouldn’t matter, because he’d move me eventually, anyways.

My days here were numbered, and I couldn’t do a thing about it.

I dimly heard FRIDAY ask if I needed any assistance, but I didn’t respond. I couldn’t hear specifically what was going on in the conference room. I wasn’t sure I wanted to. I heard yelling, but I couldn’t hear the words. It was only then I noticed the tears cutting tracks down my face.

My breaths started coming faster, darkness invading my mind, the familiar feeling petrifying me. No, no, I didn’t want to have another panic attack, not now, not alone.

A minute or so passed, but the hopelessness I felt was consuming. My vision was still gray around the edges, my hands quivering. I couldn’t stop it, and my breathing was borderline hyperventilation. I heard FRIDAY interrupt the yelling in the conference room sternly and say my name. I think I may have heard panic attack, too.

Then I heard a stampede.

Breathing hard and fast, I looked up blearily from my spot on the floor and saw all nine of the Avengers turning the corner so fast they actually bumped into each other, and I had a comical flashback to the Breakfast Club scene. It may have been funny in any other situation.

Thor, having the advantage of innate godly speed, reached me first and crouched down so fast I swear even his godly joints popped, immediately pulling me to him. “Calm yourself, young Peter,” his normally booming voice said quietly. “It is alright. We will not let any entity remove you from our care, no matter how strong.”

It took a few minutes, but I slowed my breathing enough to get rid of the light-headed feeling. Even then, the tears wouldn’t stop.

“I h-heard,” I said, squeezing my eyes shut as I melted in Thor’s embrace. “I h-heard what F-Fury said. I-it…d-doesn’t matter…” I clutched Stella so tightly I was afraid I was hurting her, but she didn’t struggle, just rubbed her head against my chin in affection and comfort.


“As touching as this is,” Fury’s voice ground out from the speakers. I burrowed further into Thor’s arms. His voice was quickly becoming another fear of mine. It always said things I didn’t want to hear, things that terrified me. Thor noticed and cupped the side of my head, his huge hand over my ear, muffling and distorting the voice enough to make it easier to handle. “I need you guys on this HYDRA cell, all of you. We’ll talk about the kid later.”

I literally felt the air around me spike with tension and drop fifty degrees. Obviously, the Avengers were not happy. I honestly thought they were going to say no, but then Natasha spoke in a steely, calm voice that I was sure terrified every enemy she’d ever faced. Hell, if she ever used that voice on me, I was going to melt into a Peter Puddle right there.

“Fury,” she said, no inflection in her cold voice, “We’ll do this mission, all of us, only because it’s protecting Peter. But I want you to understand something.” She looked dead at the camera she knew Fury was watching through, eyes cold, jaw set. “You brought us together because we’re individually the best at what we do. But that doesn’t mean we’re not human, all of us on some level, and not a family. You may not like it, you probably didn’t intend for it, but we’re that
before we’re the Avengers. If you give us a kid like Peter, with a heart of gold and a past from hell, and you put him under our care and let us get close to him, let us love him, you can make damn sure we’re going to take down anything in our way when it comes to protecting him, because he’s our kid now. Not the kid, our kid. And yeah, we’ll talk about our kid later. But I can promise you, we’ll be the ones doing the talking, and you’ll be the one signing every form necessary to make sure he can stay here for as long as he wants, you understand me?” Tasha spoke with absolutely no room for argument, and I was honestly surprised at how Fury wasn’t positively cowering. Granted, I couldn’t see him, so he may very well have been. I hoped he was.

Fury didn’t speak for a moment, but neither did Natasha. Her steely features were fixed on the camera. I was surprised the glass didn’t shatter.

Finally, Fury cleared his throat, the sound muffled through the speakers. “We’ll…talk more about this later, Avengers,” he said, and he sounded just a tad meeker than before. Good. “For now, I’ll send you the specs on this HYDRA cell. You leave in thirty minutes.”

The call cut out.

The silence that followed was overwhelming.

My ragged breathing was the only thing I heard. I kept my eyes stubbornly shut, avoiding the world for as long as I could. I clutched Stella tight against my chest, shaking. Thor tightened his arms, and for a god with super strength, he was really, really gentle.

“Pete,” Tony said, kneeling beside me. “We’ve got to go, buddy. But I want you to know that no one’s taking you from us, got that?”

Hesitantly, I nodded into Thor’s chest, a bit of tension draining from my shoulders. “Got it.” My voice was raspy.

Bruce knelt beside me. “I’m just going to make sure you’re alright. You had another panic attack, didn’t you?” I nodded. “I’m going to take your pulse, is that okay?”

I gave him my arm without leaving my godly cocoon. He took my pulse, checked my breathing, and ruffled my hair, saying, “You’re okay. Try not to scare us, kiddo. We’re old, we can’t take it.”

“Think you can stand up?” Sam asked as Thor drew back a bit, slipping an arm around my shoulders. “You look exhausted, kid. You can sleep while we’re gone; it’ll be like we never left.”

They were treating me like a four-year-old. To my dismay, I found I didn’t mind so much.

Thor and Sam pulled me up, and I really didn’t have to do any of the work myself. My legs wobbled a bit. Panic attacks, for some reason, always left me utterly exhausted. I tried to put Stella down, but she yowled quietly and dug her claws into my shirt. I let her go and she hung from my shirt by just her claws, looking up at me like I’d just offended her mother. The Avengers laughed at the sight, and I smiled fondly, bringing my arms around her until her claws retracted.

Bucky and Steve supported me to my room—my legs were still jelly—as the other Avengers wished me goodbye and went to suit up. I plopped on my bed as Bucky threw back the covers and Steve drew the curtains shut, plunging the room into darkness before Bucky flipped the bedside light on. I was glad he knew I didn’t want it to be dark without my having to ask. I curled up on the sheets still in my clothes and kicked my shoes off. Bucky gently drew the covers up around me and patted my head gently with his metal hand. They both left, Steve saying, “We’ll be
back before you know it, kiddo, and then we’ll work everything out. Get some sleep.”

I hummed as the door clicked shut softly, Stella pacing before burrowing under my arm and against my chest. I drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

The Avengers left.

HYDRA came.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure you know exactly what I'll say by now, but thanks for everyone who's still with it :) leave a Kudos or comment if you feel so inclined!
I didn’t wake up nearly as peacefully as I’d fallen asleep. In fact, I was awoken by being bodily thrown out of my bed. The world’s most effective alarm clock, everyone.

My body slammed into the floor with a thud, the hardwood bruising my side as I collided with it. I was half asleep, but adrenaline spread through my veins as soon as I realized that something was very, very wrong.

Coughing a little, as the air had been slightly knocked from my lungs, I gasped and looked up blearily.

My breath caught in my throat. There were five hulking men positioned strategically throughout my room, trapping me. Two at the door, their backs facing the hallway, faceless, emotionless, merciless black masks focused on me where I lay sprawled on the floor, cutting off my most likely means of escape. One in front of the bathroom door, cutting off any place I could enclose myself from them. One at the window, curtains still drawn, still shrouding the room from the sunlight, cutting off that escape, too.

And the one in front of me, with the—

The gun.

I felt myself trembling as I sat on the floor, legs folded beneath me, arms holding me up unsteadily. It was then I noticed the odd symbol on their coat sleeves, the tentacled head that haunted my nightmares.

HYDRA.

I scrambled back a little, trying to put distance between us, but any direction I went, I would just put myself closer to another member of the unit.

“Stand,” the one who’d thrown me out of bed—christened Alarm Clock—said roughly. His voice shook me out of my own head, a little. I wondered if I could alert FRIDAY.

“Stand!” He said again, forcefully this time, nudging me roughly with his steel-toed boot. I winced and stood shakily, leaning against the wall. I almost tripped over Stella’s food bowl.

Wait, where was Stella?

I cast a frantic search around the room, but she was nowhere to be found. Oh, God, I thought, as every horrible thought filled my mind and my lungs contracted in panic. Please, please God, let them not have hurt Stella. Not Stella, not sweet, little, innocent Stella.

Stella was my link. My…God, I didn’t even know, but Stella seemed to represent everything good and pure and innocent left in my life, kept the light in my heart, and kept me sane.

I almost said her name, but God, if she was hidden, I didn’t want these monsters to find her.

I shut my mouth in a thin line and pressed myself up against the wall, feeling myself shake
like a leaf, my eyes never straying far from the guns surrounding me. I felt the darkness ebb at my mind, probing with sharp teeth, eager to tear at my awareness, but I choked it back. If I fell into a panic attack now...

Alarm Clock said something in rapid German to the others, and the other four nodded. I shrank back, but one of them—Window—grabbed my arm with a gloved hand. I jerked, trying to pull away from him, but he tightened his grip to the point of it being painful and dragged me forward, my socked feet slipping on the hardwood as I tried to gain purchase.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I yelled, panic invading my throat and leaking into my words. The remaining four agents flanked us, forming an impenetrable square around us, Bathroom and Alarm Clock in the front, Door 1 and Door 2 in the back. Window hauled me along, even as I tried to pry his hand off of my arm. It was useless. He closed his entire hand around my bicep. His fingers actually overlapped, I was so skinny; or maybe he just had big hands. “Let—let me go, I don’t—stop it, just—”

He slammed the butt of his machine gun into the soft spot of my stomach with absolutely no warning, hissing, “Quiet. Your babbling is unnecessary.” I yelled in surprise and pain, doubling over, my knees hitting the floor as I curled in on myself. I wrapped my free arm around my torso, coughing and pulling in air sporadically. He never let go of my arm, so my upper body was twisted at an odd angle as I tried to curl in on myself and he simultaneously pulled my arm upwards. Oh, my God. Terrified, terrified thoughts filled my hazy mind. I didn’t actually know if anyone else was in this Compound. I’d only ever seen the Avengers. I didn’t know exactly what time it was. For all I knew, I could be alone with these agents. Oh, Lord, I wish I’d had Clint teach me how to use that gun, no matter how scared it made me. Or just how to throw a punch.

After a couple seconds of wheezing, and a couple more of stalling, he yanked me up so hard my shoulder popped. It wasn’t dislocated or anything, but it didn’t feel good.

I struggled to stay on my feet as he pulled me along, deeper into the Compound. I hadn’t been to several areas other than the team floors. The team took me outside, sometimes, when it wasn’t too cold, because they said I was too pale. Even so, I’d rarely been anywhere but Medical, the training room, and the living areas.

I panted out of both pain and apprehension as they quickened their pace. I glanced out the window, but it was still the middle of the day. The Avengers couldn’t have left all that long ago, no more than a couple hours. I had no idea when they’d be back, either.

They took me to a medium-sized room, with no windows and almost no furniture. There was a table, two chairs on either side of it, and a wall in the far back with a mirror.

Oh, boy. Um. I was in trouble, because I was pretty sure the Avengers used this for interrogation? Right? It was a bigger than the ones on TV, but it still looked the same. That’s how it was in all the action movies, right?

“Put him in the chair,” Window said, tightening his grip on me as I squirmed. His voice was heavily accented. “Get rid of the table and the other chair. Set up the laptop. Prepare the webcam.”

Wait, webcam?

I didn’t like where this was going.
The Door twins heaved the table out of the way, and Bathroom grabbed the chair. Despite my (albeit pathetic) struggles, Window and Alarm Clock manhandled me into the remaining chair. Window held my arms down against the armrests as I thrashed, kicking and squirming, panic consuming my vision, my thoughts, my reality, because if they tied me down, it was over, itwasoverohGodnoTonySteveTasha, pleaseClintThorRhodeySam, SOMEBODYBuckyBruce please help me—

My struggles ceased with a quick hit to my jaw, snapping my head to the side. I saw stars for a second, but that was all the time they needed to zip tie my hands to the armrests. I jerked as they stepped back, but my arms wouldn’t budge, and I only succeeded in making the ties cut into the flesh of my arms.

Oh, shit.

Alarm Clock brought out a stand and a laptop, opening it and tapping away. Window turned to him, saying something in German. Alarm Clock finished with the webcam, and he pointed it at me. I could see my own pale, terrified face, reflected in the lens and clear on the screen.

I didn’t know what was happening, and that was probably the worst thing. No one had asked me a single question. They hadn’t asked me for the formula, hadn’t threatened me. They’d hurt me, but not badly, not nearly as badly as they could have. They’d tied me down and set up a camera. Who were they contacting?

I was shocked out of my reverie when Window set his gun loudly on the table, loud enough to make me jolt in the chair. I tugged subconsciously at the zipties. My arms were beginning to bleed, I was pulling so hard. But this was how I was redirecting my panic, keeping it away from my fragile mind.

Suddenly, hands roughly grabbed my forearms, shoving them down against the wooden armrests, and a face was inches from mine, terrifying mask in place. I jerked back, eyes wide, panic consuming my every thought, because he was too close to me and I was alone.

"Hello, Peter," he said, his thick accent doing nothing to obscure the malice dripping from his words. I shivered and would have continued to tug at the zipties frantically had it not been for his bruising grip on my arms. I leaned my head back as far as I could, but it wasn’t far, and his face followed me, never more than an inch or two from mine.

"It is an honor to meet you," he said, and even through the opaque mask, I could sense the sneer. "Such an important boy, with a lot of important information."

I shivered, lips pressed into a thin line, trembling.

"But that," he said, releasing his bruising grip and reaching up to his face, peeling his mask back, "is not what we are here for today. At least, not right now."

He looked...so normal. I couldn’t help but stare. He had blond hair and icy blue eyes, almost gray in the artificial light. His jaw was sharp, cheekbones high, lips thin. He was tall. If you put him in normal clothes, you could pass him on the street and not spare him a second glance. He didn’t look evil.

This made him all the more terrifying.

"No, not right now," he said almost to himself. "Now, we need something else from you,
Mr. Parker.” Window bared his teeth in a smile and I flinched. What…? I didn’t have anything but the formula, so what—

“It has come to our attention,” he said as he pushed a few buttons on the laptop, “that the Avengers have become rather attached to you.”

Oh.

Oh, no.

“See, HYDRA and the Avengers have a fairly adverse relationship, as you know,” he said, almost as calmly as he would chat about the weather with a friend. “And, as we understand it, they seem to have whole-heartedly accepted you into their little family.” He positioned the webcam directly on me, now, zooming out until you could see my entire form strapped to the chair. “Before we pursue our business with you, we must take care of the thorns in our side.” He grinned. “You’re going to help us.”

I swallowed thickly. Tugging at my arms, the pain of the raw cuts being forced open dull in comparison to the fear in my chest, I sat, helpless, useless. Hopeless. Terrified.

“I have disabled Mr. Stark’s Artificial Intelligence. FRIDAY, was it? That was difficult. Full marks to Mr. Stark. However, I managed to shut it down before she sent its distress signal.” Window said blandly, striding towards me. I subconsciously recoiled, but there was nowhere to go. He leaned down, right in my face again. “I am going to turn it back on, so that I can contact your Avengers. You are not going to speak. You will sit quietly, do you understand?”

I licked my dry lips, unable to look away from his cold eyes. Because I am a stupid teenage boy with no self-preservation and everything to prove, I tried to reason with the scary semi-Nazi lunatic. “I—look, we can work something out. Please, you don’t have to—”

He backhanded me hard across the left side of my face, my head snapping to the side, a grunt escaping my lips. I shut my eyes against the pain, against the fear, against the gnawing terror choking its way up my throat—

I felt blood trickle from my nose and slide along the curve of my upper lip. I almost gagged as I tasted the blood, memories resurfacing too quickly.

“As I said before,” the man said, wiping a couple specks of blood off his hand and onto his uniform, “you will not speak. If you do, I will give you a bit more than that, do you understand?”

I nodded slowly, my head swimming. I felt heat rise in my cheeks as I fought the tears prickling against my eyes. I told myself it was because of the nose. It was just anatomy. When something hit your nose, it was such sensitive cartilage and so close to your eyes that your eyes immediately teared up, as a defense mechanism.

It wasn’t because I was scared.

The man placed himself between me and the webcam, the other four guards spreading out to cover the exits, two on each door. I heard a blip, and my heart stuttered as familiar voices started filtering through the laptop.

“Hello, Avengers,” the man said crisply, and I could hear the satisfied, smug smile in his words. “It’s lovely to see you face to face, like this.”

“Oh, yeah, huge pleasure. So, who are you?” Tony’s voice rang through, sounding tired and
annoyed. “Are you another budding supervillain? Doctor Doom’s apprentice? Please give us something better than Doom-Bots. I’ve been very bored.”

The man chuckled lightly. “I appreciate your wit, Mr. Stark. But I’m afraid I’m not such a benign man as the fool Dr. Doom.” He readjusted his sleeve, and I could tell he was allowing them to see the HYDRA symbol on his arm. I shivered. The air was growing colder, and goosebumps were covering my skin. Maybe it was shock. I was quivering in my seat.

I needed to do something.

There was absolutely nothing that I could do.

“You son of a bitch,” I heard Bruce say through the webcam. Whoa, Bruce sounded mad. He never sounded mad, because of the whole Hulk thing. This was probably bad.

“I’ve been called much worse, Dr. Banner,” he said, his voice almost reassuring. I pulled at the zipties. Fresh blood welled in the wounds. Wow, yeah, they were starting to really hurt now. I kept tugging. “We have a few important things to discuss, Avengers.”

“First of all,” Clint’s voice said, “you’re stupid for showing us your face, because I’m going to track you down and pull your lungs out of your ass with rusty pliers. Second, we’ve almost got your location, you bastard. Give us a few seconds and we’ll make this very, very personal.”

The man laughed. Full on, evil villain laugh. Tingles ran up and down my spine, like someone was walking on my grave. “Oh, Hawkeye, I am very much counting on your finding my location.”

Silence for a few seconds. Then muttered curses from Tony that carried through the microphone.

“You’re in the Compound.” Tony said. It wasn’t a question.

“I am. Did you enjoy our distraction? It must have been frustrating, to arrive at our alleged headquarters and find nothing.” This was starting to make more sense. SHIELD had been fed false information, probably by one of the HYDRA spies, and sent the Avengers, getting them to leave me alone in the Compound. This had been planned from the very start. I tugged harder at the ties, the pain grounding me. “I want you to know, Avengers, that you’re going to do everything I say.” Reaching down a bit, he pulled a small knife from the belt around his waist, letting it catch the florescent lights and glow. I couldn’t stop the choked off whimper that escaped my lips. “Otherwise, things may get a bit messy.”

He took several steps back and then stepped to the side, revealing my presence to my friends.

I’d never forget the looks on their faces.

They were outraged.

“You stay the hell away from him,” Sam seethed, fists clenched at his sides. I could see them all, now; they were all gathered around the camera, all of them on screen. They were in one of the bigger Quinjets. All of them had pinched, furious expressions, clenched fists, narrowed eyes.

The man chuckled and held the knife lazily, twirling it between his fingers. I hoped he accidentally cut one of them off. “So. Earth’s Mightiest Heroes.” He lowered the knife, letting it
brush against my collarbone. I shut my eyes, tipping my head away from the knife, inhaling sharply. “When will you be getting back?”

A beat of silence. Window chuckled and pushed the point of the blade against the side of my neck, just where it connected to my shoulder. A drop of blood welled and slid down my collarbone, my shirt absorbing the liquid quickly. I gasped sharply in surprise.

“A few minutes,” Rhodey said quickly, and I opened my eyes to see him glancing worriedly at the knife. “Seven, tops.”

Seven minutes. Seven minutes away.

Could I handle seven minutes?

I toyed with the thought of telling them to stay away. I didn’t want them risking their lives for me. Those thoughts disappeared when the cold steel touched my skin again. Pain lanced up and down my arms as I pulled at the chair’s arms.

The man grinned. “Shall we play a game? How about…one finger for each minute it takes after five minutes, starting now.”

I jerked sharply, unable to keep from looking at the screen any longer. I felt the tears I’d so valiantly held in leak out, mixing with the blood from my still-bleeding nose. Dammit. This sucked. This *sucked*. I needed—I needed all my fingers. I needed my friends. I needed them to storm in here and kick some ass, because I was *tired of being scared*. I was *so, so* tired of being *so afraid*.

But I was.

There were immediately shouts of anger. “We are doing all that we can,” Thor growled, and I thought he might actually break the jet if he got any angrier. “You cannot fault young Peter for our delay. We will be there soon.”

Window’s hand cupped my jaw roughly, my teeth snapping together with an audible click. He forced me to look directly at the screen. I let my eyes go out of focus, the blurry camera screen fading. I didn’t want to…I don’t know. I don’t know what I wanted. But I didn’t want to look at them while I was like this. I didn’t want them to see me like…like this.

Like a coward.

“Your delay, as you so quaintly put it, may just cost your little friend a limb or two.” His hand tightened. I felt bruises blooming on my cheeks and along my jaw from where his fingers dug into my skin, and I squeezed my eyes shut. He moved a finger up to brush the blood along my lip and held it there. I shut my eyes even tighter. God, he was *way* too close. “I’m going to have a very good time killing him. After he’s given us the information, of course. It’s up to you, Avengers, how painful his death is.”

Okay.

Okay, so that was a thing that had just come out of the sadistic HYDRA underling’s mouth.

He was going to kill me no matter what happened.

Why did these things keep happening to me? What had I done to deserve this?

*Universe, I’m sorry for that time I lied to Ben about not doing the dishes. I’m sorry for the*
time I threw May’s meatloaf away behind her back. There, we good?

“We’re less than four minutes out,” Steve said with controlled calmness, though his eyes betrayed his bloodlust. “Get the knife away from him, alright?”

The man grinned again. God, that smile was going to haunt my nightmares forever. He dropped my jaw, wiping the blood on his uniform, standing beside me. I took in a shuddering breath. “I assume you know which room we’re in,” he said confidently, striding to the laptop. “Meet us here and leave your fancy toys. You have three minutes before I start my fun.” The team’s eyes widened, and the laptop screen went dark.

The shut was quiet. It was a small, thin laptop, so closing it wasn’t this huge, heavy boom, or anything.

It was the loudest sound I’d ever heard.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you SO MUCH for all the wonderful support / comments!!! It means the world :)
Chapter 11

The Avengers were trickling into the room in under three minutes, coming from each door and from the vents. They were invading stealthily, silently, and swiftly.

It didn’t matter.

Window let the knife dig into my neck, his stance insultingly relaxed. He’d moved me to the far wall, the farthest point from both doors and the vent, standing behind my chair. The other four guards formed a semicircle around us, guns trained on my friends as they stopped, assessing the situation with cold eyes.

I gasped in a breath as the knife cut a shallow slash along my neck, on the right side. I tugged again at the zipties. The wooden arms of the chair were stained with blood by now. I couldn’t feel the tips of my fingers, and upon glancing down, they were beginning to turn a light shade of blue. That wasn’t good.

“I don’t think I can stress enough how much you really don’t want to do this,” Tasha said, red, curled hair dulling in comparison to her fiery expression. “I will do things to you that you’ve never even heard of, you understand me? I can be very creative.”

Window chuckled. “I’m well aware of your reputation, Ms. Romanov.” In my panicked state, I was beginning to realize how much this guy’s attitude pissed me off. “Unfortunately, you seem to be lacking when it comes to opportunity.”

Tasha’s eyes narrowed. “Well, then. A rain check. I’ll show you the door.”

Window dragged the tip of the knife along my collarbone, forming a shallow slash along the length of the bone. Blood welled immediately, soaking the collar of my shirt. I bit my lip to keep any sound from escaping, but a choked whimper wormed its way out, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

“For your wit, Ms. Romanov,” he said like it was the greatest party gift in the whole damn world.

Tasha looked murderous.

“Now, then,” he said, removing the knife a little and dropping a heavy hand on my shoulder. I jerked violently. “How would you like to die, Avengers? Execution style? Perhaps I’ll line you up one by one.” He grabbed my jaw from behind, his finger inadvertently brushing the corner of my mouth, tilting my head back a bit.

I shivered in his grip. He made me feel so exposed, so raw. He was the manifestation of every evil that HYDRA represented. He was everything about them that terrified me: ruthless, methodical, calm. Human.

“Young Peter here can pick who goes first, how does that sound?” Thor called me young Peter. Coming from his mouth, it sounded like a curse. It was wrong. Then I realized what he’d said.

My eyes widened in time with the Avengers’ eyes as they darkened.
Hell. No.

Screw safety and self-preservation. I sure as hell wasn’t deciding that. I probably could have used my words, but it was his fault for putting his finger so close to my mouth, so I jerked around and bit him.

And damn, if that didn’t feel good.

He yelled. He positively howled. I don’t think it was the pain; more the surprise. He tried to jerk his finger from my teeth, but dammit, this guy had put me through so much shit. He’d dragged me from my bed, hit me, tied me up, cut me, terrified me, used me against my friends. I wasn’t letting go anytime soon.

The Avengers couldn’t really do much but watch, because the other four still had heavy duty machine guns pointed straight at them and were not distracted at all by the commotion behind them, but my friends looked prouder than I’d ever seen them. I think Tony might have verbally cheered me on, actually. Clint, too.

My revenge was short-lived. He clocked me on the side of the head with the handle of the knife hard enough to jar my brain for a second. I let go of his bloody finger as stars filled my vision and my head wobbled on my shoulders until it cleared. The man cursed up a storm behind me as I blinked the stars from my eyes and spat to the side, the taste of blood heavy on my tongue. I shivered.

He grabbed a fistful of my hair and I cried out in pain as he wrenched my head back, shoving the knife dangerously hard against the hollow of my throat. I didn’t dare breathe.

“Well,” he panted, sounding disheveled, but not exactly angry. “He’s spirited, I will give you that. Now, Avengers, if you would be so kind as to dispose of your weaponry, I would be much obliged.”

Throwback to the nineteenth century. His vocabulary rivaled Thor’s.

“Let Peter go first,” Bucky said calmly, leaving no room for argument. When he didn’t move, Bucky growled, “At least get the knife away from him.”

This was going to turn into a very big fight, I could tell. I felt Window tense up and tug harder on my hair. The man opened his mouth to retort, but something caught his eye. Something small. Something brown and white. Something moving. Something coming up right past the Avengers, right past the HYDRA agents, and right up to my seat, stalking confidently.

Stella leapt up into my lap, peering past me at the HYDRA agent.

“Stella?” I breathed quietly, eyes focused on my cat, because there was literally something human in her eyes. Something angry. She looked like a tigress, stalking her prey. I assume the man behind me was too shocked to really say anything for a moment, being stared down by a cat. A very small, very adorable cat, apparently with a dark side.

Stella gracefully pounced onto my shoulder, her silky tail wrapping affectionately around my neck, before she positively lost it.

Screw the Avengers. Stella was going to single-handedly take down HYDRA one day.

She launched herself at the man, claws sinking into the skin of his face, hissing up a storm. Chaos exploded as the man shouted and stumbled back. I was startled out of my stupor by spurts of
You know what? If Stella could kick some ass, it was definitely my turn.

“Hey!” I shouted at the nearest HYDRA agent, which just so happened to be Alarm Clock. He turned, glaring at me through the lens of his mask, aiming his pistol at my chest.

I ignored the gun, though my heart beat faster.

*Be stronger than the gun, Parker,* I repeated in my head. *You’re stronger than a hunk of metal. You’re stronger than that.*

I slouched down in my seat as low as the bindings on my arms would let me and delivered a solid kick to his crotch. *Payback’s a bitch, isn’t it?* I thought with a little bit of satisfaction.

I honestly didn’t think that would work, but his legs folded underneath him, the pistol clattering to the ground by my foot as he collapsed, moaning in complete agony. Ouch. I definitely wasn’t sorry. A stray bullet hit his vest in the center of his chest, knocking him out cold from the force.

I managed to drag the gun towards me with my foot, scanning the Avengers, who were still firing at the three guys with machine guns. They’d ducked around the doors for cover. Tony, Rhodey, and Sam didn’t have their suits, and I didn’t think Thor normally used a gun, and Bruce was a pacifist (though I seriously doubted he cared all that much right about now) so they didn’t have guns with them. Steve was covering Bucky with his shield as he reloaded behind one of the doors. Natasha and Clint were crouched behind the table on the other side of the room that they’d overturned, covering each other.

I looked at the gun—no, the hunk of metal—under my socked foot. It was cold even through the material.

I saw Rhodey looking around the corner, looking for an entrance, a crack, anything. Rhodey was in the army. Rhodey could shoot. Very. Well.

“Rhodey!” I screamed, the sound tearing from my throat and startling everybody in the room. Without preamble, his eyes found mine just as I jerked my foot with all my strength, sending the skittering gun flying past the distracted HYDRA agents who were totally not focused on him, because they thought he was defenseless without his suit. He scooped it up before it even reached him and delivered an immediate headshot to one man, who folded instantly, clattering against the floor in a jumble of limbs and weaponry.

The other two firing HYDRA agents quickly followed, felled by Tasha and Bucky, respectively. I heard a yowl and wrenched around in my seat as far as I could to see Window fling Stella off with a growl and shove to his feet, claw marks decorating his face. He lunged for me.

I jerked my head around, opening my mouth to scream for one of the Avengers, but his hand covered it with a loud smack, and again, the knife was against my throat.

“Drop. Your. Weapons.” He ground out, sounding angry. It was disconcerting. He’d maintained such a cool, calm appearance throughout this whole thing, and now he was furious. Even when I’d bitten him, he hadn’t been this angry. “I will kill him, Avengers.”

There was a beat of silence. Sucking in breath through my nose was a lot harder than I’d thought, especially considering my panicking lungs were trying to work overtime to keep up with the adrenaline flooding my system. I heard a clatter, then another, then another, and pretty soon all
the guns were on the floor.

“Good,” he sneered. His head was directly behind mine so that he was almost half-crouched behind me, shielding his head with my own. Light bulb. “You know, you get very obedient when this child is threatened. I’d love to see—”

Okay, enough of this.


So, instead of leaving a bad review on Yelp, I shoved my head forward as much as I could in his grip, my skin pinching as the knife dug in a bit, and then threw it back, right into his nose. It hurt. But not nearly as much as it hurt him.

He yelled in surprise, obviously not having expected me to cut him off mid monologue. Damn villains. Always so egotistical. The knife fell into my lap, grazing my arm on the way down. His hand left my mouth as he clapped it to his nose, and I sucked in a frantic breath.

A single shot reverberated throughout the room, and the man behind me immediately collapsed. I looked up, looking to see who made the shot, to see Bruce of all people holding the smoking gun. It looked wrong on him. Wrong in his hands. He tossed it away, and I let out a silent sigh of relief.

Panting, he looked up, fiddling with his glasses, and said, “It was that or the Other Guy was going to tear his arms off and feed them to him.” He looked haggard and exhausted. I supposed it must’ve been a huge struggle keeping the Hulk under wraps during all that commotion.

I slumped back in the chair, my hands going lax against the armrests, my head lolling on my shoulders. My adrenaline was crashing hard. With grit teeth, I said, “Can someone please get these damn ties off me before I rip my arms off?”

They were in front of me in under a second. One HYDRA dude was still alive, so Rhodey and Sam went about restraining him, hauling him up, and dragging him from the room. Natasha produced a Swiss Army Knife from somewhere on her person and crouched in front of me, gently sawing the ties from my wrists.

I winced as she peeled them from where they’d cut deep into my skin, not quite covering the sound that left my lips. Tasha’s eyes narrowed.

Thor picked up a limping Stella. At my worried look, he smiled. “Do not fear, young Peter. The feline is in good health, just dazed. I will care for her.” My shoulders slumped in relief, and I gave the god a shaky smile. Steve, Bucky, Tony, and Clint had busied themselves with dragging the bodies of the HYDRA agents from the room. I tried not to focus on the pooling blood swallowing the floor. I pinched my eyes shut when the smell hit me, memories resurfacing.

“Tasha,” I choked out, trying not to smell the copper. Free from the chair, I could move forward. She pulled me onto my knees from the chair and pressed my face into her shoulder, whispering soothingly in Russian. I sighed, feeling the memories abate slowly, her scent overpowering the blood. She smelled like leather and strawberries. Probably her shampoo, I thought absently.

A warm hand dropped on my shoulder. I took my face from Natasha’s shoulder and looked up to see Bruce smiling gently. “Let me look at you, kiddo,” he said, easing himself onto his knees in front of me.

Bruce and Natasha fussed over me for a few minutes. I assured them I was fine, but they’d given me flat expressions and told me to can it while they worked. I huffed in annoyance, but a warm
bubble expanded in my chest at their worry.

When we left the blood-soaked room, I closed my eyes and let them lead me around the puddles, breathing deeply through my mouth until we got outside. I felt myself relax instantly.

I was definitely never going in that room again.

We went straight to Medical, where the rest of the team was waiting, looking like anxious puppies. Now that I was out of danger, and really tired, and really pissed off at HYDRA, it was kind of adorable.

“Guys, I’m fine,” I said, rolling my eyes as they scurried around the room, trying to help Bruce get machines and wires and fluids set up. “They didn’t do much. I promise, I’m okay.”

“I believe you,” Bruce said placatingly, taking my hand to examine my left wrist. I grimaced. “I’m just going to check to be sure.”

I spent the next hour being ridiculously mother-henned by Earth’s Mightiest Heroes. It was actually ludicrous the sheer number of pillows people kept offering me.

Now, that doesn’t mean I didn’t enjoy it.

It was nice, seeing them all look so flustered, so concerned for me. I tiredly sank into my pillow mountain with a small smile. Bruce gently cleaned the wounds on my arms, wrapping them in soft cotton bandages. When he saw the small cuts on my neck and collarbone, his eyes flashed green, glowing a little. He and Natasha stepped out of the room for a moment before he came back with a tired smile and gentle reassurances that he was fine.

He cleaned the cuts gently with practiced hands and put butterfly bandages over them, assuring me there would be no lasting damage. The other Avengers sat scattered around the room as he worked, on edge, watching. It should have made me uncomfortable, honestly, but it really just made me feel safe.

Bruce was busying himself with an icepack for the bruise on my jaw, turned away from me. Nat and Clint were flanking the door, in full spy mode. Tony, Rhodesy, and Sam were sitting in the three guest armchairs around the huge room, and Bucky was sitting on a spinny doctor chair, Steve at his side. Thor was still cradling Stella, who looked much better.

I cleared my throat.

“Um.”

All eyes turned to me, and if that wasn’t a bunch of pressure, I couldn’t say what was. “Uh. Thanks. For, uh…for coming when you did.” I suddenly became very interested in the fraying blanket draped over my legs. “That was…that sucked.”

Tony barked a laugh at my honesty. The others smiled and Bruce, being the closest, dropped a hand on my shoulder. “We’re always going to come for you, Peter. Don’t you doubt it for a second, kiddo.”

With a small grin, I sank further into my pillow pile, pleased to find that I didn’t doubt it. Not a bit.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry I couldn't post yesterday, Wifi was out. I'll post another one to make up for it! Thanks!
“Where is he?” Fury bellowed as he stalked through the common room doors, flanked by several SHIELD agents.

I was squished between Rhodey and Tony on the couch, Rhodey’s arm around my shoulders and Stella in my lap. Honestly, I thought he was talking about me, and unconsciously scooted closer to Rhodey, who tightened his arm. Tony took my wrist and gently squeezed in reassurance.

“Where’s who, Sparrow?” Tony asked, his voice challenging.

Fury’s eye darkened. “The HYDRA agent that survived. Not everything I do is about this kid.”

I relaxed slightly, shoulders sagging in relief. Rhodey squeezed my shoulder.

“He’s in one of the interrogation rooms,” Tony said, standing and dusting himself off. “Not the one everything went down in. Room number 4, I think. Steve and Bucky are playing good cop bad cop, Natasha and Clint are observing. Brucie’s analyzing the computer they used for the transmission down in his lab to see if there’s any clues we can use to find more HYDRA goons.”

Fury grunted in acknowledgment. “Wilson and Thor?”

“In the kitchen,” Rhodey said as Tony poured himself a drink (coffee). “We’re all starving.”

Fury crossed his arms. “My agents are going to interrogate this guy, and we need to speak to Peter about everything that happened before you guys got here.” I shrank back, rubbing absently at the cuts on my arms. I knew I needed to, but I really didn’t want to talk about it.

“Fine, but we’re going to be there.” Sam said as he walked in, carrying a tray of sandwiches. Thor followed behind him, bringing more coffee and a glass of water he handed to me. I smiled gratefully and sipped at it. He ruffled my hair.

“All nine of you?” Fury asked dubiously, eyeing me suspiciously. “He’s a big boy.”

“All nine of us,” Rhodey said firmly. “That okay with you, Peter?”

“Uh,” I responded eloquently, not expecting to be addressed. See, this was why I liked Rhodey. He asked me things instead of telling me to do things. Most of the time. “If you’re busy you don’t all have to be there, but…if it’s okay, I don’t really want to be alone.”

“No worries, kiddo,” Clint said, sauntering in with Natasha at his side. Steve and Bucky trailed in behind. “We’ll be there.” He ruffled my hair (geez, and they wondered why I could never tame it) and scratched Stella’s ears in passing before grabbing a sandwich. He took a big bite and said, through the sandwich, “HYDRA guy won’t say anything. Just stares at the table. We managed to remove the suicide pill before he woke up, though, so he’s not going anywhere for a while.”
Natasha smacked him on the head and grabbed two sandwiches, ignoring Clint’s pain-filled cry. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.” She sat down in Tony’s empty seat, ignoring his spluttering as he returned, expecting it to be empty. She shoved one sandwich into my hands. “Don’t even try telling me you’ve eaten. You haven’t.”


Sam laughed. “No, you love my food. But thank you.”

I suddenly felt like I was being smothered by one thousand pounds of concrete and swallowed thickly, looking up to see Fury and the SHIELD agents glaring at me. Let me tell you: being glared at by someone with one eye is absolutely the creepiest thing in the entire universe.

“Um.” I said when he didn’t look away. “This wasn’t my fault?”

Fury sighed heavily through his nose, never once looking away from me. To the SHIELD agents behind him, he said, “Two of you, go interrogate the prisoner. Don’t get physical yet. Let him stew. The rest of you, observe for weaknesses, nervous habits, anything. If his eyebrow twitches one hair out of place, I want to know. Gibbons, you stay back and take notes on Parker’s account.”

A chorus of yes, sirs flooded the room as the agents went steadily to the interrogation room holding the HYDRA agent, save Gibbons, who leaned against the wall and magically conjured a pen and notepad from somewhere. Fury took a seat across from the couch, crossing his arms. “Full report, Avengers. Gibbons, record everything.”

“We arrived at the designated location in your files,” Thor said gravely, setting the coffee pot on the table so he could talk with his hands, something he was fond of. Tony snatched at it like it was the Holy Grail. “There was an explosive contraption behind the foremost entrance. Had friend Tony’s helmet companion not warned us, we may have been gravely injured.”

“It was all a trap,” Steve said, arms folded, in leader mode. “They had trip wires, pressure plates, the works. Once we finally got past them all, there was nothing. We swept the entire place top to bottom. Not a speck of dust out of place. We got back on the Quinjet to head home, and we were about ten minutes out we got the video call.”

I looked down, suppressing a shiver. Rhodey squeezed my shoulder again.

“There were five HYDRA agents in total. Four of them were obviously grunts, and the one speaking probably knew a little more of what was going on than the rest of them did. They usually elect a leader who calls the shots and knows the entire mission fully. The grunt we got won’t know much. He was probably just manpower,” Bucky said, emotionless.

Fury nodded thoughtfully. “We’ll still interrogate him. Maybe he learned something useful.”

Just then, Bruce walked in, carrying the laptop. He looked disheveled. “Nothing,” he said solemnly. “Not even your algorithms could crack this, Tony. It’s a fortress.”

Tony hummed in thought, looking put out. “Baby girl, I need into this laptop, which is apparently gonna require a specialized algorithm. Can you get to work on that?”

“Analyzing,” FRIDAY said immediately. A few seconds later, she said, “I’ll try, boss, but Dr. Banner’s right, it’s a fortress. The outer firewalls alone will take me weeks. It may very well be
months until I can get in.”

Tony sighed. “Just do what you can, FRIDAY. This is top priority.”

“Certainly, boss,” she said, then quieted down.

Tony sipped his drink. “Well, that’s that. Come back in a few months.”

Fury sighed through his nose and pinched his eye shut. In a calm voice, he said, “Every one of you is completely infuriating.”

“We’re talented like that,” Sam said, not looking up from his sandwich.

Fury uncrossed his arms and leaned forward, locking eyes with me. “All of your bodyguards are here now, Parker. I need you to tell me everything that happened up to the video call.”

Shivers danced up and down my spine, and I subconsciously leaned further into Rhodey, setting the glass of water on the table. My hands were shaking, and I was afraid I’d drop it. “What do you want to know?”

“Just start from the beginning, okay, kiddo?” Tasha said with a small smile, running her fingers through my hair once. I sighed contentedly. That was nice. “We’re not going anywhere.”

I swallowed thickly, but my shoulders relaxed. “Uh, okay. Uh…I went to sleep before you guys left, and when I woke up it was to Alarm Clock throwing me out of bed. I—”

“Wait, hang on,” Bucky said, confusion etched in his face. “Alarm Clock?”

I blushed. I’d gotten so used to calling them by their “names” I’d forgotten that it was probably a stupid, childish thing to do, and was promptly embarrassed. “Uh. Yeah. Yes. Alarm Clock. I just…there were five of them, and I didn’t know what to call them…it just made it less weird if they had names, you know? Things I could call them. There was Alarm Clock—since he woke me up by throwing me out of bed, ya know?—and Door 1 and Door 2, since they were standing in front of my bedroom door, and Window, who was…well, in front of my window, and Bathroom, who was in front of my bathroom door. Window was the one who did all the talking.”

Bucky blinked. “I’m a little sorry I asked.”

I gave a strained laugh. “Sorry. But, uh. Yeah. He threw me out of bed and told me to get up…I couldn’t find Stella anywhere, but I didn’t want them to find her, so I didn’t say anything. Window grabbed my arm and they all dragged me to the interrogation room. They put me into that chair. I fought, but they stunned me long enough to get the ties on, and then Window took off his mask and started talking to me.” I paused, feeling cold. The memory of his hands pressing my arms down, his face inches from mine, his completely normal face—

“Breathe, Peter,” Steve said reassuringly, voice low and calm. “You’re okay.”

I blinked, and the world sharpened into focus again. “Sorry.”

“What did he say?” Fury asked impatiently, tapping his thumb against his folded hands.

“Um. He said that…I was important, and that I had a lot of important information, but that wasn’t what they needed right then. They said…they said they were going to use me to get you guys here, so they could…kill you. I tried to talk him down, but he, uh, hit me again and I didn’t talk after that.”
It was quiet for a split second, so I jerked violently in surprise when the armchair’s engraved armrest splintered under Thor’s hand. All eyes in the room turned to him. Tony gave a long-suffering sigh and said, “Thor, buddy, I know you have innate godly strength and all that, but this right here? This is why the Avengers are never allowed to have nice things.”

“I apologize, friend Tony,” Thor muttered, eyes turning to me. They were ablaze. “Young Peter. You said again.”

I was confused for a second, but then it hit me. “Oh.” I hadn’t realized I’d said that part. Whoops. “They, uh. Window. He hit me in the stomach with his machine gun while they were taking me to the interrogation room. I, uh, wouldn’t stop talking. And then again in the jaw when they were getting me into the chair and I wouldn’t stop squirming.”

Bruce immediately sprang up and rigidly stalked over, lifting my shirt with no warning. I gave a strangled protest, but it did nothing. “God, Peter, say something if something like this happens. I didn’t think to check your stomach; you seemed fine. Rhody, hold his shirt, please.” Rhody did, shooting me a look that said we were having a talk later. Joy. “Tell me if this hurts.”

His cold, gentle fingers pressed lightly on the bruise. He got to a particularly sore spot and I hissed. Natasha took my hand. “Yeah, that, right there. That doesn’t feel good. Ow, ow.”

Bruce stood and Rhody lowered my shirt. “They managed to crack the same rib they broke earlier. Geez, Peter, tell us next time. Do you want an icepack?”

“No, I’m okay,” I said even though I wanted one. I was pretty sure an icepack wouldn’t work, because Fury’s heated gaze on me was going to incinerate it the moment it came into his line of sight. If Fury had had laser vision, I would be Swiss cheese. God, I knew I wasn’t the most cooperative person alive, but did he have to glare at me constantly? It sucked.

“Can we get on with this if you’re all done coddling him now,” Fury seethed, knuckles clenched. “Some of us have things to do.”

I felt the blush creep up my cheeks and looked down, but my eyes snapped up at the sound of the chair suddenly creaking as Steve unexpectedly took his weight off of it.

Wow. I didn’t think I’d ever see soldier-boy Steve glare at a superior officer. But here we are. “We’re not coddling him, Fury. He’s fifteen years old and he was just tied down and threatened by people out to kill him.”

I mean, in my opinion, they were coddling me a little bit, but that didn’t mean I wanted them to stop.

“What happened next, Pete?” Tony said, shooting Steve an appreciative look.

“Um. That’s really it. He made the call. After he hung up on you, he just moved me to the wall and they got in formation and…waited, I guess.”

There was silence for a few seconds, broken only by Bruce’s subtle “hm.” I sipped at the water, feeling myself deflate. I’d had so many adrenaline highs and panic attacks in the past few days that I didn’t think my brain would ever get back to normal.

Just then, Fury’s agents returned. “The prisoner isn’t cooperating, sir. He refuses to tell us what we ask, no matter what we do. He’s just…smiling. He only said one thing, the entire time.” He paused. “He says he wants to talk to Peter Parker, and that he’ll cooperate if Peter’s the one asking the questions.”
A beat.

“Absolutely not.”

“No way in hell.”

“Over my dead body.”

And that was basically the gist of the cacophony that filled the room after the SHIELD agent had spoken. It was so freaking loud (thank you Thor) that Stella yowled unhappily and pawed at her ears. I scratched her head reassuringly and she nuzzled against me, but it was more of a reaction on my part. My heart started beating out of my chest, and sound became a little muffled. The thought of just being in the same room as one of them again was...terrifying. They’d had me completely at their mercy. I’d been strapped to a chair absolutely helpless, and the raw feeling was still fresh.

I heard Fury and the others arguing about it. Fury wanted it to happen, so we could actually get some information, but the Avengers didn’t seem too keen on that. Obviously.

What would happen if I said no? I seriously doubted the HYDRA agent would give us anything, if the SHIELD agents’ reports were anything to go by. It would be a waste. Eventually, he’d be moved to a prison or something, and nothing would change. We’d have lost the only opportunity we had to get some information on HYDRA.

The thought made me sick to my stomach. Goosebumps lined my arms. But I wanted answers.

“I’ll do it,” I said quietly. My voice broke a little, so I cleared my throat and said again, a bit stronger, “I’ll do it.”

The arguing ceased. Fury didn’t look surprised, but he blinked (winked?) abruptly, which was probably the equivalent of him jumping out of his seat and screaming to high heaven in absolute shock.

The others did look surprised. And reluctant.

“Peter, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” Bruce said calmly, wiping his glasses on his shirt. Wow, he looked tired. “I really don’t like the thought of you with him. The Other Guy doesn’t, either.”

“Yeah, none of us do,” Sam said heatedly. “You don’t have to do this, kid. We’ve got other means.”

I shook my head. “I want...I want to know. Things aren’t...they aren’t adding up, you know? I don’t feel like I know everything I should, and it’s driving me crazy. If this gets us answers, I want to do it.”

Stella stood in my lap and stretched, leaping down my where she was perched and jumping onto the table. She edged around the sandwiches and stalked right up to Fury, studying him curiously. Fury stared right back. Finally, Stella snuffled and turned away haughtily, leaping up into Clint’s arms. She climbed onto his shoulder and perched there, eyeing Fury snidely.

Fury blinked. “Parker, tell me right now that your cat did not just snub me.”

I was too busy trying not to laugh to form a coherent answer. My shoulders were shaking. I finally managed, “My aunt and uncle told me that lying was wrong.”
There was snickering around the room. Fury was...well, furious.

“I don’t get paid enough for this,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Parker, are you going to talk to the prisoner, or not?”

I stopped laughing. “Uh...I mean, now? That’s really soon...”

“No, not right now,” Rhodey said authoritatively. “It’s Christmas Eve. You, Peter, are going to sleep, and then tomorrow, we’re celebrating Christmas. You can interrogate him in a couple of days, okay?”

The tension bled from my shoulders immediately, and I smiled. “Okay.”

“Okay, you heard the man, Fury,” Tony said, putting down his drink and waving his hands in a shooing motion. “Off with you. Come back after Christmas. Please remember to bring individual, heartfelt gifts for all of us, or I will be personally offended. Go on, shoo. Oh, don’t give me that look, I’m not letting you ruin Peter’s first Christmas with us. Skedaddle!”

With that, Tony bodily shoved a livid Fury out into the hallway and shut the door, wiping his hands together like he’d just finished cleaning up a big mess. I couldn’t suppress a wide grin at his antics.

“Oh!” He shouted, putting his hands on his hips and looking at me. “It’s still early, by my standards—well, by anyone’s standards—but what do you say we put the milk and cookies out for Santa and get munchkin here to bed?”

I spluttered. “I’m fifteen! I’m not a munchkin, and I don’t believe in Santa!”

Tony’s eyes twinkled. “You should,” he said in a sing-song voice, disappearing from the room closely followed by Thor, who was grinning ear to ear. “Someone take the kid to bed! I have PLANS!”

I was confused by what the hell had just happened, but he was right about someone taking me to bed, because I wasn’t sure I could make it down the hallway, I was so tired. Bucky smiled and pulled me up—completely unnecessary—and led me down the hall after the others said goodnight. Stella pounced off of Clint’s shoulders, and Bucky scooped her up onto his own, where she perched happily.

When we got to my room, he shut the curtains—it was still daylight, but the sun was setting steadily—and switched on the bedside lamp as I pulled off my socks, yawning.

He sat down next to me. Quizzically, I looked up at him only for him to yank me into an abrupt hug, pressing my face into his shoulder. His metal hand gently cupped the back of my head, and his flesh arm wound around my back.

“Um,” I said into his shirt, totally unprepared for the show of affection. “Bucky—”

“Kid, you scared me straight into hell,” he said, his voice not as steady as it usually was. “God, I thought—dimmit, kid, don’t scare me like that, okay?”

I blinked. I hadn’t realized I’d scared him so badly. Well, I mean, obviously it’s never fun to see someone you cared about in my position, but...but I hadn’t realized he... I hadn’t realized just how much he cared.

I blinked, somehow managing to keep my eyes dry. “I—sorry,” I said, putting my arms around his
waist, and just holding on. “I’m sorry.”

Bucky stayed like that for a few seconds, then squeezed my shoulder and stood, moving towards the doorway, not looking at me. I immediately realized how much I didn’t want to be alone in this room. That last time that had happened, I’d had forced bonding time with HYDRA’s finest.

“Hey,” I said quietly as he reached the doorway. He turned back, his expression unreadable. “Could you, uh—” I stopped, embarrassed. God, I kept going on and on about how I was fifteen and I wasn’t a kid, and here I was, about to ask the most childish question in history.

I shook my head. “It’s—ah, never mind. It’s stupid.” I shrank down and burrowed under the covers, turning away from him. Stella curled up against my chest, resting her head on my outstretched arm. I smiled slightly. “Night, Bucky.”

It was silent for a few seconds, but the door didn’t close.

Swiftly, Bucky moved back into the room and sat down on the bed, ruffling my hair. “I’ll stay until you’re asleep.”

I felt the blush creep up my cheeks, but I hid it under the comforter. “You don’t have to. If you have other stuff to do.”

Bucky chuckled. “Nothing important. Get some sleep, kid.”

I closed my eyes and feel asleep almost immediately, a smile on my lips.

Chapter End Notes

You guys are amazing, as always. Thanks so much to everyone who's commented and left a Kudos :) love you all! Thanks!
Waking up this time was a much more peaceful experience.

Sunlight broke through the thin crack between the curtains, spilling over a small portion of the floor. Stella was still curled up against me breathing softly, and I was buried under my comforter, warm and safe. I sighed contentedly and closed my eyes. It was too warm and soft to even consider getting out of bed.

“Come on, Sleepyhead, up and at ‘em!” A voice screamed, followed by a clang and a thud. I’d just started to doze off again, and the unexpected cacophony scared the hell out of me. I startled so violently I fell out of bed tangled in my sheets and sat up from the floor to see Clint crouched on my floor, the vent cover lying beside him. He had a wide grin on his face at my bewildered expression.

I finally found my voice. “What the hell, Clint?” I yelled, standing precariously. Stella had jumped on the floor beside me, hissing up a storm. When she saw it was just Clint, she gave an annoyed snuffle and leapt onto my bed, then onto my shoulder. I held her head reflexively. “You scared the hell out of me! I was almost back asleep!”

“Well, then, I’m glad I caught you,” he said, still grinning. “It’s Christmas morning, kiddo! Everybody’s already awake! We did let you sleep in, but no one wants to wait anymore.”

Absently, I glanced at the clock and saw that it was almost eleven. Huh. It’d felt earlier.

“Okay, well, I still wanted more sleep,” I grumbled, pulling out some clean jeans (mine, actually; Tony had ordered me some clothes about a month back) and a t-shirt. “I’m coming, okay? Get out so I can change.”

Clint smiled knowingly and ruffled my hair and scratched Stella’s ears before ducking out the door. “If you take too long, I’m eating your breakfast, kid!”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, a slight smile coming over my face, no matter how I wanted to stay angry.

It was nice, knowing they’d waited for me. I won’t say I’d like to routinely wake up to Clint dropping out of my vent every day, but the spontaneity and unpredictability of living here with the Avengers was one thing I loved so much about it. With May and Ben, everything had been…so routine. I’d loved it, because I’d loved them, but now with the Avengers, randomness was the norm. And I loved every second of it.

Tears pricked my eyes as I mechanically got dressed. May and Ben. It was my first Christmas without them. It seemed like everything was constantly reminding me of them, and I didn’t know how to feel about it. I never wanted to forget them, but each reminder was like salt in a barely healing wound. It just hurt more.

I didn’t know what to do. How to feel, how to act. They’d expect me to be happy. It was Christmas, after all, and I was actually alive to see it. But how could I be happy without them?

A knock on the door startled me out of my thoughts. “Come in,” I said, picking Stella up
off the bed. She purred happily and snuggled against me.

The door opened, and Bucky stood there, looking a little out of his element. I smiled slightly, remembering how he’d stayed with me last night. “Hey.”

“Hey, kid,” he said, closing the door softly. “I just wanted to see if you were alright?”

I blinked, then relaxed a little. I shrugged. “I’m okay.” I paused, then sighed. “I miss them.”

Bucky nodded, his expression pensive. “We don’t have to do this now, if you need some time. I can tell the others you’ll be out later.”

I smiled a little. “No, it’s okay. I want to be with everybody.” I took a deep breath. “Thanks for checking on me. And for last night. It, um…it helped.”

Bucky smiled. It was one of his rare, sincere, soft smiles, not his awkward, forced ones. “You ever need me, I don’t care what I’m doing, okay? Ask FRIDAY and she’ll get me.”


Bucky made me feel safe. Bucky was…honestly, he was a lot like Uncle Ben. He was quiet and thoughtful, but when he spoke he was funny, and honest. He was always just…there, when I needed him. And he didn’t mind being there, and that was one of the best things I could ever ask for.

“Thanks,” I said with a smile, before adjusting Stella and following him out the door. He ruffled my hair and pushed me gently ahead of him, his metal hand cold and comforting against my back.

We came into the living room; Stella jumped out of my arms and scampered over into Natasha’s lap, where she lounged happily as Natasha sipped her coffee, her eyes smiling over the rim of the cup when she saw me. “Took you long enough,” she said fondly.

Tony was sipping coffee too, but from a much more sizable mug that said World’s Stupidest Genius on it. That was…surprisingly accurate. Bruce was sitting next to Natasha on the couch, reading the newspaper, his glasses slipping down his nose as he looked up and smiled. Clint, true to his word, was eating what looked like something Sam would’ve made for me—the pancakes I liked, with blueberries and strawberries, and a ton of whipped cream. Sam, for his part, was grumbling from the kitchen about remaking the pancakes, even as Clint gave a frothy grin.

Bucky went and sat down next to Steve on the other couch, who was intently examining one of Tony’s smartphones, mumbling to himself with wide eyes as he figured out how the volume button worked. Rhodey was adjusting his braces in one of the armchairs. I noticed all of this subconsciously, though, because I was mostly focused on the sheer number of presents under the tree.

“Um.” I said haltingly, not really sure how to approach the mountain. “What’s all this?”

“It’s Christmas,” Tony said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “You saw Thanksgiving. Christmas is bigger.”

“…okay, but…there’s, like, ten of us. Should there really be that many presents?”

Tony fondly swatted the back of my head. “I’m a billionaire. I’m allowed to spoil my friends.” He grabbed my arm and dragged me further into the room, pushing me to sit down in the
armchair by the fireplace. I did, sitting cross-legged on the plush, spacious chair.

“Where’s Thor?” I asked absently.

“He’ll be around later,” Sam said, handing me a fresh plate of blueberry, strawberry pancakes with at least two full cans of whipped cream. I gave him a toothy grin and dug in. Sam’s pancakes were actually one of the greatest wonders of North America. They were fluffy and delicious and just divine.

“Don’t inhale them,” he chuckled, sitting down next to Clint. “I won’t let the black hole steal the second plate, I promise.” He nudged Clint with a glare as I shoveled in another forkful of whipped cream.

“Like you could stop me,” Clint scoffed, putting his plate on the table.

“I bet I could,” Natasha said coolly, fixing him with her trademark stare as she twirled a butter knife expertly between her slim fingers.

Clint gulped. “Geez, Nat, fine. The pancakes are officially under your divine protection, etcetera, etcetera.”

I laughed through the whipped cream, scooping a little onto my finger and offering it to Stella, who licked it up, purring annoyedly when I wouldn’t give her more. “Clint, why aren’t you with your family?” I asked as the thought occurred to me suddenly.

“I’m going back in a couple of days for New Years,” he said with a fond expression. Geez, he loved his kids. It was kind of adorable. If you thought too long, though, it was kind of scary how he could have three kids, a wife, and be one of the world’s greatest superheroes and still be so immature all at once. “Lila’s birthday is January 2\textsuperscript{nd}, so we just do her birthday, New Years, and Christmas all together. Nat’ll be going with me.”

Just then, FRIDAY said, “Boss, the preparations you’ve made for your ‘Christmas Supreme Plan’ are ready.”

Hang on. Preparations? Plan?

Tony + preparations + planning = danger. Vacate immediately. If escape is impossible, call Pepper (who I still had not met).

At least, that’s what Rhodey said during one of our Calculus/Bash-Tony’s-Past-Self sessions.

Tony flashed a thousand-watt smile. “Don’t worry. You’ll like it. I planned it especially for you, Pete.” I must have been giving him a look of dubiousness and terror, because he laughed. “Don’t worry, kid, I’m allowed to have some good ideas! I promise it’ll be fun, trust me.”

I don’t think my expression changed, but he charged ahead anyways, sprinting out of the room with no small amount of excitement. He was like a puppy.

“Anyone know what’s going on?” I said after swallowing some blueberries. “I’m a little scared.”

The facial expressions around the room were…conflicting. I studied the Avengers, some of whom looked amused, some of whom looked annoyed, and some of whom (Tasha) looked downright unimpressed. “You’ll find out in a minute,” Bucky said, looking somewhere between
amused and a little worried.

“That’s not an answer,” I said nervously.

Just as I finished saying that, the fireplace *exploded*.

I jumped clear out of my seat and took two huge steps back, Stella following, weaving between my legs when I stopped by the door, ready to bolt. Ash and soot flew everywhere, and I coughed into my sleeve, my eyes stinging a bit.

“Guys?” I called, more than a little scared. “What’s going on? Are we being attacked? *Again*?”

Just then, a hulking, huge figure came out from the cloud of soot, dusting himself off. I squinted to see him through the hazy air.

“No, Peter, we’re not being attacked,” Tony said, strutting into the room. He wrinkled his nose at the state of the air, coughing into his sleeve. “Oh, wow. I didn’t factor that in. FRIDAY, can we vent the room?”

“Of course, boss,” she said, sounding amused.

The sound of giant fans filled the room, my clothes billowing as I held on to the back of the couch out of apprehension. What the *hell* was going on?

I shut my eyes against the flow of smoky air as it was sucked away, blinking them open when it got quiet, coughing a little. My eyes were immediately drawn to the elephant in the room, the hulking figure I’d seen a moment ago. As my eyes adjusted and my brain processed what it was, I…

I blinked.

I blinked again.

My jaw fell slack.

“Uh…” I said grace fully, sure I looked like a fish out of water. “What exactly…*what*?”

It was…um…Santa.

A tall, looming figure in a big velvet red suit with a long bag over his shoulder, looking suspiciously empty. His white velvet hat fell loosely over one side of his head, and a majestic white beard fell down to almost his belly button, that and the mustache obscuring half of his face. He wore shiny black shoes, and his blue eye crinkled in a way that was almost…well, jolly.

Wait.

I knew that eye. And that *eyepatch*.

“Wha—*Thor*?” I yelled, everything clicking as I took in the huge posture and distinct lack of gut. “What the *hell* is going on?” I yelled, more perplexed than anything. None of this was making sense.

After deeming that the danger had come and gone in the form of an ash cloud, Stella hopped onto the couch and curled up next to Bucky, who scratched her head gently, his eyes smiling as he watched.
“Well, Pete, you weren’t supposed to figure it out quite so fast,” Tony said, looking a bit put out. “I guess I forgot about the eyepatch. You said you didn’t believe in Santa, and I wanted to change your mind. Ladies and gentlemen…Santa Claus at your service!”

I blinked again. “It’s just Thor. In a Santa outfit. Which is…actually really creepy.”

It was. It wouldn’t be creepy if he was a Santa at a mall somewhere, but…I knew him as Thor, and this was just…weird.

Thor looked like I’d just thrown a crate of Pop-Tarts in the ocean. “I do not understand, young Peter! Friend Tony said that you would enjoy such festivities as your ‘Santa Claus!’”

I shifted, still not quite understanding what was going on. “I mean, I like Christmas, but we never really did Santa. My parents were scientists. They didn’t like me believing in magic, so they told me he wasn’t real when I was…four or five, I guess. May and Ben knew, so they never really made a big deal about it. We all just got each other something and then just…uh…hung out, I guess.”

On some level, each of them looked a little upset by the news, but it didn’t bother me much. I was glad I’d found out sooner rather than later, honestly. I was pretty logical. I liked science. I was glad my parents hadn’t let me believe in Santa Claus for too long.

Clint was…a little more vocal. “What?” He asked, clearly a little upset. “I’d never tell my kids Santa wasn’t real—at least, not for, like, a decade! It would break their hearts!”

“I mean, I was a little upset at first, but it wasn’t really a big deal,” I said, sitting back down to continue eating my pancake mountain. Thor sat as well, still in full costume. I smiled a little now that I could appreciate the situation. It was pretty funny seeing a legendary Norse god with an entire kingdom somewhere. And he kind of looked like the pirate version of Santa with his eyepatch, which was downright ridiculous. “They told me because they were scientists and I liked science. I wasn’t really into fantasy or magic as a kid, anyways.”

Clint looked slightly mollified, but still annoyed. “Still,” he muttered, crossing his arms. “It’s the principle.”

I put on what I hoped was a placating smile through my pancakes.

“Ohay, well, why don’t you just celebrate our way with us?” Sam said, leaning forward. “We don’t want to replace your parents or your aunt and uncle, Peter, but we do want to celebrate Christmas with you.”

“I mean, I still want to celebrate Christmas,” I said, smiling. “I just didn’t get why Thor was Santa Claus cosplaying.” I blinked. “Wow. Try saying that five times fast.”

Immediately, Clint tried. He failed horribly. His consonants were everywhere. I laughed along with everyone else. Even Natasha laughed a little bit behind her hand, eyes smiling.

We joked around a bit more until I finished my pancakes, talking about everything and nothing. Bucky brought me hot chocolate at some point, which I guzzled in 0.02 seconds. We spent a couple of hours in the common room, during which Thor partially de-Santa-ed, taking off the beard, mustache, hat, and coat, leaving him in a white button-down and the red velvet pants.

He looked like a pirate. He really did. The word “swashbuckling” came to mind more than once.
At around two, Sam and Steve excused themselves to go check on the food that had been slowly cooking in the kitchen, FRIDAY keeping watch to make sure nothing burned. Bruce folded his newspaper and went with them, smiling and ruffling my hair as he passed.

“So, Peter,” Rhodey said, his braced legs propped up on the ottoman. “Anything you wanna do for the day?”

I thought for a second. May and Ben and I had always just done a little bigger version of Thanksgiving, honestly. We’d eat, watch movies, and talk. We each got each other one present each. I didn’t usually have a lot of spending money, so a lot of the time, I made them theirs, just things I’d been tinkering with that they could use. That’s what I’d done with the Avengers this year, with help from FRIDAY.

But like Sam had said, this wasn’t a replacement for my Christmases with May and Ben. This was a new memory, with my new friends.

Hopefully soon, my new family.

I smiled, leaning into Bucky, who was sitting next to me. He dropped his flesh arm around my shoulders. “Not really. This is good.”

It really, really was. I was…happy, fully, for the first time in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

As you’ve noticed, I suck at updating regularly, so i’m uploading like five chapters now to make up for it. Sorry, and thanks for reading!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was the same for a while.

Sam, Bruce, and Steve came back in a few minutes later, carrying at least thirty different dishes, which they cluttered on the table in the center of the room. Bruce brought in plates, passing them out with a smile, and we all helped ourselves. I was getting better about how much I ate, and I’d put on a few pounds. I was up to 110 pounds, now, which made Bruce a lot happier.

I devoured everything I got, laughing along as the Avengers reminisced about old missions. Natasha told a story of how with one villain, Clint was supposed to be undercover seducing her, keeping her away while the other Avengers snuck into her lair and destroyed all the biological weapons she’d created, but as they were getting to the—ah, the good part of the night—apparently Laura chose to call.

She blasted him for not calling, as it was her mother’s birthday and the whole family was visiting. She understood if he couldn’t make it in person, but still, his mother-in-law’s birthday warranted a phone call, at least.

Clint had been simultaneously trying to explain to his wife that he was on an undercover secret mission, and no of course he hadn’t forgotten Julia’s birthday, and yes he would make it up to her as soon as he was physically able, and he loved her, but he had to go stop the psychotic biological terrorist from killing him with chemically improved smallpox, and yes, tell the kids he loved them.

Apparently, the terrorist hadn’t taken too kindly to him being married and having children and tried to lock him in her testing chamber for a slow and painful death.

Natasha swooped in and saved the damsel just in time. Tasha said these words exactly, and Clint almost choked on his ham.

Stories like that filled the room as we ate, and the laughing never seemed to stop.

Then we got to the presents.

Everyone had gotten everyone else one thing, which kind of explained the number of presents. There were ten of us, after all, and each person was getting nine gifts, so that made ninety presents under the tree. We all sifted through them, collects ours and then going back to our respective seats with our armfuls.

“We go oldest to youngest,” Natasha proclaimed as she organized her stack of gifts, winking at me. “At least this year I don’t have to go last.”

Thor went first. He really was a giant puppy; he loved everything he got. Most of them just got him some clothes that actually fit him. Tony made him a new eyepatch that doubled as a communicator near his ear and wasn’t fried by lightning, which was actually amazing. When he opened mine, he looked confused, so I went on to explain.

“It’s a toaster, but specifically for Pop-Tarts,” I said, smiling as his eyes lit up. “You can program the flavor into the screen—yeah, just like that—and then select how many pop tarts
you’re putting in, and it’ll toast it just right based on the flavor and stuff. I used all those articles you made me read.” I never actually thought I’d use them, but apparently, wishes can’t all come true.

Thor was beside himself with joy. He almost cried. I scrambled to make that not happen, because as previously stated, I was not going to make Thor the god of thunder cry, from joy or otherwise. It was touch and go for a while, but I managed to keep his eyes dry, much to the amusement of the others.

Next was Bucky. There was argument about that. Biologically, Bucky was only 33—younger than most of the others—but technically, he was 101. Tony gave some long-winded logical argument about it, and eventually, Bucky agreed to go just to shut him up, which made Steve next, lest we suffer another of Tony’s rants. Bucky mostly got weapons upgrades, as well as some new cooking supplies. He liked cooking. He was good at it, too.

I’d grown closest to Bucky, and I wanted to give him something different.

I’d made him a huge picture frame. It was elementary, yeah, but if I do say so myself, it was pretty well done. I’d used some of Tony’s tools and sanded the wood, then polished it until it was gleaming oak, a rich brown that matched the color of the trees behind the Compound. I’d tempered the glass, too, and made it bulletproof and shatterproof. Inside the frame was a collage of pictures I’d ask FRIDAY to take over the weeks. Among them were Sam and Steve cooking, Natasha crocheting or sparring with Clint, Tony and Bruce in the workshop, Rhodey and Tony messing with each other, Thor and Tony having a drinking contest (that had been interesting), and Bucky and I playing Mario Kart.

Bucky stared at it for a long time. He stared at for so long, in fact, I started shifting uncomfortably. Did he not like it? I mean, I’d worked hard on it, but it also wasn’t like what everyone else had gotten him. Maybe he hadn’t wanted something so mushy. I’d debated just working on some upgrades for his arm, but I’d wanted to do something special. Maybe that had been the wrong decision…

Oh. Wait. He was blinking really fast. Was he crying?

God, why did I make everyone cry?

I tried to fix it. I really did. “What? No, nonono, don’t cry, that’s not—”

He shut me up by yanking me in for a hug. Reflexively, I hugged him back, though I was in an awkward position. “Bucky?”

He let go and pushed me back fondly, sniffing suspiciously. “Thanks, kid.”

“Oh,” I said, readjusting myself to lean against the corner of the couch. “You’re welcome. It’s bulletproof.” I kind of just blurted that out to fill the silence.

Bucky laughed. “Of course it’s bulletproof. You don’t do anything half-way, do you?”

I blushed.

Steve was next. He got a lot of workout equipment, considering that’s what he spent 95% of his time doing. I got him something a little off the mark. I’d enlisted FRIDAY’s help in compiling all of Steve’s favorite old songs from the thirties and forties, and I’d built him a new phonograph and put them all on the same vinyl record. It was basically a vinyl playlist. His eyes lit up. He was blown away by the concept of multiple songs on one vinyl record.
Next was Rhodey. I’d struggled on what to get Rhodey; he didn’t do much other than game and lounge around with everybody, because his braces hurt him after too long. He never said anything about it, and he never would, but I could tell that he didn’t like the braces. Who would? They reminded him of the fact that he’d probably never be able to walk on his own again. He got a lot of technology from everybody else, like entertainment stuff. Steve gave him a pair of boxing gloves and said that when Rhodey was up to it, he’d be waiting in the ring. Rhodey gave a small smile and set them aside.

With FRIDAY’s help (FRIDAY and I became best buds after this whole ordeal, because she helped me with everything) I stole Tony’s plans for them and then made a smaller version of the cloaking technology used on their Quinjets and Helicarriers (I had no clue what those were, but I figured I’d find out eventually) and essentially gave Rhodey invisible braces. They functioned the exact same, and he still walked a little jerkily, but he could almost pass as walking by himself.

He was…really touched. I hadn’t expected him to be that touched, honestly. I was making everybody mushy, and that had not been my intention. I’d just…wanted to thank them, for everything they’d done for me. Instead, I was making this feel like a Hallmark movie happy ending, which was weird and a little too chick-flick for me. I mean, okay, I was really happy that they appreciated what I’d gotten them so much, but for real, I’m a teenage boy. I don’t need to be hugged every two minutes.

…

Okay, maybe it’s not that bad.

After Rhodey came Bruce. I didn’t really know what to do for Bruce, either. He never asked for anything. Everybody else got him books he’d been asking for. Tony even managed to get a signed copy of one of the original manuscripts of Darwin’s evolution books. I didn’t get him a book. I made him glorified sweatpants.

He was really, really confused until I finally put him out of his misery and explained it. “You’re the Hulk, right?” I said. I’d never seen the Other Guy, but I’d seen Bruce almost Hulk out a couple times. “Those are pants you can wear on missions. They’re kind of baggy like sweatpants, but you can press the button here—” I pointed to the hip of the pants, “—and they’ll become tight enough to not get in the way, but loose enough to move around easily. And if you Hulk Out, they’re made of ultra-stretchy material, and they’ll grow with you and shrink with you when you de-Hulk.”

Tony actually spat out his coffee. “How on Earth did you make those?” He asked incredulously. “How smart are you?”


Steve leaned over and smacked Tony on the back of the head. “Quiet,” he said, ignoring Tony’s spluttering.

Bruce smiled, ignoring them, and gave me a quick hug. “Thank you, Peter,” he said genuinely. “I’m sure I’ll use these all the time. These will solve a lot of problems.”

I grinned.

Next came Tony. Tony was easy for everybody. Mostly, everybody just got him joke gifts, because honestly, what do you get a billionaire? The stories that came with the gag gifts were probably the best presents Tony could have gotten. I got him a gag gift and a serious gift. The gag gift was me taking one of his blank white coffee mugs and writing the string of Russian curse words I’d used
on him when he told me I couldn’t have anymore spare parts, commemorating my ingenuity, the first time I made Tasha laugh, and Tony’s general personality. When Tony was confused, he asked FRIDAY to translate—he didn’t trust Natasha not to make fun of him or give him the wrong answer—and FRIDAY proceeded to translate it.

Tony laughed. Steve didn’t. At Steve’s reaction, everyone else laughed, including me and Tasha.

His serious gift, I was hesitant to give. He opened it, scanned it, looked at me with a blank expression, scanned it again. And again.

“Are you gonna say anything?” I asked after a solid two minutes of him leafing through the Iron Man blueprints I’d changed.

I’d noticed some things about his suit and had FRIDAY get me the blueprints, with the express promise that I didn’t photocopy them, give them to anyone, yada, yada. I promised, and she agreed. I spent hours poring over them, and finally came up with a way to make the suit use 50% less power and still operate the same, as well as how to make the design sleeker, making it roughly 32% more aerodynamic, therefore making it about 26% faster.

“Oh, I want to say a lot of things,” he said, still looking over the blueprints in something akin to disbelief. “I want to ask how you got these, why FRIDAY let you look at these, and how smart are you, kid? Because I never would have seen any of this.”

I perked up a little and continued, a little embarrassed. “It was just little things I noticed. They weren’t obvious or anything.”

“Well,” he said, folding the blueprints carefully and putting them on his stack of opened gifts. “They’re going to help make the suit a lot better, kid. Thanks. You wanna work on it with me?”

My jaw dropped open. “Hell yeah, I do!”

“Language!” Steve snapped, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I swear, they’re ruining you!”

Everybody laughed at him. Eventually, he laughed too, much to his chagrin.

Clint came after Tony. He was easy, too. Tasha got him a Hunger Games mug, with Clint’s face photoshopped in for Katniss’s. Everybody else got him little things, as well as a couple of things for Laura and his kids. Tony made him a new bow, with the string easier to pull with the same force, and this one collapsed into a small case the size of a large wallet that would pass through metal detectors, so he could carry it anywhere. Clint looked like a kid in a candy story as soon as he saw it.

Tony and I had collaborated on Clint’s present. Tony had taken care of the bow, and I had drawn up some designs for some new specialized arrows. There was one design that released a sonic wave on impact; it wouldn’t damage people or buildings, but it knocked out communication devices within a thousand-foot radius of the target, and we’d configured the wave to leave the Avengers’ coms alone, if set to the right frequency. There was another with something almost like spider’s webbing. He could fire the arrow, use a small remote to activate the webbing, and it would form a net around the target, if they needed to catch someone alive and unharmed. He ruffled my hair and grinned, ecstatic. He really liked all the designs, and promised me I could come watch him the next time he practiced, to see if he wanted to tweak anything.

Sam came next. Honestly, I hadn’t known that Sam was only thirty-nine. He acted a lot older. He got a lot of cooking stuff, too, including a FRIDAY-infused blender (cough cough Tony) that
would critique what he made as he made it. He liked that. I pulled the blueprints for the drone of his suit and configured a way to fly 30% faster, as well as increase the area around Sam’s suit the drone could go by a couple miles. It would be really useful for reconnaissance missions. He really liked the idea, and said I had free reign to improve anything else I saw if Tony supervised. I hastily agreed.

Geez, lab time for the next few weeks was going to be awesome.

Natasha was last, before me. She got a bunch of spy gadgets from everybody. Poisonous lipstick (plus the antidote for herself) to incapacitate people she kissed on missions, heels with knives in the soles, the list goes on. Tony and I collaborated again, drawing up plans for a bulletproof, body-armor evening gown she could wear on undercover formal missions. She gave a soft smile and thanked us both, which was actually the most Natasha thing she could do.

Then it was my turn.

I got a lot of little stuff. Rhodey got me some books I’d been asking for, which I was definitely going to binge read later. Sam set me up my own Netflix account on the living room TV. That made me happy; it made me feel more like this was home. Steve and Bucky got me some workout gear and some boxing gloves and tape, and a standing invitation to join them in the gym whenever I wanted. Thor (unsurprisingly) got me an entire crate of S’mores flavored Pop-Tarts. At least that was my favorite flavor.

Clint and Natasha also worked together on their gift. They gave me a Taser and a textbook on martial arts, and said they’d work together to teach me how to defend myself without using guns or knives. They said I’d be wiping the floor with them in no time.

That meant…a lot. It meant a lot to me.

Tony scoffed and said, “You already have unlimited lab time; how much more do you want, freeloader?” But there was a twinkle in his eye. He didn’t get me anything big—just a soft, fluffy blanket with all the Avengers on it, which I fell instantly in love with—but he got me like a six-month supply of everything Stella would need, including some new high-tech cat toys and a self-emptying litter box. That actually may have been my favorite, because I adored Stella, but God. Cleaning her litter box was a nightmare. Stella immediately started playing with this electronic mouse that reacted like a real mouse would, chasing it around the room and pouncing every so often. Bruce gave me an encyclopedia set on organic chemistry and the application to modern medicine. I’d mentioned once that I was interested in the science behind pharmaceutical studies. I appreciated a lot that he’d remembered.

I’d thought that was it, but then Bucky shifted, bringing out an envelope. He handed it to me with a small smile. “This is something from all of us, kiddo.”


Everyone nodded, smiles on their faces, and Bucky just glared at Clint. I could tell, though, that there was no heat to it.

Confused, and a little apprehensive, I took the envelope and tore the seal. With slightly shaking fingers, I took the thick papers out of the envelope and unfolded them.

I almost dropped them, but I just managed to tighten my shaking hands, crinkling the pristine white papers on the edges a bit.
Notice for Temporary Guardianship of Peter Benjamin Parker given to Sergeant James Buchannan Barnes as of December 19, 20**

My lips parted and my eyes widened in shock. I could barely breathe. My heart was trying to burst out of my chest. I couldn’t…My eyes were blurring, and I could barely read the words on the page anymore. But I remembered what they said.

“Is…” my voice came out rough and choked, and I cleared my throat and tried again, with little more success. “Is this real?”

I could barely see Bucky smile from the corner of my eye. “Yeah, kid, it’s real. Tony pulled some strings with his lawyers to get the process sped up. It’s not an official adoption, but it means that nobody can just take you from us without a fight.” He leaned in and put a hand on my shoulder. “It’s a start.”

A start. If only they knew. To me, it was so much more than a start.

“Thank you,” I managed, my voice small, and rough. “I…thank you.”

Bucky scooted a little closer to me and put his arm around my shoulders as they started shaking. I put a hand over my face as I tried to suppress the sobs of relief, leaning into him as he rubbed my back.


“I know,” I choked out, because I was better than okay. This was…this was amazing. I hadn’t actually…I hadn’t expected this so soon. “I’m…I…I can’t even s-say anything. It’s…thank you.”

I cried for a little bit. They waited patiently until I’d finished, Bucky whispering words of encouragement and rubbing my back as I hiccupped. God, this was embarrassing. I couldn’t bring myself to care all that much.

Stella had noticed my distress and abandoned her mouse, hopping up onto Bucky’s lap beside me and pawing at my leg, climbing onto my lap and settling down. I scratched her ears. Swallowing, clearing my throat, and wiping my eyes on my sleeve, I looked around and gave a shaky smile. “I can’t thank you enough for this. Ever. I just…thank you. Thanks.”

“It was about damn time,” Steve muttered quietly, where he thought no one could hear. We did.

“Steve!” Tony gasped dramatically, putting a hand over his heart and sinking forlornly in his chair. “Oh, fearless leader, thou hast dealt us a grave insult by using such profane, blasphemous language in the presence of a child!”

Steve, beet red, tried to defend himself. “What?! I—I didn’t mean to, it just slipped out! It’s your fault, Tony, and you, Clint; it’s rubbing off on all of us!”

“Alas, your purity!” Clint orated, falling out of his chair in a fake faint.

I couldn’t help the wet laugh that bubbled up inside my throat. Clint and Tony went back and forth over Steve’s head, and Steve’s head was whipping between them as he frantically tried to defend his honor. It was like watching a tennis match, Steve being the unfortunate ball.
That went on for a few minutes, the banter never ceasing. I leaned into Bucky and he pulled me against him, his metal arm firm and reassuring, just like the Avengers and their presence in my life.

As far as my Christmases go…I can’t rate it against Christmases with May and Ben; they were just too different. However, it was new, and fun, and every bit of what I wanted with the Avengers.

It was the start of something new and different from May and Ben. I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! PS I'm currently going back and rewriting it where I'm able since my writing has improved a lot since I started this monster two and a half years ago, so I'm doing that in addition to trying to finish it up. Just keeping you updated! Thanks!
A/N: Warning for gore. Um. Gory gore. If you’re at all squeamish, I recommend skipping the bolded parts.

I’m sorry in advance, because I am merciless. Uh. Yeah. Sorry?

“You ready, kid?” Bucky asked, eyebrows pinched as we stood outside the cell, Stella in my arms.

We were waiting for Clint and Natasha to question the HYDRA prisoner and lay down the ground rules about my presence there before I went in. Fury and some of his agents were on the other side of the one-way mirror, observing and cataloging his movements. They’d taken his mask and his tactical gear, leaving him in just his undergarments, boxers and a plain white t-shirt—not a very dignifying outfit, which I’m sure was the whole point. His wrists had been shackled to the table, but they had been strapped separately to the arms of his chair along the back, instead, to keep them further from me.

There were cameras facing towards him, watching every move of his front, especially his face. They zoned in on his pupils, especially, watching for dilation to tell if he was lying. After a bit of a struggle, they’d also hooked him up to a lie detector, the cuff around his arm tight to ensure that he didn’t get it off.

I sighed through my nose, calming my heart. “I guess,” I said, handing Stella to him. “So, just…ask the list of questions you guys gave me? And then ask my own? And try to get him to give stuff away?”

Bucky nodded, eyes dark. “Simple as that.” He took a deep breath. “You sense anything off, or if you just want to get out of there, you get up and leave, okay? We’ll handle everything else.”

I smiled gratefully and nodded, taking a deep, shaky breath. “I’m ready.”

Natasha and Clint, who’d come out to escort me in, smiled at my words. “Course you are, kiddo,” Clint said, ruffling my hair.

Bucky stepped back with a final smile and went to the room behind the mirror with the others. Natasha opened the door and Clint walked in as I followed close behind him. Alarm Clock’s tired eyes brightened with malice as soon as he saw me. Natasha followed me, shutting the door quietly.

I hadn’t actually seen his face before. I took a calming breath, looking away from his eyes in favor of looking at Clint, whose face was set in an uncaring mask.

“How’s it hanging, Francis?” He asked with a smirk. At my puzzled laugh, he clapped me on the shoulder. “Since he refuses to tell us his name, I named him Francis. Better than…what was it you named him?”
“Alarm Clock,” I said, casting a sideways glance at the man, who didn’t give anything away. “He was the one who threw me out of bed to wake me up.”

“Hm,” Clint said thoughtfully, his facial expression remaining the same, but his eyes smoldering a bit. “Interesting. I’ll remember that for our next session, Francis.”

Natasha had been standing on my right, face stone cold, arms crossed, looking every bit a deadly Black Widow. I smiled to myself. Man, I’d made some good friends.

Alarm Clock—Francis—scoffed. “I will speak only to the boy,” he said, his heavily-accented voice oozing malintent. “That was the deal.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t get your boxers in a twist,” Clint said, feigning nonchalance. He really was well-trained. “Widow and I are just the escort. But believe me, we’ll be watching.”

He sneered. “I am sure.”

I grabbed the cold metal chair and sank into it, pulling out the folded piece of paper in my jeans pocket, with the list of questions. “It’s okay,” I said with more confidence than I felt, smiling up at Tasha and Clint. “I’m okay. You can go.”

Clint patted my shoulder in passing, heading for the door. Tasha fixed Alarm Clock with one last look—a look that literally would have incinerated me on the spot—and followed Clint, her posture graceful yet reluctant. The heavy shut of the door was my cue.

My palms sweat, and I wiped them on my jeans out of habit. My heart was racing, thudding against my ribs and sternum in a frantic rhythm. I managed to control my breathing, but it was a struggle.

I cleared my throat. “So. Francis, huh?” The man’s face gave nothing away. “Not a very macho name. Parents couldn’t think of anything better?” I racked my brain for stereotypical German names. “Um…Stefan? That sounds German. Come on, that’s so much better than Francis.”

He didn’t even blink, just kept staring at me. “Geez, fine then. Um. Johann?” I laughed nervously a little. “Wait, that’s probably taken, huh? Red Skull and all that.”

The man, finally breaking his stoicism, smiled disturbingly. “You think you are funny. You speak too much.”

I pursed my lips. “I’d like to think your sense of humor just isn’t sophisticated enough to appreciate my jokes.” And wow, did that sound badass. Score one for Peter.

To my surprise, the man laughed, throwing his head back as the sound filled the room. “I look forward to the day when your jokes are replaced with screams.”

I couldn’t stop the thick swallow. There was a sharp rap on the mirror, two quick knocks in succession. Clint had assigned that as the Are you okay? knock. I gave a small nod. I wasn’t done yet.

“And why would that be?” I asked, smoothing out the paper in front of me, careful to hide the writing from him. “Why would I be screaming?”

Alarm Clock grinned like a shark. “I am not so easily manipulated, Peter.”

I smiled right back, acting braver than I felt. “Okay, Francis. I’ll stop calling you Francis if you tell me your real name.”
He leaned forward as much as he was able, his arms visibly straining. “I will tell you my name, Peter,” he said with a smile, “so that when you are reduced to a sad heap of what once was human, when you are at your very lowest, you may think of my name and remember that I had a hand in putting you there.” He leaned back, still smiling. “Emmanuel. My name is Emmanuel Jaeger.”


The man—Emmanuel—inclined his head. “Indeed.”

“So, Emmie. Can I call you Emmie?” Emmie frowned. I took it as a win. “There are a lot of things that don’t add up,” I said, leaning forward, bracing my forearms on the edge of the table, imitating every cop show I’d ever seen. Man, how did people do this? The metal table was digging into my arms, the still-healing cuts throbbing. “How did you disable FRIDAY? And get inside the Compound without anyone knowing?”

He scoffed. “It was simple. Anthony Stark is not the only genius alive. Kaiser was easily able to dismantle the Artificial Intelligence system for a period of time. After that, taking out the guards and gaining entry was very simple.”

“Kaiser,” I repeated thoughtfully. Window had seemed intelligent. The others had seemed more like grunts. “Was that Window?” I corrected myself quickly, my ears turning pink. “The one who did all the talking.”

“Yes,” Emmie replied. He smiled again. “He was especially excited to be in control of this mission. He wanted to see the great Peter Parker in person.”

I ignored that. “How did you know where the Compound was?”

“Silly child,” he said, and his condescending tone made me want to literally scream. “You must know there are HYDRA agents dotted all throughout your precious SHIELD.”

I glanced at the list to reaffirm; that led right to another question. “Can you give me names?”

He scoffed. “HYDRA is not so foolish as to entrust such sensitive data to its soldiers.”

I sighed, leaning back. “Guess they just didn’t love you enough, huh.”

“No, Peter,” he said, manic conviction invading his indifferent eyes. “They know that pawns must be sacrificed for the greater good. HYDRA will prevail because of this knowledge.”

“So, you’re just going to sit here like a good little pawn?” I asked, angry. It made me so angry, knowing that HYDRA was willing to slaughter and abandon and purge and destroy whatever it took, just to prove a point. The man in front of me probably didn’t grow up wanting to be HYDRA. He’d probably been threatened, or blackmailed, and then brainwashed past the point of rescue. “You’re going to sit here and answer what you can, the let yourself rot somewhere for years? No one’s coming for you, Emmanuel,” I said, my fists shaking as I clenched them on the table. “You’re completely alone. Nobody has your back, nobody believes in you to get out. How does that feel?”

To my surprise, a slow smile spread across his face, and he started laughing, soft and jerky, until it crescendoed into a full, evil laugh. I stared at him, wondering how someone could be so twisted. Finally, the laughter settled down, and he looked right at me, a gleam in his eyes. “You
know exactly how it feels, Peter.”

He expected a reaction. He expected me to jerk, to flinch, to cry, to scream at him. He expected me to be angry.

I was angry. But I’d never let him see that. Instead, I smiled. “Bullshit.” He blinked. I felt a twist of satisfaction at having surprised him. “I used to know how it feels. I remember the feeling. But the difference between you and me is that I have people looking out for me, now. Nine of them plus a hella badass cat, to be exact, and they’re pretty formidable, when they’re not acting like kids.” I smirked, picturing Tony and Clint’s indignant faces. “So, no. As of right now, I can’t say that I do, Emmie.”

He jaw ticked, and he looked away, eyes angry.

“Moving on,” I said, going down the list. “Why do you want that super soldier serum?”

Oh, boy. His smile was back. “You are asking me why HYDRA is so intent on finding you? On interrogating you for Captain American’s serum?”

“Pretty much.”

He grinned again. “Oh, Peter. SHIELD is so short-sighted, never looking past what’s right in front of them.” He leaned forward and said, just slightly above a whisper, “We don’t want Captain America’s serum.”

I jerked out of pure shock. That was not the answer I was expecting. Not at all.

“I…but, you keep coming after me,” I said, confusion seeping through the fragile mask I’d put on. “You keep chasing me and attacking me, because I have the formula. You knew that, so what—”

“Yes, well,” Emmanuel said, smug face delighted at my confusion. “Captain America’s serum would have been a bonus, really. We never really cared much about the papers, Peter, though it seems you’ve destroyed them.” I jerked. HYDRA knew about that? “Oh, yes, we knew that you destroyed the papers and memorized the information. Quite a bold move, though not at all out of character for you, I would think. No, HYDRA is not after the papers, Peter, or specifically the serum. They are after you.”

I felt the world spin on its axis as those words sunk in. Me. They wanted me. But why? All I had was the information. That was all I had. “Why?”

He smirked. “That information is a bit above my pay grade. Would you not agree?”

“No, actually, I wouldn’t,” I said, leaning forward, anger and confusion and fear pumping through my veins, firing through every nerve of my body. “You’re acting like you know something else. This whole time, you’ve been acting like there’s some big secret I’m not privy to, and it’s pissing me off. So why the hell do they want me?”

Emmanuel studied me with something like twisted approval. “You are smart,” he said after several seconds of silence, inclining his head slightly. “But it will not help you to know. It will change nothing. They will hunt you down, Peter, like the animal you are.”

“And why am I an animal?” I asked, fists clenched, teeth grinding against each other. I was so mad. Red was tinting my vision, a crimson lens of anger distorting the world around me. I was sick of being hunted and hurt. This whole time, I thought it had been because my parents had
entrusted me with their research. I lost everyone I loved, I became homeless. I ate one meal a day at best, nothing some days. I wore the same clothes for weeks. I couldn’t shower regularly. Everyone I passed could tell that I was homeless, and they looked at me like I was something less than them, with those pitiful looks I loathed. I cut all connections, except Jason. And who could really call that a connection? I was ready to break it at any time. Hell, I had; I hadn’t seen him in two months. I usually saw him at least one every two weeks, at most every three. He probably figured I wasn’t coming back. I was fifteen years old, and sometimes, I felt fifty. I thought it was the research.

Now, I found out, it was just me.

“Why am I an animal?” I repeated when he didn’t answer.

He shifted as though uncomfortable, something glinting in his eyes. “Well, Peter. I supposed my words are incorrect.” He shifted again. I glanced down at his hands, but he kept talking. “You may not be an animal, but you have no right to call yourself a human.”

He was picking the lock.

The thought formed just as his right wrist snapped free, and he brought up the small blade that had—if the bleeding flap of flesh hanging off his arm was any indication—been buried under his skin. I sat frozen as he brought the blade up, just as Clint, Natasha, and Bucky barreled through the door, guns up, shouting at him to drop the blade.

But as they’d come in, he’d kept speaking.

“Ever hear of cross-species genetics, Peter?”

With that, he brought the blade up and slit his own throat, just as Bucky and the others barreled in.

The blade was small, but the cut was deep. Bright red blood—not the deep crimson of a vein, but the bright, vibrant color of blood from his carotid artery—sluiced down his neck as his head hung back, the gaping wound exposing his torn windpipe and mutilated muscles, a flash of white near the very back indicating he’d cut almost to his spine. Horrible, wet sounds escaped his bloody lips as he gasped. At one point, he coughed, blood spurting out of his open throat before it reached his lips. His glazed eyes settled on my face and dulled, suspiciously like May’s had. I saw Death’s face again, in that moment.

I was transfixed, wide eyes staring in my seat at the gory corpse before me, unblinking, unmoving, lips slightly parted in shock, too stunned to close them. Orders were yelled, and people rushed in, trying to save him. He was our only lead. But they wouldn’t be able to. I’d already seen that look in his eyes. Death’s face, hovering expectantly in his irises, taking the life with him as he fled. The blood ran, and ran, and ran, and ra—

A metal, cold hand gently covered my eyes. I couldn’t even flinch.

“It’s okay, kid,” Bucky’s soft voice penetrated the haze around me, even as the bright red stained as another gruesome memory. “You don’t have to look. It’s okay.”

I could hear him, could understand his words, but they didn’t make sense. I couldn’t respond. I couldn’t even close my eyes behind his hand. I just stared as shafts of light filtered through his fingers, encroaching on the darkness. My hands rested in my lap, lifeless. I sat slouched
against the back of the chair, Bucky’s flesh hand steadying me when I started tilting. Goosebumps lined my arms.

“Peter? Come on, kid, come back to us,” he said, sounding a little worried. “Bruce? Steve, get Bruce.”

Come back from where? I didn’t really know where I was. I felt trapped inside my own head. My body wouldn’t respond to me.

Death hurt. I hadn’t even liked that guy. I’d hated the guy. He’d terrorized and hurt me. He’d called me an animal. Wait, no. Cross-species genetics? I’d heard of it. **But his words made little sense compared to the horrifically vivid memory of his open, gaping throat.**

Time blurred a little. I realized Bucky’s hand had been removed, but instead of the man’s body, I saw Bruce’s worried face, and behind him, a couch. The living area, then. Well, I didn’t really see it. I just kind of registered that it was there. I couldn’t unsee the man’s eyes as he’d died. The eyes that had been looking right at me.

“He’s in shock,” Bruce said thickly, dragging a hand down his face. “Severe shock. He’ll come out of it if you talk to him enough, but…I don’t know, guys. This is…this may mess him up for a little while.”

Mess me up. Was that even possible anymore?

“Dammit, Peter, come on,” Bucky said, voice laced with concern and fear. “Come on, kid, you can do it. You’re in there. Come on out, we’re all here.”

No. I didn’t want to. There would just be more death. More dull eyes and slack faces and crimson blood splashing against cold floors and torn tissue and muscle and bone and—

“Pete, get out of your head, okay?” Different voice. Tony. “It’s just going to make it worse. I know, okay? Believe me. Come on, we’ll take care of you.”

Would they? They’d try. But could they?

“Look me in the eyes, Малыш.” (A/N: “kiddo” in Russian). Tasha’s soft but commanding voice, her calloused hand on my cheek. “Look at me, not through me. Peter. Hear my voice and come back.”

They would. They could. I hoped.

Struggling, I blinked. Consciously. I blinked again. Tasha’s eyes widened a fraction before she smiled. “There you are.” She called to Bruce over her shoulder as I blinked again, shivering.

Bucky replaced Natasha kneeling in front of me, gently taking my face in his hands. “You there, kid?” He asked, his forehead crinkled in worry. “You were…well, almost asleep for a few hours.”

A few hours?

It had felt like minutes.

“He died,” I said slowly. “He died.”

Bucky’s brow smoothed over, maybe because I had actually spoken, but his eyes narrowed in concern. “Yeah. Yeah, he did, kid.”
“Slit his own throat,” I said, eyes trailing to the floor, my breathing picking up. “Saw his windpipe in two pieces. Think I saw his spine.” I paused, heaving a breath. “Eyes. His eyes, Bucky.”

Bucky raised himself up further on his knees and firmly pulled me to him, cupping the back of my head, pressing my (wet?) face into his shoulder. “Don’t think about that. Don’t think about it, Peter. It’s okay. You’re here, with us. All of us. We’re all here.” He whispered something to someone else. Something about water. “You’re gonna be just fine, kid.”

“Looked like May,” I mumbled. He pulled back a little, so he could hear, asking me gently to say it again. “His eyes. Looked like May’s. When she died.”

Bucky exhaled in a huff. “Shit, kid,” he whispered, conviction in every crevice of his voice. “I don’t care what it takes, you’re gonna be okay.”

I didn’t believe him.

Chapter End Notes

Lol bye fluff, welcome back angst. Thanks for reading!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N: Here you are; love you all!

For six days, I barely spoke.

I barely ate, either. I slept as much as I could, but the nightmares didn’t let me sleep for long amounts of time. I mostly stayed in my room. Stella, worried, sweet Stella, never left my side. She stayed curled against me, a spot of warmth in the cold darkness of my mind.

Bucky didn’t leave much, either. He’d dragged a recliner to rest beside my bed and stayed there. He wanted to be right there if I had nightmares—which was quite frequently—so he could wake me up. He had to sleep some, so the others traded out with him while he took naps, though he was never gone for long. I didn’t even have the presence of mind to realize how little rest or food he was getting, or to appreciate that he was doing it for me.

I wasn’t eating, so I was perpetually dizzy. I didn’t really notice, though, as I spent most of my time horizontal. Sam came everyday with different food, but I could only stomach a little bit before I threw it up, the memory of the corpse turning my stomach with each thought.

I only spoke when I needed help doing something, or when I wanted to know the time, or when I was rambling from a nightmare.

It was like I was trapped somewhere deep in the shadows of my mind, in the darkness where the horrible memories lived and fed off of my terror. All I could see was that man, so willing to die for—for HYDRA, for nothing—and all I could think of was Death’s face and how it had seemed so real.

May’s eyes were the only thing I could see. May’s eyes as she faded, as she died, and left me, and moved on to something I’d never understand—

I knew it was selfish. I knew. I knew she was probably happier now. Probably in heaven. I liked science. My parents hadn’t believed in God, so I’d never gone to church, but I liked the idea of there being some higher entity, some higher being above us that helped us out when we needed it. Science could still work, even with God in the mix.

So I hoped, I hoped with everything I had, that May and Ben were in heaven. That they were happy.

But that didn’t mitigate the power of the memories and the choking terror I felt whenever I remembered. I stayed in that terror, trapped for days and days, trying to claw my way out of it enough to eat, to sleep without nightmares, to talk to someone without sounding so afraid, to be alone for more than thirty seconds without going into a panic attack.

To be normal.

The sixth day, my head cleared enough to communicate like an intelligent life form.
I was lying in bed on my side, burrowed in the Avengers themed blanket Tony had gotten me, the softness and warmth making me feel safe and protected. Bucky was in the recliner, dozing, a book hanging loosely from his fingers as he snored lightly. His flesh hand was resting on the bed beside me. Stella was curled up against my stomach, purring soothingly.

I blinked. Blinked again.

It was like a switch had flipped.

My mind was suddenly a lot clearer. The muddled state of shock receded suddenly, and I sat up slowly, feeling clearer than I had in a while. The memory was still horrifying and gruesome and terrible to remember, but it was...somehow a bit more manageable. Like if I needed to, I could choke it down, like I used to with the memories of May and Ben’s bodies. The fear wasn’t quite so...debilitating.

“Bucky,” I said quietly, my stomach growling demandingly. I swayed, dizzy from the change in altitude, and braced myself on the bed. Stella perked up and inspected me worriedly, pouncing into my lap and pawing at my stomach. “Bucky.”

Bucky started awake, the flimsy paperback falling from his hands as he rubbed his eyes blearily. “Peter?” He said, his voice slurred but attentive. “You okay, kid?”

“Uh,” I said, still off balance. “Um. Yeah. I think I’m—I think I’m a lot better. I’m not...as fuzzy. I feel clearer. Better.” My stomach growled in frustration, reminding me forcefully of my hunger. “And hungry. I’m also very hungry. And dizzy.”

Bucky’s eyes lit up at the word hungry, and he huffed an exhausted laugh. “Oh, thank God. Peter, you had us all scared to death. We had no idea when you were coming out of—that.” He paused, leaning back. “You were—barely eating, kid. You lost a bit of weight.”

I laid back against the headrest. I hadn’t meant to worry them. “I’m sorry. I know I’ve...probably been a handful, for a few days.”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed. “You have nothing to be sorry for, kid. You saw something I wouldn’t wish on the worst criminal. I honestly didn’t expect you to come around for a few more days.” At my questioning look, he sighed, picking up his book and putting it on the nightstand. “You were...just...out of it. You wouldn’t really focus on anyone for very long, and when you did it was a bad sign. Meant you were going back into your head. Do you...do you remember the nightmares...?”

I swallowed, glancing down and away. “Y-Yeah.” The nightmares, the vivid visions of his face, May’s eyes, Ben’s body, the blood cutting rivers through flesh and marrow, the sinew and tissue being torn and ripped and shredded and—


Bucky nodded, looking away as well. After a moment, he said, “You’re alright, kid.” He ruffled my hair gently, and I gave him a small smile, tugging the soft blanket up higher around me. Stella curled up against me again. “I’ll get Sam to make you something. You okay if the others come in for a while? They were worried.”

I smiled again, bigger this time. “Yeah.” I wanted to see them.

He smiled, one of his gentle smiles. “I’ll be back in a minute.”
He left, leaving the door slightly ajar. Stella pawed a bit more urgently, a bit miffed that I had ignored her for so long. I took my hands from the bed to lift her, but the dizziness struck as soon as there was nothing to prop me up and I fell back against my pillows with a small oomph.

Clint, Rhodey, Natasha, and Steve chose that moment to walk in, relief covering their features. “Hey, kiddo,” Clint said as I gracefully struggled to sit up, plopping down in the worn recliner as Steve helped me sit up, propping me against the headboard. I swayed, and he steadied me with a hand on my shoulder. “Looks like you’re a little out of it, still.” His eyebrows were a bit drawn together.

“Oh,” I wheezed, winded. Geez, why was I so exhausted? “I’m…really dizzy. And, uh, tired.”

Natasha placed a cool hand on my forehead as Rhodey sat down on the bed. “You don’t feel sick. It may be lingering effects from the shock. Where’s Bruce?”

“Here,” Bruce said, stepping into the room right as Natasha said his name, followed closely by Thor and Tony. He immediately came over and replaced Natasha’s hand with his own, brow furrowing in concentration. “No, you’re warm, but you don’t have a fever. Can you sit up a little more?”

I tried. My arms trembled, and I felt heat creeping up my neck and cheeks as I struggled to do something as simple as lift myself up. Steve didn’t say a word as he put a warm hand on my back and lifted me up, holding me in a sitting position when it became obvious I wasn’t going to be able to do it myself.

I flinched as Bruce put a cold stethoscope under my shirt and against my back. He whispered a quiet apology and moved it carefully around, instructing me to take deep breaths. Once he was done, he replaced it around his neck.

“Well,” he said, rummaging through his doctor’s bag, everyone in the room watching him expectantly, “your breathing is a little heavy, but nothing too bad. Your heart rate is also a little fast, but well within the acceptable range. Mind if I prick your finger to take your blood sugar? I’ll need your blood pressure, too.”

I nodded hesitantly. I hated needles, but I trusted Bruce.

He strapped the cuff to my arm and pumped it up, the scratchy Velcro uncomfortably tight against my arm, the whoosh signaling its release after a few seconds of pressure. “Not bad,” Bruce mumbled, the frown abating a bit as he read the numbers. Clint picked up Stella gently from where she was batting curiously at the contraption, and I couldn’t hold in a smile as she meowed annoyedly, having lost her latest toy.

Bruce pricked my finger. I got away with just a gasp. The room was spinning a little, so I leaned more heavily against Steve, who shifted to better support me, eyes worried.

“Geez, Peter,” Bruce said, looking mildly horrified. “Your blood sugar is in the ninth circle of hell.”

Rhodey choked on his soda as Natasha snorted a surprised laugh. “That’s one way to put it,” she commented, crossing her arms and leaning against my bed.

I smiled a little, but it was getting hard to concentrate. “Uh…is that…that’s n-not good, right?”

“Yes, very not good,” Bruce said, snatching Clint’s unopened soda from his hand, earning him an
indignant squawk. “Frankly I’m surprised you’re still conscious. Drink all of this.”

Bruce opened it, the fizzing loud in my ears. He handed it to me, and even though I took it with both hands, I was shaking so badly that I almost dropped it. In an uncharacteristic show of assistance, Tony snatched it up before it fell and raised it to my lips. “Small sips, Pete,” he said quietly, looking worried.

Despite that, I chugged the whole thing. God, it tasted good. My rumbling stomach only became more demanding, though.

Tony took the empty can and shoved it into Clint’s hands when I’d finished, panting a little. “S-sorry,” I said, looking down. “I know I’m—probably being a…handful.”

“Nay, young Peter!” Thor bellowed. I winced slightly from the volume. “You have not inconvenienced in the slightest! We were concerned for you.”

I gave him a half smile, though I didn’t really believe him.

Just then, Bucky came hustling into the room, followed by Sam, carrying a tray. Bucky sat down next to me on the bed and eased me back into the pillows with Steve’s help, seeing what a struggle I was having performing a basic physical task (can you sense the sarcasm and bitterness at my complete lack of upper body strength right now? Good.)

“You good, kid?” He asked, slipping another pillow behind my neck as Sam came up behind him.

“Y-yeah,” I said, nausea turning my stomach as I smelled the food. That soda wasn’t sitting well. “Um, I don’t—I d-don’t know if I c-can eat much…”

Bucky’s eyebrows furrowed. “Bruce? Is he okay?”

“The soda may have been a little too much sugar and carbonation at first,” Bruce said thoughtfully, “but it was the only thing I had on hand, and I had to get his blood sugar up. Peter, how are you feeling?”

“Dizzy, and n-nauseous, and overall like…a t-truck hit me,” I ground out as another wave of nausea swept over me.

“Okay,” Sam said, setting the tray down and picking up a steaming mug. “This is literally just chicken broth. Think you can stomach some?”

“I really d-don’t know,” I said, the prospect of anything else entering my stomach actually kind of scaring me. I was seriously questioning the ability of my digestive system to function right now.

“Two sips. That’s it. If it doesn’t stay down, we’ll try again later,” Bucky said, concern slipping into his steady tone. “Okay?”

“Ok-kay.”

I sipped the warm broth hesitantly, Bucky’s flesh hand gently cupping the back of my neck as Sam carefully tilted the cup. I swallowed two mouthfuls, the salty liquid sliding down my throat and settling uneasily in my stomach. I felt my hand clench the bedsheets as nausea roiled my stomach, and a small whimper escaped as I closed my eyes.
“Th-think I might be s-sick,” I said slowly, feeling th bile rise in my throat.

Sure enough, three seconds later, I threw up into the metal trash can that Thor had tossed to Bucky. I retched twice, my burning throat aching as I sagged backwards when I was done, and coughed a little. Bruce whispered something to Natasha, who nodded quietly and left.

Clint had immediately sprung up when I started throwing up, disappearing into the bathroom, only to reappear a moment later with two cool washcloths, which he handed to Bucky. “Always helps my kids when they’re sick,” he said as explanation. Bucky gave him a grateful smile.

He used one to wipe my mouth off and laid the other on my forehead. I didn’t have a fever, but the cool cloth felt really nice anyways. I sighed, the nausea receding for a moment as my eyes slipped closed.

“You okay, Peter?” Steve’s quiet voice asked.

I hummed in response. “Tired.”

I heard Natasha enter the room and say, “Is this everything?”

“Yeah, thanks, Nat,” Bruce replied, and something shifted on the bed. I felt Bucky’s hand leave my shoulder and opened my eyes to see what was going on. Bruce was holding an IV stand and a bag with some clear liquid, hooking up the tube to a decent sized needle.

“I d-don’t want that,” I said, eyeing the needle warily.

Bruce chuckled, and Bucky ruffled my hair, his hand settling atop my head, reassuringly. “It’s fine, kid. It’ll be in and then it’ll be over.”

“You really need some nutrients and fluids, Peter,” Bruce said, sterilizing the needle. “You shouldn’t be this weak. I know you haven’t eaten much the past few days, but there’s no reason you shouldn’t be able to hold yourself up. There’s something else going on with you, and I’d feel a lot better about your health if you let me do this.”

My eyes flickered between him and the needle a few times, and finally I huffed and turned my head away, squeezing my eyes shut and exposing the underside of my left arm. “Do it really fast.”

Bucky kept his hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently as Bruce quickly inserted the needle. I felt a small pinch, flinching at the sting, but that was it. “Good job, kiddo,” Clint said, grinning. “I’d give you a sticker, but I gave my last one to Natasha after her flu shot.”

I grinned a little opened my eyes to see Tasha giving him a cold smile. “I seem to remember you crying like a baby after you got those rabies shots in Uruguay. Or am I mistaken?”

Clint pouted. “I didn’t cry.”

“I’m sorry, my mistake. If I remember correctly, you ‘shed masculine discharges of excess eye fluids in response to painful stimuli.’”

For the second time, Rhodey choked on his soda.

…

I was in bed with the IV for two days, only up and moving when I went to the bathroom. On the second day, I was able to stomach the broth and some dry toast, so they took my off the IV. That
was very nice, getting that out.

The team stayed with me in shifts, but Bucky didn’t leave much, simply dozing in the recliner or reading when one of the others was also there. When we were alone, he told me stories of what he could remember from before the Winter Soldier, which included a lot of Steve-beat-downs, featuring his heroic rescues. Tasha read to me in Russian. I understood some of it, but mostly I just dozed to the sound of her soothing voice.

Bruce and Tony brought in some of their projects and let me tinker with them when my hands steadied a bit, and Thor told me more stories about Asgard. Sam apparently stress baked, so he said during one of his visits that I had three kinds of cookies, two cakes, and a pan of brownies waiting for me. With a wink, he added that he’d camouflaged them with some of Tony’s old cloaking tech, hiding them from Clint, which I thought was actually the most badass thing in the world.

Steve told me more stories of his time in the war. He also told me about Peggy Carter, his 40’s sweetheart. Those were bittersweet stories. I could tell he really loved her. Clint came in some, too, with some of the blueprints I’d gotten him for Christmas, asking me questions and humoring me when I went into some long-winded scientific explanation that went right over his head. I felt awful when I realized he hadn’t gone to see his family. He’d missed Lila’s birthday, and the guilt I felt was awful. I tried to apologize, but he wouldn’t hear it. He just ruffled my hair and smiled, saying, “Lila will understand. You were pretty sick, kid, and I was worried.” I still felt guilty, but that eased my conscience somewhat. Rhodey came and showed off the progress Tony and he had made with my cloaking device for his braces; it was coming along pretty well, actually.

All in all, I was never really bored. When nobody was there and Bucky was asleep, I read the million science encyclopedias and the book set I’d gotten from everybody for Christmas, which kept me pretty busy.

On the third day, I was able to walk around on my own and do simple things that, you know, I should be able to do. Yes, more bitterness, sorry.

I was sitting on the couch in the common room watching Star Wars with Rhodey and Stella, who had claimed the entire armchair to the left of the couch, while everybody else did training, after Bruce had reluctantly lifted my prison sentence—I’m sorry, my bed-rest period—when Bruce and Tony proposed the idea.

“So,” Tony said, plopping down next to me with a smile. “Bruce and I have been talking. How would you feel about going to SHIELD to get some tests done?”

I stiffened a little, sitting up straighter. “What kinds of tests? Mute, FRIDAY.”

The TV volume cut out as Bruce eyed Stella—who flicked her tail lazily, a blatant statement that she wasn’t about to move—and then sat down resignedly on the table in front of me. “Routine tests. You really scared us, Peter. You shouldn’t have been nearly as weak as you were, even with not eating much. Six days is a lot, yes, but you were eating, however sporadic it was, and drinking. There’s no medical reason I can come up with as to why you were…like that.”

The fear must have shown on my face, because Tony patted my knee at the same time Rhodey clapped me on the shoulder. “You’re fine. We’re all going to SHIELD for an official debrief anyways, so it’s just a ‘two birds with one stone’ kind of thing. Somebody will be with you at all times, and they won’t be doing anything too bad.”

“Yeah, okay, but what kind of tests?” They’d dodged my question.
“Mostly bloodwork,” Bruce said calmly. “They may ask you to do some stuff like you would do for a physical. Lift weights, run on a treadmill, but you don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with. Like Tony said, you won’t be alone with them, okay?”

“Why can’t you do it here?” I asked, a knot in my stomach forming at the thought of being tested by SHIELD.

“As much as it pains me,” Tony said, kicking his feet up into Rhodey’s lap and consequently across my legs, settling into the couch, “SHIELD has some pretty badass medical equipment, better than what I have here. It’ll give us more accurate readings and tell us what we need to do to avoid another bed rest period for you.”

I scowled. “You mean prison sentence.”

Bruce sighed. “Peter, it wasn’t—”

“Prison. Sentence.”

Rhodey laughed, finally just turning off the muted TV. “You’ll be fine, kiddo. We’ll be in the facility if you need anything, okay?”

Hesitantly, I settled back against the couch and crossed my arms, sulking. “Fine.”

“Aw, so brave,” Tony cooed, his voice dripping sarcasm as he ruffled my hair, sending it in every direction, avoiding my flailing hands when I tried to swat his arm away. “They grow up so fast.”

I smiled a little, but I was nervous about the SHIELD visit. Something didn’t feel right. I dismissed it as nerves—after all, I hadn’t left the Compound for months. Oddly, I felt pretty fine with that. It was big, and I could explore. Maybe I could ask to stop by and see Jason while we were out; I felt bad for dropping him like I did.

“While we’re out, can I stop by the homeless camp I used to stay at and see my friend Jason?” I asked just before Rhodey flipped the TV back on. “He did a lot for me, and I used to check in with him every so often, but it’s been a while.”

The three of them exchanged looks—you know, those super-secret how high does this kid’s clearance need to be and does it really matter he’s a random homeless person looks that screamed covert operations—then Tony smiled. “Sure thing, kid.”

The thought of seeing Jason pretty much pushed my nervousness aside, replacing it with excitement. I was looking forward to it. I was excited about getting out and seeing him.

I tried to convince myself of these things, but the fear only grew.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sticking around :) hope you liked it!
“Anything seems funny, you feel anything at all off, you press this button, okay?” Tony said, indicating a small silver button on the side of the watch he’d fitted around my wrist.

I gave him a long-suffering sigh, glancing around. We’d pulled off into a field a block away from the homeless shelter. The Quinjet was camouflaged against the backdrop of trees, hidden partially behind a chain link fence covered in vines and the edge of a ground of trees under an overpass. The Quinjet was barely small enough to hide in the little alcove, but no one would discover it.

All nine of my self-appointed bodyguards were standing around as Tony explained the watch, arms crossed, stances anxious. They looked like we were about to walk into a war zone with water guns.

“Aren’t you guys being a little paranoid?” I asked, fully aware of how whiny I sounded. “I came here dozens of times, and nothing ever happened.”

“Yeah, well, that was before you had HYDRA agents actively pursuing you,” Rhodey said, leaning against the Quinjet. His braces were invisible, and I smiled to myself. “It’s not paranoia, it’s preparation.”

“Okay, well, I’ll be fine,” I said, giving them a smile and turning towards the camp. “Gimme like twenty minutes and then we can get going.”

“You sure you don’t want one of us to come with you?” Bucky said, tense. “We don’t know this Jared kid all that well—”

“Jason, actually—”

“—and we can be discreet.”

I raised an eyebrow at the word discreet and turned around, fully facing them. “Okay, just…take a minute. You have a metal arm. Clint has a quiver full of arrows and a huge bow. Natasha is dressed completely in leather and would terrify them all. Tony’s…well, he’s Tony Stark. Steve has his shield and uniform. Sam’s wearing his flight suit and his goggles. Thor is a god. And he’s huge. With an eyepatch. And Bruce and Rhodey—well, you two actually look pretty normal.”

“Was that a compliment?” Bruce asked Rhodey, looking confused.

“You know, I don’t actually know,” Rhodey whispered back, looking somewhere between surprised and slightly offended. Clint snickered.

“But my point is, the nine of you don’t exactly scream discreet.” Stella, who had been chasing a squirrel around the underbrush, bounded up to me, and I lifted her onto my shoulders.
She freaking *loved* being on people’s shoulders. “Besides, Stella’s saved me from HYDRA twice already, so…” I shrugged. “She’s got you beat.”

I will swear up and down to the day I die that Stella positively *grinned* at them.

“You have a weird cat,” Clint said as I walked away.

“I know,” I called back.

I made my way towards the camp, looking around at the tents and at the fire pit in the center. I knew my way around here. Some of the people nodded at me, and I nodded back, but…I felt so…out of place. My hair and my face were clean, and there was no dirt under my nails. My clothes didn’t have holes in them and weren’t stained or ragged. I didn’t have my backpack with me. My shoes were intact.

I felt…so removed, from them. A few months ago, I would’ve been right at home. But now? It felt like I was an entirely different person.

“*Peter? That you, kid?*”

I whirled around at the voice and saw Jason coming towards me with a huge smile on his face. He grabbed my shoulder and pulled me in for a hug as soon as he reached me, laughing. “Dude, I thought you were a goner! You haven’t been by in months!” He looked me up and down, still holding my shoulders. “Man, you’re all cleaned up, huh? Found someone to stay with?”

“Yeah,” I said, smiling at the familiarity. I felt the guilt rise up, then. “I’m sorry I haven’t been by. I met some people and they took me in, and—they’ve been really, really good to me. I’m really happy with them. But some stuff happened, and I couldn’t come by…I’m sorry I didn’t let you know I was okay.”

Jason grinned and clapped me on the shoulder, putting an arm around me shoulders and leading me further into the camp. “No worries; I’m glad for you. A good kid like you shouldn’t be stuck on the streets.” He eyed Stella. “I see you’ve still got the cat. What did you name her again?”

“Stella,” I replied, ducking into his tent as he held the flap open for me. A plastic sheet covered the grass, and he had a couple paperback books to one side, a sleeping bag, a self-charging flashlight, two backpacks, and some cans of food and water bottles strewn around.

He sat down on the sleeping bag; I sat across from him, Stella waltzing over to the food, sniffing around. “How’ve you been, Jason? How’s everyone doing?”

“We’re okay,” he said with a weary smile, leaning back. “It’s, ah…been a little rough since it started getting cold. Some of the older ones are getting sick. Benny’s not doing too well.” Benny was an older man with thin, grey hair with the brightest toothless smile a man could have. He was a war veteran. Army, thirty-first Infantry. Sometimes he got that thousand-yard stare in his eyes. A couple hours later, he’d be giving away the last of his money to someone else at the camp.

Something twisted inside me. I’d spent months with some of these people. I wasn’t here all the time, but I’d been around enough to get to know a couple of them. Here I was, clean and full—gaining weight, getting stronger—when all the people in my exact situation were still here, suffering in the cold and the wet, huddling around trash can fires and in tattered blankets and holey clothes. I walked in with a heavy winter coat and a jacket underneath, thermal jeans, warm, thick socks, nice boots, gloves, and a scarf, and they barely had enough to cover themselves in this weather.
“I’m sorry,” I said, hunching over a little. “I—I’m sorry, Jason.”

He knew what I meant, and promptly smacked me on the back of the head.

“Ow!” I shouted, my hand flying to my hairline. I stared at him incredulously as he smirked. “What the hell?”

“Don’t apologize. I’m happy you’re off the streets, Peter. A lot of the people here are older. They’ve lived good lives, and they’re at peace with dying here. I wish I could help the younger ones, the kids and the teenagers, but you can’t save everyone. I’m just glad you’re okay. I don’t want you to feel guilty about being safe. We’ve all got our trials. For some, it’s being homeless.” He looked away. “You’ll have your trials, too. Trust me.”

That was…surprisingly intuitive. “Uh…wow. That was quite a speech, Jason.”

He grinned again, amusement and…something else I couldn’t identify in his eyes. “I’ve always been a good speaker; it’s how I connect with people. You’ll see. One day, I’ll be some big-shot leader of a giant organization. One that’s going to change the world. Make it better.”

I smiled. “I’m sure you are. What, you gonna take over Apple? Maybe challenge Tony for Stark Industries?”

He paused, looking confused. “Why’d you call him Tony?”

Oh. Oops.

“Uh. Well. Funny story, actually.” I trusted Jason. Steve would probably die of a heart attack and Tasha may consider skinning me alive, but I trusted him. “You know those people that took me in?” He nodded suspiciously. “They’re kind of the Avengers.”

“They’re shit-ting me.”

“I’m not.” I said with a nervous laugh as he gawked at me. “I’m dead serious. The last time I left here, I was attacked on my way to another camp. They saved me and took me back to the Compound so they could fix me up—don’t give me that look, I wasn’t hurt that bad—and then they just…decided to keep me, I guess.” I smiled, looking down. “They’re…amazing, Jason. I’ve found a really good family with them.”

“Huh,” he said, still gawking, leaning back on his hands. He laughed quietly, shaking his head. “Leave it to you, Peter, to get yourself beat up and saved by the Avengers.”

I laughed, picking up Stella as she wandered over to me and settling her in my lap. She was stiff as I pet her, like she was on edge. She must’ve been confused by the new environment.

“But yeah,” I said to fill the silence, shrugging. “That’s me. I live with the Avengers now. They’re all awesome and super overprotective. It’s like having nine older siblings.”

Jason grinned, a glint in his eye. “They should be overprotective.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ah, come on, Peter,” he said, punching me lightly on the shoulder. “You must get into all kinds of trouble.”

I thought back on the past three months. The attack in the alley. Destroying the papers.
Fury’s threats. The panic attacks and flashbacks and nightmares. The not-eating and the sickness. The being-tied-to-a-chair-by-HYDRA-agents thing.

“Maybe a couple times,” I mumbled reluctantly.

He threw his head back and laughed, and *wow,* I’d never noticed how high pitched his laugh was. Geez, he had some lungs. “Knowing you, it won’t be the last time.”

Well, I couldn’t argue.

My watch beeped, letting me know it was time to get going. I turned it off and said, “I’ve got to go. We’re on our way to SHI—to run some errands,” I caught myself just in time. Luckily, he didn’t look fazed. “It was really good to see you, Jason.” I ducked outside the tent, Stella in my arms, and he followed. “I’ll stop by again if I can, and I’ll try to bring some stuff for everybody else. Tony’s got the money, he won’t mind.”

Jason grinned and pulled me in for a hug. “We’d appreciate it, kid. Now get out of here before I’ve got Hawkeye and Iron Man on my ass about your curfew.”

I laughed and walked away, raising a hand in farewell. “Have fun taking over the world!”

“Trust me, I will!” He shouted back as I turned into the little alcove, where the others were waiting for me. Wait, where—

“He seems nice,” a voice said behind me. I jumped six feet in the air and whirled around to see Tasha strolling up just behind me, shedding a tattered blanket, fingerless gloves, and a stained scarf. She fixed me with an unimpressed look and raised an eyebrow. “You alright, Малыш?” (*A/N: Kiddo in Russian*)

“You scared the shit out of me!” I yelled, ignoring an indignant “Language!” from Steve. “What were you doing?”

“Eavesdropping,” she said with a completely straight face, traipsing past me into the Quinjet, where everyone else had already filed in. She turned back with the slightest smirk and said, “You coming?”

“Yes,” I grumbled, dragging myself in behind her, plopping into a seat between Bruce and Sam. “You’re scary when you want to be.”

She smiled and wagged her eyebrows. “It’s my job.”

With that, she joined Clint in the front of the jet, and we set off for SHIELD.

…

SHIELD was not as…super-spy-esque as I thought it would be.

The hallways were gloomy and dark, flickering lights casting eerie shadows on the walls. Agents bustled by with papers and files, and medical and scientific personnel swarmed around. The entire thing was like a really sad beehive. There never seemed to be a still moment.

The ten of us (plus Stella, who was perched happily on Thor’s broad shoulders) made our way through the halls to a large, open room with several computer terminals overlooking the head of the Helicarrier (which was SO FREAKING AWESOME). A few of the agents were pointing and whispering in our general direction, but I couldn’t tell if it was directed at me or the Avengers.
“You’re late,” a voice said from the balcony above us. I turned to see Nick Fury descending the stairs on our right, his (ridiculous) trench coat billowing behind him.

“Ah, well, ya know,” Tony said flippantly, waving a hand around in a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “What is it, three in the afternoon? What can we say, air traffic’s a bitch this time of day.”

Sam and Clint sniggered into their hands. Steve gave Tony a disapproving look, but the amused twinkle in his eye ruined the effect. I stifled a laugh.

Fury gave an unamused smile. “Cute.” He looked to me, suddenly all business. “Parker, you’re going to the medical wing. Coulson will take you.” Coulson nodded and put a non-threatening yet firm hand on my shoulder, steering me towards the hallway.

I tripped over my own feet in an attempt to turn around, nervousness itching its way across my skin. “Wait, you said—”

“Yeah, we said,” Tony said, eyeing Fury even as Bucky started towards Coulson and me. “The slightly more ancient grandpa is the kid’s perpetual escort.”

Bucky strode towards us and gave me a small smile. “Gotcha, kid,” he said just loud enough for me to hear. “I’ll rotate with one of the others, Director. No offense, but we don’t want Peter alone in here. You know, with all the HYDRA spies on the loose.”

Fury’s jaw ticked, and he gave a cool smile. “Of course. Coulson, double time it.”

“I will retain the feline,” Thor said proudly, cupping Stella in one huge hand against his chest, where she snuggled happily. I smiled fondly. I wouldn’t have to worry about her with them.

We walked in silence for a few minutes. It was awkward, but not horribly so. Of course, the relative peace couldn’t last.

“So, you’re Sergeant Barnes, right?” Coulson spoke up, startling me. “You worked with Captain America with the Howling Commandos?”

“Yeah,” Bucky grunted, his tone polite but dismissive.

Unfortunately, Coulson didn’t seem to take the hint.

“That must have been great. Working with Captain America, I mean. I have several vintage collector’s cards of him.” He started fishing around in his pocket with a look of determination. “I think I actually have one of you, too—it would be great—”

“Oh, look, we’re here,” Bucky said, not sounding all that sorry as he shoved me gently through the door of the medical wing. I coughed into my sleeve to smother the laugh as Bucky winked at me. A man in a white lab coat strode towards us as soon as we cleared the door. A younger man in a lab coat was scribbling on a clipboard across the room, glancing up briefly as we entered. Coulson put his cards away, looking a bit put out.

“Mr. Parker,” the man said, extending his hand. I shook it as he continued, “It’s an honor to meet you. Your parents were very skilled scientists. My name is Dr. Ryan Cunningham; we worked together briefly.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling a blush creep up my neck. Something about that didn’t add up, though. “When did you work with them?”
“Oh, years and years ago,” he said with a thoughtful look. “We must have been in our twenties, straight out of college. Your father and I interned for the same company, and he and your mother and I became good friends and kept in touch even after I was transferred. They were brilliant scientists and very good people.”

I smiled politely, conflicting emotions rising at the mention of my parents. “Thank you, sir.”

He seemed to sense my aversion to the subject. “Well, let’s get on with it, then,” he said, leading Bucky and I back into a large examination room. There was one of those creepy horror movie/dentist chairs with beige leather that leaned kind of back and had the feet kind of up, like a really confused recliner. I eyed it warily.

“What exactly are you gonna do?” I asked apprehensively, hopping into the chair. Bucky, sensing my discomfort, leaned against the chair, bumping my shoulder with his reassuringly.

“Just some routine tests, like you’d have in a physical,” Dr. Cunningham said absently, focusing on some machine to the side of the sad recliner. “We’ll also do some specialized bloodwork to make sure you’re alright. Dr. Banner expressed some concern at an episode of yours? You weren’t eating enough, and it made you very sick?”

“Yeah,” I said, fiddling with the sleeve of my jacket.

“Well, obviously low blood sugar can have some seriously adverse effects, but Dr. Banner said yours were much more pronounced than they should have been. My assistant and I will just be checking to make sure there are no abnormalities we need to worry about. Don’t worry, I’ve done it all a hundred times,” he said with a smile. “This is my intern, Alexander,” he said as an afterthought. The man who’d been scribbling on the clipboard, Alexander, glanced up and gave me a smile and brief nod, then went back to his notes. “He’s a SHIELD agent in training, interning to be a field medic, so he won’t really be helping with this part. But I know I can count on him if I need help.” Alexander looked up with a grin and went back to his notes. Dr. Cunningham smiled at me. “You ready to get started?”

I gave him a thin smile and took a shaky breath. “Yeah. Okay.”

The next hour was a mixture of bloodwork, reflex tests, blood pressure cuffs, thermometers, and a bunch of other fancy doctor equipment I couldn’t name. The needles never seemed to stop, but Bucky did his best to distract me whenever that came up. After thirty minutes or so, he switched out with Rhodey and Sam. Dr. Cunningham wasn’t pleased with the interruption, but he didn’t say anything.

I jogged on a treadmill for ten minutes while they monitored my heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen levels, and more medical stuff. I wasn’t breathing hard or tired in any way after that, which made me happy; since I’d been eating more regularly and bigger portions, my stamina was a lot better.

An hour in, Dr. Cunningham was down to standard health questions. Sam and Rhodey were off to the side talking about something Fury had said in the interview, but they were in the room, which was all that mattered.

“Any family medical conditions we should know about?” Dr. Cunningham asked, checking his sheet and clicking his pen, eyes glancing at the clock every few seconds. He must be as ready as I was to be done.
“Not that I know of,” I responded. “I think my grandfather on my dad’s side had diabetes, but I don’t—”

An explosion rocked the entire Helicarrier, knocking over trays and tools that clattered to the floor. Startled, I grasped the armrests to keep myself grounded and looked to Sam and Rhodey, who had immediately suited up.

“Peter, you okay?” Rhodey asked, hovering beside me. “Dr. Cunningham? Alexander?”

“I’m okay!” I shouted over the blaring alarms which had started up almost immediately. “What’s going on?”

“The Helicarrier is being attacked,” Dr. Cunningham said, staggering to his feet, leaning against a metal table. He put a hand to his head, looking dazed. Alexander stood as well, scanning the room calmly before drawing his gun, keeping an eye out for threats. “The automatic protocol will seal this wing from the rest of the ship soon. If you’re going to go help the other Avengers, you need to get out before the doors are reinforced.”

“We can’t leave Peter alone,” Sam said, touching the comm on his ear. “Cap? Iron Man? Anybody read me?” A second passed, and I recognized Steve’s hurried voice over the comm, garbled and frantic. “On it. Rhody, they’re overrun. One of us won’t be enough.” He glanced at me, indecision plain on his face.

“Go help them,” I shouted, putting a hand on Dr. Cunningham’s arm to steady him when he swayed. “Dr. Cunningham and Alexander are here, and we’ll be on lockdown. I’ll be fine!”

“We’ll take care of him as best we can,” Dr. Cunningham said, not looking all that sturdy, but the sentiment was appreciated. “Alexander is very capable.”

Alexander hefted his gun. “I’m almost out of training. I know how to defend them.”

Rhodey and Sam looked at each other for a minute before Sam’s face finally caved. “Anything, and I mean anything seems wrong, you hide, you hear me? And if they find you, you fight back, Peter.”

I looked him in the eye with a determination I wish I felt. “I will. Just…hurry, okay?”

Sam clapped me on the shoulder and Rhodey nodded before the raced out the doors, just in time for the vibranium shields to cover the entrances. I stared at the spot where they disappeared, praying they’d all be okay.

“Well, seems they were late,” Alexander commented. “I thought your friends would never leave.”

An icy cold came over me as Alexander turned his back to me, rifling through some papers on the table. My hands began to shake, and my heart began thumping so fast I could feel the pressure against my ribs.

“Alexander?” Dr. Cunningham said, his voice wavering.

“What do you mean?” I asked, slowly backing up from him, even though I had nowhere to go. Dr. Cunningham followed, as I was the only thing supporting him.

“They were supposed to attack the Helicarrier almost ten minutes ago,” he said, sounding annoyed. He found the piece of paper he needed and slipped it in his pocket, shrugging off his lab
coat and turning to face me, untucking something from beneath his SHIELD uniform.

I couldn’t breathe.

On his pendant, the tentacled head stood out like a sore thumb. I couldn’t look away from it.

“Alexander, why?” Dr. Cunningham pleaded, eyes much clearer than before. He took his arm from my grip gently, standing stock still. “You—you’ve been my friend for months, Alex, almost years—I can’t believe…”

Alexander grinned, shrugging carelessly. “You were easy to fool, Doc. Too trusting for SHIELD. For anyone.”

“You’re them,” I whispered, stumbling back, away from him, desperate to shout for Rhodey and Sam, for Bucky, for somebody. “Y-you’re one of them.”

I couldn’t run. I couldn’t hide. I couldn’t call for anyone.

Alexander smiled at me, the calm, placid smile from before replaced with a fanatical malice shared by every evil member I’d met so far, and I felt like someone was walking on my grave. Terror gripped my heart and shivers racked my body, up and down my spine.

His lips stretched over his teeth in an animalistic grin.

“Hail HYDRA.”

Chapter End Notes

Lol I SUCK hahaha sorry bout that, hope you enjoyed!
A/N: Oh, boy. I’m sorry. I apologize in advance. Warning for language (obviously) and violence. A lot of violence.

“Hail HYDRA.”

I simultaneously felt like I couldn’t breathe and like I was hyperventilating. I was getting better with—with guns, with weapons in general. Being around them so much maybe helped. But still—having it pointed at me, being—being defenseless against one again—

Breathe, Peter, a voice echoed in my head, sounding suspiciously like Bucky.

I took a deep breath, focusing back in on the world around me.

Dr. Cunningham had moved past shocked to fuming. “How dare you, Alexander. We’ve worked together for months. I—I treated you like a son. How dare you throw that back in my face?”

Alexander shrugged, raising his gun and leveling it evenly. “You don’t have to get hurt, Doc. I just need the kid.” He considered for a moment, then something like hope entered his eyes. “You could come with me, Doc. I’d vouch for you. HYDRA always needs new scientists, and with the research you’ve already done on the kid and his genetics, you’d be a real help.”

His research? My genetics?

“My genetics?” I said out loud, voice small and shaking. “Doctor Cunningham?”

Doctor Cunningham sighed visibly. “Now isn’t the time, Peter—”

“Ah, come on,” Alexander said, leaning against the scary dentist chair, still leveling his gun at us. “They’re behind schedule, so I’ve got a couple minutes. Enlighten the poor kid.” When Dr. Cunningham remained silent, Alexander cocked the gun.

The watch.

I subtly brought my hands closer together while Alexander was focused on Dr. Cunningham, pressing the panic button.

Nothing happened. In fact, the watch was completely dead.

“Oh, don’t bother,” Alexander said, and I jerked, looking up quickly as he trained the gun on us again. “HYDRA’s got a heavy duty signal jammer running. Only HYDRA communication devices—and my specially enhanced pager, thank you very much—can work in this frequency. Your friends aren’t coming.”

Oh, my God.

“Now, Doc,” Alexander said, gesturing with the gun. “On with the show.”
Dr. Cunningham raised his hands slightly, scowling, then sighed. “I’m sorry, Peter. Your parents…they were good people. They really were. They contributed so much to science. Their advancements were…remarkable.” He closed his eyes. “You’re living proof of that.”

“Me?” I asked, slipping my hand behind me to feel for anything I could use as a weapon on the table against Alexander. I was still reeling from the shock of not being able to contact anyone, but even then, my shaking hand closed around a scalpel and I clutched it like a lifeline. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he mused, looking away thoughtfully, his expression pinched. “According to the debrief conducted this afternoon—Fury paged me during one of your tests—HYDRA’s agent sent to retrieve you let something slip about cross-species genetics. That was your parent’s main area of research—comparing the super soldier serum to successful cross-species genetics experiments, categorizing similarities, recording ideas for potential improvements in the medical field. They…got very close, with the entire serum, and…they had no choice but to use you as a test subject when HYDRA got too close.”

Okay. That was not what I was expecting.

“You’re not serious,” I said, adjusting my grip on the scalpel. Alexander watched on, somewhere between antsy and entertained. “My parents wouldn’t—they would never do that to me, no matter what.” I was not convinced of this at all. In fact, the more I thought about it, it was entirely possible.

How well did I really know my parents?

“They would if they thought they were keeping it safe from us,” Alexander said, taking a few steps towards me. On instinct, I whipped the scalpel out from behind me and held it out. He smirked. “Cute.”

Dr. Cunningham backed up, slightly in front of me, growling, “You’re going to have to go through me. It’s my job to protect my patient, and I’ll do that. Can you shoot me, Alex? After we’ve worked together for so many months? I took you into my home. Numerous times. I trusted you around my wife, my children.” Alexander looked on, his carefree expression becoming strained.

“I told you, Doc, you don’t have to get hurt. I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, the gun sagging. After a second, his face steeled, and he leveled the gun with both hands. “But I will if I have to.”

Dr. Cunningham squared his shoulders. I lowered the scalpel to my side, knowing it was useless against a gun, but it made me feel better having it. My eyes darted back and forth between them, waiting anxiously for something to happen.

“I won’t let you take him,” Dr. Cunningham said, steeling himself. “He’s just a child.”


The bullets hit Dr. Cunningham in his left shoulder and lower stomach. He cried out and fell, curling up on the floor, moaning. I dropped to my knees beside him, shouting his name. Thinking quickly, I tugged his lab coat off his now-limp form and tied it tightly around his shoulder, then grabbed a folded bedsheet off a rack and pressed it hard against his stomach, doing my best to ignore his pained groans. Neither shot had an exit wound, so I only had to worry about
two holes instead of four.

“You didn’t have to shoot him!” I shouted, looking up at Alexander, anger seeping through the fear. “He trusted you!”

“That was his mistake,” he hissed, gripping the gun tightly. “I didn’t want to shoot him. It’s your fault, anyways. If you’d come with me, he wouldn’t be hurt.”

“Is it worth it?” I shouted, my throat raw. I was so angry. I was so angry. “Is it worth it, doing HYDRA’s dirty work, shooting innocent people, people you care about, for something that will never happen? Is it worth it, Alexander?”

For a precious, hopeful second, his conflicted features made me think he was reconsidering his decision. It was gone as quickly as it came. He seethed for a second, his eyes burning dangerously with a hatred very few humans are capable of possessing. “It sure as hell better be now that I’ve shot my friend,” he growled, stalking over to me, grasping my arm and hauling me into the air.

Fingers scrambling, I managed to get a grip on the scalpel and slammed it into his left bicep. He howled, but instead of letting go, his fingers tightened. Using the distraction, I knocked the gun out of his hand with a move I’d seen Clint use during sparring and kicked out at his knee. It wasn’t a very good hit, but the surprise and pain made his loosen his grip enough for me to break free.

I stumbled over my own feet, trying to turn and run—since the whole wing was sealed off, there were a few open hallways I was hoping I could hide in until this was over—but he lashed out and grabbed the back of my shirt, yanking me back and throwing me down. My head cracked against the linoleum floor, throwing stars around the room and behind my shuttering eyes. I moaned weakly, disoriented and terrified, and tried to push myself up.

“It doesn’t have to be this hard,” he said, sounding bored, the sound bouncing between my ears before finally becoming comprehensible. Blearily, I glanced up and saw blood staining his shirt from the scalpel. Good, my addled brain managed. “I can take you like I would any other prisoner, no pain required. Just give me the super soldier formula. Thanks to your very amiable testing, I already have what I need for HYDRA to start some nice testing on your interesting genetics, but this would earn me a very nice Christmas bonus, if you know what I mean.”

Barely raising myself up on shaking arms, I turned and spat at his feet.

He eyes darkened. “Fine. Don’t say I didn’t give you a chance.”

Alexander grabbed the back of my collar, tightening the neck of my shirt around my throat. I choked briefly, gasping when he tossed me like a football into a table. I fell back to the floor, feeling my ribs creak dangerously.

“St…stop, please…” I wheezed, my arms shaking with effort as I tried to lift myself up.

Without warning, his combat boot connected with my chest, once, twice, three times. I felt multiple ribs cave under the pressure, yelling in agony as the bones wrenched apart and tore into my muscle. I coughed weakly and spat, blood-speckled saliva leaving my lips.

Dr. Cunningham was across the room, moving sluggishly. We locked eyes for a split second, and he nodded, clearly in pain, but determined to help. Dragging himself the few feet to Alexander’s discarded lab coat, he fished out the pager and started fiddling with it, nodding to me,
letting me know he’d succeeded, unbeknownst to Alexander.

I let out a shaky breath. Help was coming.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Alexander rear back for another kick, and ignoring the fiery burn in my chest, I jerked out of the way and grabbed his ankle, yanking as hard as I could. He landed on his back with an oomph, and I dragged myself precariously into a standing position, leaning against the table I’d just hit. I took a whole two steps toward Dr. Cunningham before a hand in my hair threw me back down, adding another knock to my head.

I groaned, wrapping a protective arm around my torso, trying to limit any further damage, and managed to roll over onto my back, making it easier to breathe. I opened my eyes blearily, and Alexander was looming above me, looking furious and disheveled, his hair sticking up every which way. He rammed a fist into my face, shouting—well, I’ll spare your virgin ears, but it wasn’t flattering. My nose cracked. I felt the sensation reverberate throughout my face, tears stinging my eyes. Hot blood trickled over my lips, and I spat it out weakly, gagging as it slipped down my throat.

“You know, it’s going to be a problem if you keep trying to run,” he said, casually picking a small piece of lint off his SHIELD uniform. He was so angry. The sheer amount of rage he seemed to have for me was more terrifying than anything else. “I suppose I’ll have to fix that.”

He crouched down beside my left leg. I squirmed, trying to drag myself away, to lash out at him, anything, but my motor skills seemed halted, sluggish, probably from the knocks to the head. He took my ankle, despite my struggles, and in one fluid motion, twisted.

I heard the sound before I felt it. A grotesque snap—two of them, actually, in rapid succession—seeming to echo around the silent room, and a split second of nothing, and then—and—

Agony. Utter, utter agony. A consuming pain, whiting out everything else for a few seconds. The pain was everywhere at once, in my shin, my toes, my knee, my foot, and God, my ankle. I heard myself screaming, my throat raw with the force, as if I could verbally expel the pain. After coming back to myself, after the pain ebbed just enough so that I regained some semblance of sanity, I writhed. This was really, really bad, because I didn’t know when the Avengers were coming, and I was hurt and scared and Dr. Cunningham couldn’t help me, and I couldn’t run, not with my ankle, and I could barely move, and—

I didn’t even have time to consider thinking of a plan before there was an unyielding hand around my throat. I choked in sheer surprise, reaching up weakly to pry it away, but then I was being lifted, and pretty soon I was on eye level with Alexander, my feet barely touching the ground, my ankle screaming.

I was terrified.

“I’m tired of playing games. Are you going to behave?” Alexander growled, his hand tightening around my throat. He shoved me back against the wall, holding me there, and got right in my face. “Because if you don’t, I will kill everyone you love, and you’ll watch. You will watch me as I rip them to pieces because of you.”

Alexander shook his head in disgust, looking away. “I can’t believe Ryan chose to protect you. You f***ing brat, he was the first friend I could trust; he treated me like his own kid, and you—you and SHIELD took that from me, all because your parents decided to play mad scientist and you decided to memorize a formula you had no business having. This is—this is all your f***ing
fault, you little bastard.”

I clawed at his hand, wheezing frantically. I felt my nails scratching my own neck as well as his hand, but the pain was irrelevant. The heels of my sneakers left the ground as his grip only tightened, my broken ankle twisting horribly as it was jostled. “D-don’t do…th-this,” I choked out, feeling the pressure in my head building as the blood was trapped in my skull. “P-please…”

He shoved a fist against my side, igniting agonizing heat in my broken chest. My shout of pain was stifled by the hand crushing my windpipe. “I’ll do whatever the hell I want with you. They need you alive, but alive is a very broad spectrum, kid.” He took me away from the wall only to slam me back against it, his hand growing impossibly tighter as he did so. The knock on the wall made my head swim. I could feel warm blood trickling down the back of my neck and down my scalp. The man’s face swam in and out of focus as I felt myself losing consciousness, my struggles growing weaker.

I’d stopped gasping, considering I wasn’t getting any air anyways, but my mouth stayed open subconsciously, trying to get air that just wasn’t there. I felt my eyelids flutter as my fingers did little more than snag on his shirtsleeve, rather than continuing to struggle. Pitiful, small noises escaped my abused vocal cords, coming unbidden, muted whimpers of pain and fear. Were they the last sounds I’d make? I couldn’t help but wonder.

Knowledge started slipping slowly away. I…was at SHIELD? Someone was coming for me. To save me? Hopefully. Darkness seemed a lot easier. I was…someone. Maybe? I probably had a concussion, if I was thinking like this. Wait, what was a concussion? It was probably bad that I was thinking these things like this, but thinking any more than that kind of hurt a lot.

“HYDRA’s gonna be glad to get their hands on you,” the man said, smirking victoriously. What was his name again? Maybe it started with a W? That didn’t sound right. His voice contorted in time with the swirling of his face as I started blacking out. Wait, HYDRA? That sounded like a water company. Why was I going there? “I’m sure they’ll—”

“Peter!”

I vaguely registered someone’s voice shouting. There was a clang, and a whoosh, and a yell, and then there was wind on my face as I collapsed bonelessly, and then I hit a warm, broad chest. Worried hands wrapped around my back as I went limp, yelling…something. My name? I realized vaguely that I could breathe now, but as soon as I sucked in a breath, I choked on it, coughing violently, my ribs shifting agonizingly with each hack. I panicked, breathing as deeply as I could, trying desperately to appease my oxygen starved lungs, but that just triggered more coughing.

“Peter, Peter, hey, slow down. You’re okay, kiddo, we’ve got you. We won’t let them have you, Peter, I promise; you’re okay.”

Ohhhhh. Yeah, my name was Peter. Warm hands rubbed my back as I coughed, but I could breathe easier now. My entire body ached from the beating the HYDRA dude, W-something, had given me, but all I could think about was how nice it was to breathe. Breathing was seriously underrated. Even if it did move the splintered bones in my chest.

I heard some thumps and a cut off cry in the background. Hopefully that was the Water Man. Wait, that didn’t sound right. Aqua-Man? Wait. Wrong superhero universe. Wow, thinking was hard. Was it always this hard?

“Peter?” A soft voice asked. The sound warped and shifted. Huh. That was weird. I don’t
think that was supposed to happen. “Can you hear me, buddy?”

I mean, I *could*. But I didn’t feel like responding. Responding took effort.

I realized I’d been moved and was lying in someone’s arms, settled in someone’s lap. Huh…this was nice. I was super warm. I didn’t think I’d been held like this in years. Maybe ever; my dad was never super touchy feely, and my mom would hug me every once in a while, but never like this. This was nice. I liked this.

“Peter, you’re scaring us, kiddo. Can you open your eyes?” I knew that voice. I couldn’t pair it with a name, but I knew it. I didn’t want to scare them. I liked that voice.

Concentrating (which made me headache almost unbearable) I fluttered my eyelids to show I was awake, and let a quiet moan slip out.

“Good, he’s conscious,” someone else said. I knew that voice, too. “That’s a good sign. Peter, I’m going to shine a light in your eyes, alright?”

I couldn’t process the words fast enough to say no, that I was pretty sure that was going to hurt a lot, but then there was a gentle thumb on my eyelid and a really bright light, then another in the other eye, just as quick. I cried out a little as my headache spiked and reached up weakly to shove the hand away, but someone caught my hand and held it tight. The hand was cold, and hard. Metal?

“Sh, sh, it’s okay,” another voice said. Man, there were a lot of voices. “Bruce?”

“Concussed,” the voice—Bruce—said, and he sounded worried, “badly. I want to get him to the Compound quickly, but I need to check him out first.” Fingers danced around my ribcage, and I squirmed, trying to get away because it hurt, but gentle, large hands held me firmly. “Sorry, Peter. Four broken ribs. A couple cracked. He’s covered in bruises. Looks like a broken nose, too.”

A pause, then, “His ankle looks broken, too. Compound fracture of the tibia and fibula. HYDRA bastard probably broke it to cripple him, keep him from running.” Someone swore colorfully. I vaguely recalled May turning scarlet when I’d used some of those words. Wait, where was May? And Ben? If I was this hurt, shouldn’t they be here? “There’s a cut somewhere on his scalp, and he’s wheezing, which is worrying.”

Oh. Was I? I hadn’t realized it, because I could breathe at all, and that was a gift, but now that I thought about it, my breaths sounded rattling and loud in my own ears.

“Why? Is it his ribs?” This voice was worried, too, but different from the rest. It was female. After a few minutes of confusion, I began to pair voices with names…that was Tasha. She sounded worried. Natasha wasn’t supposed to sound worried, she was a superspy. Nothing worried Natasha.

“Maybe,” Bruce said. Bruce was the doctor/pacifist with anger-management issues. But he was super nice and fun and smart. “But that HYDRA agent strangled him. I’m worried about his windpipe.” Gentle fingers prodded at my neck and turned my head from side to side. I whimpered. That hurt.

“Peter? Are you with us?” That voice came from right beside me. Steve, I realized. He must be the one holding me.

“Mm,” I managed, but even that hurt my throat. “H’rts.”

“What hurts, kiddo?” Ohhh. Clint was here too?
“Ev’rythin,’” I murmured.

“Okay,” I recognized Tony. Wow, everybody was here. Par-tay. Wait, no. This party kind of sucked. “It’s okay. You’re okay, Pete. We’re gonna fix you up.”

“You stay awake, Peter,” another voice, sounding terrified. Bucky. He was holding my hand. His was shaking. Or was it mine? Or both? “You stay with us, you hear me? Dammit, kid, come on.”

Steve gently gathered me up, cradling me against his wide chest. My head lolled against his shoulder, arms and legs dangling limply, my broken ankle screaming as gravity took over. Bucky didn’t let go. I didn’t want him to. I coughed weakly, a coppery tang filling my mouth. I wheezed, trying to get around the coagulated blood lining my swollen throat, but the effort it took was monumental. Reality started to fizzle out around me. I could still feel the metal hand.

“Comrades, young Peter does not look well.” I numbly recognized that Thor must have toned down the volume in consideration of my headache, because it wasn’t quite so booming. Or maybe my hearing was just fading out. “I fear I see blood coming from his lips.”

“What?” Bruce asked, and then there were hands on either side of my face. At that moment, I coughed again, another weak rattle, but it was enough. A steady stream of blood clogged my throat, and I hacked until it cleared, blood dribbling from the corner of my mouth. “No, no, we don’t need this,” Bruce said hurriedly. “We need to do surgery, now. I think a rib punctured one of his lungs. He’ll develop pneumothorax if we don’t seal the leak of air into his chest.”

“Quinjet’s ready!” I heard Rhodey’s voice shout, sounding a bit further away.

After that things were more hectic, but I was floating in a peaceful haze, where the pain didn’t reach me quite so acutely. People moved around me. I was constantly jostled, but the pain was duller, now.

I was in a car or something. No, too smooth to be a car, but I could feel movement. Maybe a plane? That wasn’t the most efficient mode of transport. Um. Probably the Quinjet.

Something pricked my elbow, and I started to feel warm and sleepy. “Tha’s nice,” I slurred, turning my head when someone tried to press something over my face.

“Peter, you need oxygen, okay?” Sam’s harried voice said, gently but firmly pressing a plastic mask over my face and securing it around my head. “You’ll be asleep in a few minutes, and we’ll take care of you.”

True to his word, Bruce’s voice started to fade as sleep tugged me along. I dropped off the face of reality and into a deep abyss of peace, floating on cotton clouds, in a painless world. I stayed here for a long time, the pain never reaching me.

I couldn’t feel anything at all, except the cold, metal hand clasped desperately around mine.

That feeling never left.

Chapter End Notes

Haha at least I didn't leave you hanging this time. Sorry about that. More coming
soon! Thanks for sticking around, and please leave a Kudos / comment if you want!
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was impossible to tell how long I was asleep.

Dreams were few and far between, which was a blessing. A lot of them were nightmares—some of Alexander, a couple of May and Ben, one of my parents. Even the HYDRA agent who’d slit his throat made a guest appearance. I slipped in and out of…well, the nightmares. When I was outside the nightmares, I wasn’t exactly conscious, but I wasn’t…not.

I could hear voices, but the words were sometimes tricky to make out. Bucky’s voice was the most frequent, followed by Bruce’s and then Natasha’s. Everybody else visited a lot, too, but I couldn’t respond. Just knowing that they were constantly there, that I was safe, was a relief.

Bruce had me on strong enough medication that I was rarely in pain, though from the glimpses of conversation I absorbed in my comatose state, he was concerned about the amount of medicine it required to keep me comfortable. Something about my metabolism being ridiculous, even for a teenage boy.

All in all, I was pretty damn comfortable.

That didn’t last.

After a while, conversations around me became clearer. I could hear full sentences now and feel the oppressive plastic of the oxygen mask covering half my face.

“How’re we doing today, kiddo?” Bruce’s soft voice filtered in through my haze, jolting me into…not-unconsciousness. “Your vitals are up. That’s a good sign. Brain waves are more active, too.”

I wanted to respond, but my body wouldn’t cooperate. All I could do was lie there and listen.

A few silent minutes later, the bed dipped on my right side, and a warm hand took mine. Bruce’s voice came back, even softer. “I know you’re healing, Peter. You’re doing really great. The rate you’re healing…it’s nothing short of miraculous, but you’ve gotta wake up. There’s only so much a feeding tube can do.”

Feeding tube? Aw, that freaking sucked.

“Young blood sugar is…constantly low and getting lower. We can’t seem to administer enough calories to keep you healthy. We’re trying. I swear to God, we’re trying our best. But…you need to do the rest of the work, kid. Bucky’s stretched so thin it’s a wonder he’s still functional. I had to sedate him to get him to sleep. You can imagine how happy he was with me when he woke up,” he joked wryly.

If I could’ve, I would have snorted in humor. God, hellfire was a tame adjective to describe the scolding Bruce must’ve received.

“He’s been in here almost constantly,” he continued, turning away like he was checking something, readjusting his grip on my hand, but not letting go. “He’s worried. The rest of us are,
I could hear the sigh in his voice. I wanted to respond, to blink, to do something, but every individual body part weighed as much as a pregnant elephant.

Was that a bad simile? I blame the drugs.

Point was: I couldn’t move. It was all I could do to remain not-unconscious long enough to listen.

“You’re missing some good documentaries,” he said after I didn’t do anything, voice strained but still trying to be cheerful. “Bill Nye released a new mini-series on the effects of astro-nuclear thermodynamics on nuclear power plants and their environmental impacts in regard to long-term sustainability. You’d enjoy the science behind it. FRIDAY said she’d tape it for us, but we’re already way behind, so…you have to wake up. So you and Tony and I can catch up. Okay?”

I tried. I really, really tried.

Bruce sighed through his nose and squeezed my hand, once, before laying it gently over my bandaged ribs, careful not to disturb the heart monitor clipped to my finger or the IV in the crook of my elbow. “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

And I slipped back into oblivion.

…

The next time I became not-unconscious, Natasha was reading to me.

Her smooth, steady voice read a book in Russian, and I was pleased to find I could understand a lot of what she said. I let the words wash over me, taking comfort in her presence and her voice, and the darkness pulled me under quickly.

…

Tony, Clint, and Sam were conversing in quiet voices.

“I can call T’Challa,” Tony said, sounding strained. “See if Wakanda has any tech that could help him.”

“I’m not worried about him physically,” Sam threw in, his hand resting on my shoulder. His thumb traced light circles through the hospital gown. “Bruce says he’s healing. It may be psychological. He may be subconsciously preventing himself from waking up to avoid anymore trauma.” He sighed heavily. “Can’t say I blame the kid.”

Actually, yes, avoiding more trauma sounded wonderful, but I was a little sick of the whole listen-to-everybody-talk-about-me-in-a-vegetative-state schtick. I wanted to respond, so I was actively trying to wake up, but my freaking body had vacation plans that it forgot to mention ahead of time.

“I know Wanda and Vision are off doing their own thing, and I respect that, but do you think Wanda would be willing to come back for a bit? She could easily slip in his mind if that’s the case, convince him to come out and play.” Clint added his two cents, sounding a bit hesitant.

Hm. T’Challa. Wanda. Vision. These were new names. I’d have to ask them about it if my body decided to actually freaking listen to me!
“I know Wanda’s good,” Tony said, audibly strained. “But…let’s make that a last resort, yeah? It’s just…bad memories.”

“We get it, Tony. Don’t worry.” Sam reassured.

“Thanks.”

A few seconds later, I felt something flick my shin. Again. And again. That was annoying.

“Clint, stop flicking him,” Sam chided, exasperated.

Clint groaned. “Nothing else is working! He always yells at me when I flick him. He should be able to yell at me even while unconscious, I’m serious!”

Oh, boy, I wanted to. I really wanted to, because that was very annoying.

But as usual, I couldn’t. Once again, I drifted.

...  

The next time, Rhodey, Steve, and Thor were talking.

“—just saying, I don’t get why it’s called a microwave,” Steve said, sounding perplexed and annoyed. “It heats stuff up. Just…call it a heater, seriously.”

“No, Steve listen,” Rhodey replied, sounding like this conversation was going in circles and he’d already explained himself. “The actual technology uses microwaves—a type of light wave—to heat what’s inside. That’s why it’s called a microwave.”

I could practically hear Steve throw up his hands in frustration. “Exactly! So call it what it does, not what it uses. It would make things so much easier to figure out!”

Thor boomed, “Friend Steven, we shall endeavor to rename all technological appliances on Midgard accordingly! Let us begin this harrowing undertaking!”

Rhodey gave a dejected sigh. “Fine, fine. Go rewrite the dictionary. Have fun.”

The urge to laugh dying in my motionless body, I faded.

...

Next time, it was Sam and Rhodey. Rhodey was mid-monologue.

“—never should’ve left you alone,” he said, his voice sounding choked. “I’m—we’re so sorry, Peter. If one of us had stayed…” He trailed off, then continued. “We wouldn’t have left you. But…during the debrief, someone reported in to Fury. Said they were sure they’d found every last HYDRA spy. I…we thought SHIELD was clean. I’m sorry, kid. We…shouldn’t have trusted their word. We should’ve stayed.”

Sam cleared his throat. “We feel…pretty awful, kiddo. It’s our fault. I know what you’d say. You and that bottomless reservoir of forgiveness you seem to have tucked away somewhere, you’d say it’s not our faults. You’d get all righteously indignant that we even suggested the very thought. But…it is our fault. We shouldn’t have left you. And we’re...sorry. It’s not enough, but we’ll be here for you as soon as you get back on your feet. Whatever you need. Right, Rhodes?”

“Right,” he confirmed immediately.
Hm. What a coincidence, Sam. I was righteously indignant, because it’s not your fault at all! For real! It’s freaking HYDRA Alexander’s fault for not taking up yoga as a child or something else that helps with anger-management!

But today was a bad day, and it was all I could do to stay not-unconscious through the whole speech. So, once again, I fell back into the dark.

…

Bucky was with me the next time.

He was monologuing, telling me about his day. A steady stream of endless chatter that he knew would help me relax. And it did. I felt my shoulders (metaphorically) loosen—since I was, ya know, a limp noodle at this point—but my mind relaxed as well.

His voice was soft and low, comforting. His metal hand and his flesh hand both curled around my left one, holding it tight under his chin as he leaned his elbows on the bed.

“Steve and I did a little workout,” he said, the sound of rustling fabric indicating his adjusting position. “I was a little out of shape. I haven’t—been eating, much, or sleeping. I don’t know if you can hear me, but…I’m having nightmares, Peter. Nightmares about you.”

Well, thanks, Bucky.

He clarified, almost as if he’d heard me. “Not…not about you scaring me. Just…HYDRA screwed me up pretty badly, Peter. I know the trigger words are gone—that’s a story for another day—but HYDRA still terrifies me, even now. They’ve come so close to taking you, to killing you, so many times now, and I…I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have you anymore, Peter.”

I had a feeling that, even though he was talking to me, I wasn’t really supposed to be hearing this.

“I don’t even know why I’m so attached to you,” he said, his voice suspiciously choked. “I didn’t think I could ever…be as protective of someone as I am of Steve, but…well, then you came along, kid. The others…I’d die for them, but only Steve and rarely Natasha have ever been able to get past these…walls, I’ve built to protect myself from…from everything. Even Steve sometimes has trouble. Natasha barely ever gets through. But you? You waltzed in, sat down, got comfortable, and…and I don’t have any intention of letting you leave, got it? So you need to wake up so all of this is justified.” A sniff. “Dammit. Look at me. I’m the heartless Winter Soldier. And I’m crying in the Avengers Medical Wing over a stray like you.”

Normally I’d be offended, but I didn’t have to see his expression to feel the love behind that statement.

“Come on, kid,” he said, clasping my hand even tighter. “Come on. Just…dammit, just blink. I’ll settle for that much. Just…let me know you’re on your way back. That’ll be enough. Please.”

Oh, eff that. Blinking was so mundane. I was ambitious.

Feeling everything around me, taking in all the textures and smells and sounds, I concentrated on moving from being not-unconscious to physically conscious. I willed my mind to take the extra few steps into waking, dragging myself along with every fiber of my being, because dammit Bucky had just given me the sappiest speech in human history and I’d be damned if I missed the chance to call him out on it.
And. Also. To tell him thanks and all that.

Yeah, that sounded better.

So, I fought with my own consciousness, my own body, for stretching minutes that ticked by. I fought and begged and pleaded, and finally gave a big “screw you” to my central nervous system and heaved with everything in me.

My hand twitched.

I felt Bucky’s head lift abruptly. “Peter?”

Yes! YES! Screw you, nervous system! Screw you, atrophied!

Another big heave sent my body crashing into awareness, the safe, painless haze replaced with dizzying aches and pains. They were nothing compared to the original injuries, but they were still acutely not fun.

I gave a low moan, my voice gravelly and rough from disuse.

“Peter? Come on, kid, open your eyes for me?”

Slowly, still asserting my dominance over my own body, I blinked my heavy eyelids.

The world was blurry and unfocused. Blinking again, I flicked my eyes around, still too weak to move my head. My eyes settled on Bucky’s pale, relieved face.

I murmured, trying to get the words out, but the oxygen mask took up half my face and the dexterity required for such fine motor control as speaking was still somewhere on the bottom of the list of functioning parts.

“Hang on,” Bucky said, pressing the call button and gently removing the mask from my face. I took a deep breath, relishing the smell of fresh, non-treated air. “Better?”

“W’er,” I mumbled blearily, my throat suddenly aching fiercely.

But Bucky, bless him, got it. He raised a cup of lukewarm water carefully to my lips, and I gulped greedily. He took it away periodically, so I wouldn’t choke, but pretty soon I’d drained the glass.

“Better?” He asked, his eyes shining with relief and joy. “You okay? What were you trying to say?”

Blinking again with half-lidded eyes, I breathed in deeply and managed, “You l-look…like shit.”

Bucky blinked. Blinked again. Then he chuckled. The chuckling turned into full blown laughter. I gave a small, tired smile, barely able to move, but content to watch him fall into near hysterics at my small comment.

“God, kid, you—you’re amazing,” he breathed, wiping tears from his eyes. “You’re just…”

“Also,” I mumbled, weakly reaching out my fingers for his hand, which was resting on the edge of the bed. He took it without question and waited for me to continue. “Y-you’re…ridiculous. And s-super c-cliché. And…d-definitely…n-not heart…heartless.” I panted the last few words, my vocal cords aching horribly, but I’d said what I needed.
Bucky smiled.

That was enough.

The door burst open.

“You’re awake!” Bruce nearly shouted, face breaking into a smile. “You’ve been unconscious for almost three weeks, kid.”

My eyes widened. “W-weeks?” I muttered, feeling somehow cheated. It had seemed like… several hours. A few days, maybe, but weeks?

“Yes,” Bruce said, pressing a button on one of the machines. “Your body needed time to heal, apparently. You slipped into a coma not long after I finished surgery. It was a close thing.”

I blew out a breath, feeling exhausted but not quite ready to succumb to sleep just yet.

Bruce patted my shoulder with a smile and said, “Everything looks great, Peter; you’re healing really well. Want me to grab the others? They’ve all been sitting around like lost puppies.”

I breathed a small laugh and nodded. The pain was back, but it was much more manageable than I thought it would be. Bruce wasn’t kidding when he said I was healing fast.

“Let me know if it gets too much, Peter,” Bucky said when Bruce left. “They can come back later, when you’re stronger.”

“Kay,” I breathed, relaxing into the pillow.

“If I may,” FRIDAY’s voice dropped into the silence. “I’m very glad to see you awake, Peter. I’m not sure if an Artificial Intelligence system can be…worried, but I believe that is the emotion with which this sensation is closest identified.”

I gave the ceiling a lazy grin. “Missed y-you, Fri. Th-thanks.”

The rest of the Avengers—plus Stella—entered the room in a cacophony, all talking (or meowing) at once.

Tasha set her down by my side where she purred happily, nuzzling her head against my side and rolling over, scratching her back on the sheets. She meowed when I lifted my fingers to stroke her fur. I smiled, glad she was back with me.

I gave the rest of them a tired smile as they made themselves comfortable around the room. I couldn’t really hold a conversation for all that long, so I was content to listen to them as they caught me up on what I’d missed around the Compound and in the world while I’d been unconscious.

Dr. Cunningham was going to be fine. He’d undergone a successful surgery and was at home with his wife and children, recuperating. Alexander was at SHIELD being interrogated by the very people he’d trained under. I doubted that was very pleasant.

Apparently, Tasha had almost killed him. It was a close thing. She’d beaten him unconscious, afraid he’d take his cyanide pill, but she needn’t have worried. The first thing SHIELD had done when they’d found out they had HYDRA spies was scan for cyanide pills implanted in agents’ molars, so Alexander’s had been removed.
Once he was unconscious, she didn’t stop. Clint, Sam, Rhodey, and Thor had to work together to drag her off of him. He had valuable information.

Apparently, Tasha had been a bit unhappy.

Tony, characteristically burying himself in his work, showed me what he’d done with some of the designs we’d given the others at Christmas. He’d made some progress on Sam’s drone as well as Natasha’s body armor, but he said he’d left the fun stuff for me.

“So, you have to get back on your feet to help me with all this shit, or I’ll kick your ass for making me do all the work,” he said nonchalantly.

Steve muttered and threw his hands in the air. “See? See? There was no reason to cuss in that sentence. None at all.”

“No, see, the reason was to get that reaction,” Clint defended Tony, perched on one of the waiting room chairs. “He wouldn’t do it so much if you’d stop reacting so strongly,” he added with a grin.

“He’s got a point, Cap,” Sam said, arms folded, a smirk on his face.

Steve sputtered and started reprimanding them all. No one was spared—it was a massacre. I watched it all with a tired smile, and eventually drifted off to sleep, lulled by the sound of Steve raining hellfire on the rest of them.

…

A week later, I was sitting on the edge of the bed, Bucky supporting my swaying upper body. I’d healed enough that Bruce was going to try to let me walk around—with crutches, of course. My ankle was still healing, but he said the rate was astonishing. The clean breaks had diminished to nothing more than hairline fractures for each bone.

I panted with exertion already, but I’d be damned if they forced me back into that bed before I’d at least stood. All the pent up energy was not doing wonders for my boredom.

“Nice and easy, okay?” Bruce said, taking my arms and positioning himself in front of me. Bucky stayed behind me, strong hands supporting most of my weight, and Rhodey stood off to the side, watching my progress. Since he had a lot more experience with physical therapy than Bruce, he was going to observe and suggest things if needed.

Thor was also there, keeping Stella occupied. For some reason, the biggest and smallest creatures in the Compound had decided to become besties. Which was…actually adorable. Not gonna lie.

“Ready?” Bucky asked, snapping my mind out of the reverie.

“Yeah,” I said through grit teeth.

“Alright, on three, buddy,” Bruce said, bracing himself to take my weight before he transferred me to the crutches. “One—two—”

On three, I stood—more through force of will and Bucky’s support than anything else, but hey, it counts. I swayed, my knees trembling, threatening to buckle. Bruce quickly grabbed the crutches and situated them under my arms, careful to avoid straining my still-healing ribs.
I put my weight on the crutches, easing the burn in my leg and chest marginally, and took an experimental step forward.

My leg held. I grinned at Bruce, and then at Bucky, who smiled encouragingly and stood behind me to catch me if I fell. “Doing great, kid. Think you can take a few more steps?”

I took another, then another, and finally I’d reached the bathroom door, panting, exhausted, but exhilarated. I hadn’t moved this much in a month, and the thought of being re-confined to the bed sucked.

Rhodey smiled from his spot. “You’re looking great, Peter. Maybe when you’re okay to move some more, we can get you down to the gym and use the parallel bars without the crutches, yeah?”

I nodded, then winced. The concussion had given me an almost constant headache. It wasn’t by any means agonizing, but it was, to say the least, annoying.

“Wanna try making it back to bed?” Bucky asked, pressing lightly on my back as I rocked a bit.

“Yeah,” I breathed, readying myself for the harrowing ten-foot journey. Again. Can you sense the bitter sarcasm?

A bout of dizziness swept over me, but I lightly shook my head to clear it, thinking it was caused by the headache. It abated, and I started walking forwards.

“Looking good,” Bruce said thoughtfully when I reached the halfway mark.

Suddenly the lighting dimmed. I thought, for a brief, surreal second, that someone had turned out the lights. Those thoughts were dashed when I felt my body falling, and even those thoughts vanished with my consciousness.

…

Oh, good God. Something smelled absolutely vile.

That was my first conscious thought. I turned my head frantically aside to escape the smell, almost retching at the pungent odor.

“Young Peter, are you conscious?” I heard Thor’s rumbling voice ask, accompanied by Stella’s indignant meow—probably at my lack of response.

“Peter, open your eyes,” Bucky said, sounding scared.

That did it. I peeled my eyelids open, staring at him, blinking owlishly. I was back on my bed, completely horizontal.

“What—how did I get back here?” I asked. I’d just been standing. I was halfway to my bed. “And which one of you needs a shower?”

Bucky sagged, visibly relaxing, and Bruce put the stopper on some type of testing tube—I assumed, from the horrible smell, that it was smelling salts—setting it gingerly on the bedside table. Rhodey was leaning against the foot of the bed, looking anxious, and Thor stood by. Stella was perched on top of my chest, looking at my face with an unamused air.
“You passed out halfway back,” Bruce said, looking dejected. “I don’t understand. The only thing I can think of would be your blood sugar, but…I did the research, three times. A healthy teenage boy requires about two thousand calories a day to maintain their weight with no exercise, and I gave you that. When that didn’t work, I gave you three thousand, but it still wasn’t enough. Anymore and I’m afraid it would shock your system.”

“So…what does that mean?” Bucky asked, sitting in the recliner.

“It means,” Bruce said, picking up my chart and scanning it briefly, “that his metabolism rivals yours and Steve’s. I can’t find an explanation. I asked SHIELD to send me Dr. Cunningham’s labs he did on Peter, but they’re so busy with all the security breaches and everything that it’s taking forever.”

Oh. Whoops.

“Um.” I said timidly, raising my hand. “I forgot. Until just now. Uh. Before Alexander…well, beat the snot out of me, he, uh…Dr. Cunningham said something about…what my parents worked on.”

I paused long enough for Bucky to give me an expectant look. Clearing my throat, I continued, “Uh, well…they were…comparing successful cross-species genetics experiments to the super soldier serum. To look for improvements in medicine and the healing factor and all that stuff. And I guess, they got really, really close with the serum, or with a genetic crossover, or…I don’t know, it wasn’t all that clear, but…they, um, used it. On, uh. Me.”

Silence.

“I think,” I mumbled, playing with the fraying edges of the blanket, “they were trying to keep it safe? That’s what Alexander said. But—but how the hell does injecting your kid, how—how does that keep it safe?”

Bruce pursed his lips, obviously unhappy. He turned away, breathing heavily, and said, “I’m going to my room for a few minutes.” By room, it was fairly obvious that he meant the special Hulk-proof room Tony had designed for him.

Rhodey was visibly seething, arms crossed, eyes steely, expression pinched and furious. Thor, bless him, looked a little confused—he probably barely understood the concept of a serum, since he was, ya know, born with all that fun extra stuff—but Rhodey’s and Bruce’s reactions had tipped him off that it wasn’t something good.

Bucky was silent.

I glanced at him, nervously shredding the frayed blanket even more, watching his blank expression apprehensively. “Bucky?” I asked quietly.

He flinched, almost imperceptivity, and glanced at me. Patting my knee with his flesh hand, he stood, stalking out the door. “Back in a few, kid.”

“O…okay?” I said/asked, watching him shut the door quietly.

Rhodey sighed, sitting on the edge of my bed where he’d been. “It’s fine, Peter. He just…gets like that, when he’s really angry. All silent and broody. When Steve gets hurt on missions and stuff, he goes in his head for a while. He’ll be back soon, and then we’ll figure this out, okay?” He said, giving me a thin smile that might have been reassuring if he didn’t look so worried.
I nodded, the fraying blanket falling apart beneath my worried hands.

After a sleepless night, I was left with nothing but thread.

A/N: You’re all my favorites!!! Thanks so much for all the fantastic support!

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!!
“Okay, Peter,” Bruce said absently, looking intently at a monitor. “We’re going to run a few tests. These aren’t for SHIELD, alright? They’re for us, to figure out what’s going on with you.”

I nodded, sitting on my bed in Medical. It had been two weeks since I’d told them about what Alexander and Dr. Cunningham had told me, and I was almost completely healed. The only thing still aching was my ankle, and even that was barely a dull throb. Bruce said that breaks like mine usually took eight to twelve weeks to heal completely, and even that wasn’t including physical therapy. For me, it was basically fully healed in just under six weeks.

Steve sat on another bed, and Bucky sat on a wheeled stool between us. Since the serum and my metabolism were so similar to Steve’s (and consequently partially Bucky’s) serum, Bruce was going to test for similarities.

“Let us know if you’re ankle’s bothering you,” Bucky whispered, standing and stretching.

I smiled. “Will do. It barely hurts, anymore.”

“Good.”

Bruce drew blood from each of us (wow that was so fun) and put it in a centrifuge, then took our blood pressures and resting heart rates. My blood pressure was a little higher, but my heart rate was higher than average for my age group, and even a bit faster than Steve’s and Bucky’s. Bruce said this was interesting because their hearts had to beat faster to pump enough blood to keep up with the enhanced metabolism.

The mystery of me, myself, and I just kept getting better and better.

The centrifuge was still running, so Bruce sent Bucky and Steve down to the gym with specialized bracelets. “Keep these on, okay? I want you to jog for ten minutes continuously. Go as fast as you want, but don’t sprint, okay? I finally got Dr. Cunningham’s data from Peter’s testing sent over, so I want to compare the information. Come back when you’re done.”

Bucky flicked his eyes to me momentarily and ruffled my hair before leaving, Steve on his heels after giving me a smile.

“How’re you feeling today, kiddo?” Bruce asked with a gentle smile, sitting down in front of me on Bucky’s abandoned stool.

“Good, I guess,” I said, stretching my arms above my head, satisfied when no pain came from my ribs. “The only thing that hurts is my ankle, and it barely even aches. My ribs feel fine. I’m less tired, too.”

Bruce gave a small grin, scribbling something down. “That’s great. You’re progressing really well, Peter.”

I smiled, happy to know I was making progress. Even though I’d been steadily improving, the frustration of feeling so useless and dependent had gotten pretty old pretty fast.
Bruce got up, setting the clipboard on the counter, leaning there for a second, then sighing. “You know, I had a compound ankle fracture too, when I was younger.”

I blinked, sitting up straighter. Bruce didn’t make it a habit of revealing anything personal about himself, especially from his childhood. “Really?”

He nodded, turning to face me and leaning back against the wall. Even with this gesture, though, he avoided direct eye contact. “I was nine. My father got drunk and clipped me with a baseball bat as I was trying to get away.”

“Oh,” I managed, throttled by the information. I could feel my wide eyes soaking in the information as slowly as my brain.

Bruce was so…kind. So gentle, so considerate. Even after everything he’d seen as an Avenger, and, apparently, been through in his past. He must have been an even better child. How could—how could anyone, let alone his father—

“It happened…a lot,” Bruce admitted, looking uncomfortable, but determined as he carried on, rubbing the back of his neck. Bringing his hand around, he dragged it down his chin, then settled it under his armpit, probably to keep from fidgeting. “One day, my mother tried to take me and run. My father caught us and…hit me with the bat. My mother tried to protect me. They struggled, and she died.” He sighed through his nose, looking at the tiled floor.

I stared at him, unable to speak. This was all…news to me, to say the least. He never gave any indication that he’d had such a horrific past. None. He was so…nice. “After that, I went to live with my aunt, and studied science. Then, after some…failed relationships, I guess, I became…this. The Hulk.” He smiled, but it was anything but happy. “I guess…everybody’s helped, a lot, and I don’t see myself or the Other Guy as…a monster, anymore. But sometimes…it’s hard. I think of all the people that died because of my mistakes…and my mother, and Betty, and I…”

He broke off, misty eyes blinking.

I didn’t know who Betty was, but I had a feeling he was one of those “failed relationships” he’d mentioned, and decided not to press.

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking startled despite himself. “I didn’t mean to ramble. I just…we know a lot about you. About your life. You…barely know us, really. Our pasts, before we were Avengers.”

With a jolt, I realized he was right.

He turned away suddenly, busying himself with a chart. I sat on the bed, unsure of what to do.

“I just…thought I’d let you know,” he said quietly. “Who I am. A bit, anyways. The rest is…a story for another time.”

He sounded so…sad. So broken. So hurt.

Was this what I’d been like?

What would May do? Ben?

What should I do?

Slowly, minding my ankle, I hopped off the bed, walking towards him as he flipped
through some papers, inconspicuously sniffing a bit. I put a tentative hand on his shoulder.

“What?” He asked, not unkindly, but not turning around. I tugged at his shirt a bit, not trusting my voice.

Finally, he turned, looking anywhere but me. “What, Peter?”

I did the only thing I could think to do and wrapped my arms around him.

He seemed startled. He knew I was touchy-feely, but mostly with Bucky and the others. I could tell immediately that Bruce liked his space, so I hadn’t tried to infringe upon it. But now? Boundaries be damned, the man needed a hug.

He stood still for a short moment, unsure, and then wrapped his arms around my shoulders and my back. Even though he was the second shortest member on the team (cough cough Tony) he still had a couple inches on me. My eyes stared over his shoulder, and eventually I closed them and hugged him tighter, strengthening my resolve and my voice.

“Your dad was stupid,” I blurted out, mentally cringing at the horrified look and unimaginable lecture May would have given me at my insensitive words. “You’re awesome. You’re always…so nice, Bruce. And gentle and kind and smart. And funny, when you want to be. And I bet you were even better as a kid. Also, I haven’t met the… the Other Guy, but I bet he’s pretty awesome too.” I stopped, listening to him breathe deeply, his body shaking the slightest bit. “You’re not…not a monster. Monster is, like, at the opposite end of the spectrum when it comes to your personality traits.” That earned a strained chuckle, and I smiled. “And if your dad couldn’t see that, then he’s a complete idiot.”

Bruce didn’t reply for a minute, but I didn’t let go. If anything, I tightened my grip on him. Finally, he cleared his throat and spoke. “Thank you, Peter. That…means a lot to me.”

I felt his arms loosen and took that as my cue, stepping back. Discretely, he swatted at his eyes, turning around as I hopped back onto the medical bed.

“We did the running,” Steve said from the doorway, where he and Bucky had suddenly materialized. They stopped short, taking in my small smile, Bruce’s slightly red eyes. “What? What’d we miss?”

Bruce turned to me, and I smiled. “Nothing much.”

Bruce smiled, turning away. He knew his confessions were safe with me.

…I

After getting the results from Bucky and Steve’s tests, Bruce dragged Tony to his lab to look through the data, warning us to check on them if they hadn’t come out after forty-eight hours.

I tried to be surprised, but it was getting kind of hard.

Natasha, Clint, Bucky, Sam, and Thor were called away on an emergency mission to deal with some conspiracy within the UN, including but not limited to cyborgs, rabid animal hybrids, and a half a dozen mad scientists under the control and direction of one grossly overpaid UN member.

Bucky ruffled my hair and gave me a reassuring smile before he left. “It’s a routine mission, kid, and there are five of us. Natasha and Clint will infiltrate, Sam will give air support,
and Thor and I will be the muscle. I could do it in my sleep.”

I gave a small, worried smile as he boarded the Quinjet, feeling the worry tighten my chest. I knew, rationally, that they’d probably be fine. I couldn’t help but worry for them, though.

Rhodey went down to the gym with his physical therapist for some training. I was left in the living room with Steve and Stella.

Stella was chasing one of her automatic mouse toys, playing and pouncing like there was no tomorrow. I was curled up in the armchair by the fireplace, reading a spin-off of Star Wars by some bigshot author, but it wasn't as authentic as I would've liked, and I got bored pretty quickly. Steve was reading his own book on the couch: The Great Gatsby. I hadn’t read it, but I knew it was from around his time. He may have been feeling nostalgic, or something. Or maybe he just liked the book.

Also, he was wearing reading glasses, which made him look literally like the preppiest jock I’ve ever seen.

“Is that good?” I asked, setting my book down. I didn’t feel like reading.

He flinched at the sudden noise, and I felt bad for interrupting him, but he just smiled. “Yeah. It's one of my favorites. A pretty accurate representation, from what I remember. It helps me remember home.” He paused thoughtfully. “I was only eight or nine when the book was set, so it’s a little difficult to remember specifics, but…this helps.”

I paused, wondering if I should ask more. Bruce had made me curious about everyone, about their pasts. I knew, technically, that it wasn’t really any of my business, but it couldn’t hurt to ask, right? “Could you tell me about it?”

He looked perplexed, setting down his book, marking his page. “Tell you about what?”

“Before,” I asked, leaning back against the cushions, loosely folding my arms over my knees. “Before the serum and everything. You told me stories about during the war, and with Peggy, and the Howling Commandos and all that. But what about before you joined the army? Before you got the super soldier serum?”

His eyes narrowed, but not…aggressively, just thoughtfully. “What about it?”

I shrugged, feeling uncomfortable. “I dunno, just…about it. What were the twenties and thirties and forties like, what did you do for fun, who were you friends with…ya know, just that stuff.” I paused, shrugging again. “Bruce made me curious. I realize I don’t…know you guys, all that well, you know? Like, I know about your time as Avengers and what you like to do and stuff, but everybody knows that. You’re all famous. You guys know basically everything about me, you know? I just…wanted to know.” Hastily, I waved my hands in front of me, saying, “It’s totally okay if you don’t wanna tell me, though!”

“No, it’s fine,” he said, taking off his reading glasses. “I’m just surprised. I’d be happy to tell you about it.” He smiled.

I grinned, settling back in the seat. “Okay.”

He leaned back, blinking, looking away. “Well…I mean, I was…a sickly kid. Small, scrawny, never very good at anything physical, you know? I kept getting infections, viruses…my dad died when I was a kid, and my ma worked really hard to support us, and pay for all my medicine. It was hard on her, but…most jobs for kids my age back then were all manual labor, and
I wasn’t really cut out for it.” He paused, and I sat up straighter, listening intently. I hadn’t known any of this. “I was fifteen, smaller and skinnier than you, and I was trying to defend this thirteen-year-old kid from some older kids who were picking on him. You know me—I don’t like bullies,” he said with a smirk in my direction. I grinned in response, recognizing the catchy slogan Avengers PR usually attached to his name.

“To put it simply—and this stays between us—I got my ass handed to me,” he said with an embarrassed huff, rubbing the back of his neck and chuckling at the floor. I laughed, knowing he was only cussing because the others couldn’t hear him. “Anyways, that’s when I met Bucky. He was two years older than me, bigger, stronger…everything I wanted to be, really.” He laughed a little. “He got the three kids off of me in two seconds flat, then took me to this little diner for some ice. I’d busted up my nose pretty bad. Anyway, we…got to be friends, and…brothers, later. Still are.”

Steve rubbed his chin, looking thoughtful, smiling nostalgically. “You know I was an art student?”

I blinked, processing that. “I…had no idea. You draw?”

“Draw, sketch, paint, sculpt…I could do it all, and I loved it. My ma was great. She worked an extra job on the side to help me pay for what the scholarship didn’t cover. Bucky and she supported me the whole way. Then it was…ah…I guess two or three years later? My ma died.” He stopped, blinking quickly and looking away. “It wasn’t…sudden, but it wasn’t expected. She was older. Consumption set in, and…well, there weren’t a lot of treatment options back then. There wasn’t much to do,”

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

“Don’t be,” he said with a small smile. “It was a very, very long time ago. Anyway, then the war came around. The country didn’t need art students, they needed soldiers. Buck enlisted. He was fit, healthy, young…everything they needed. I…well, wasn’t,” he said wryly. “You know the story from there, I guess. I told you about Peggy, and how…how I lost Buck on that train.” His eyes clouded over with a distant grief that I understood well.

My ankle was sore from its position, so with a muted hiss, I adjusted it and leaned back against the chair again. “Do you still draw?”

He seemed surprised that out of everything he’d just confessed, that was the question I picked. I mean, I had plenty, but I was genuinely curious. He sighed thoughtfully. “Not as much as I’d like to. There just never seems to be time. When there is time, it’s just…I can’t seem to find the motivation, you know? It’s like…being an artist, that side of me…I feel like I left it behind the ice.”

I nodded, understanding sort of what he meant. “Well, if you ever feel inspired, I’d love to see you draw something one day. Or paint, or something. Or you could, ya know, teach me some stuff. I’m no Picasso, but I draw a mean stick figure,” I said with a light-hearted smirk, trying to ease the slight tension that had descended over the room.

Steve’s laugh immediately dissipated any discomfort. “Sure thing. Just let me know when you want to—”

He was interrupted by Bruce and Tony, who came barreling into the room, panting with crazed looks on their faces.
Steve was instantly on his feet, book forgotten. “What happened? Are you alright?”

Bruce and Tony looked at me in unison, and I could see the cogs turning in their minds. I stood as well, even as Tony, panting, let the words out: “To the lab, kiddo, now. You too, Steve. We made a breakthrough.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks!!!! Lots of bonding coming up, so I hope you’re excited!
Despite rushing into the living room and ripping Steve and me from our conversation and dragging us hastily to their lab, Bruce and Tony didn’t feel the need to explain anything, apparently.

They dragged us in, told us to sit, and started conversing hastily about something, taking turns with a microscope.

I’d grabbed Stella on the way, and she now pounced around on the workbench, inspecting every little scrap of metal Tony and Bruce had lying around. I smiled fondly as she pawed at Dum-E, who was charging in the wall.

I was drawn back into the scene in front of me as Tony’s and Bruce’s voice grew louder, more excited.

“—but the blood cells have merged differently—look, it’s—”

“Yeah, but that’s not all, it looks like two completely different things up close—”

“—breakthrough like this could—”

“Uh, Bruce? Tony?” Steve said, standing without a clue in the world of what they were saying. “Wanna fill us in?”

Tony whirled around, seeming surprised that we were there. I raised my eyebrows expectantly.

“Uh, yeah,” Tony said, grabbing some papers scattered around on the desk. “Yeah, just…when are the others due back?”

“I dunno,” I said, getting a little impatient. “We’ll tell them when they get back. Just…I want to know, okay?”

Bruce nodded, grabbing the papers out of Tony’s hands. “Of course, Peter. Just…sit down, alright?”

Grabbing a stool, I sat. “Okay. Tell me. I’m sitting.”

Tony took a deep breath and scrubbed a hand down his face, looking tired. Bruce didn’t look much better. “We’ve been…comparing the data between you, and Steve and Bucky,” Tony said, plucking a chart out of Bruce’s hand and scanning it. “Mainly Steve, since he has the original serum. Mostly we’ve been looking at your bloodwork, but also at your vitals in response to exertion and physical strain, and…well, the qualitative data was very similar. You definitely have some kind of serum in your blood, but…it’s definitely not the same as Steve and Bucky’s.”

Silence.

“Wait…what?” Steve asked, looking perplexed. I couldn’t speak I was so shocked. “I thought that was the whole point of his parents injecting him. They rediscovered the super soldier
serum and injected him to—well, allegedly, to keep it safe. That’s what their research was on, mainly.”

“You’re right,” Bruce interrupted, looking at me apologetically. “But that’s not what we found in Peter’s blood. It…has incredibly similar effects, but…it’s distinctly not your serum.”

“Then…” My voice broke, and I cleared it, shocked. “Then…what is it?”

Tony and Bruce glanced each other before Tony sighed. “We…we don’t know, Pete.”

“So…it’s not Bucky and Steve’s,” I said numbly, staring at the microscope. “Then…what…what is it? Bruce, what’s inside me?” My breaths became shallow as my heart sped up, and I gripped the edge of the stool. “What did—what did they put in me—Tony, I—”

“Peter? Peter, look at me,” Steve said, voice worried. “Peter, you’re panicking, okay? We’ve been through this, you need to calm down. Remember what Bucky said?” I tried to nod, but I just ended up gasping, darkness creeping in the edges of my vision. “You’ve gotta find some sort of anchor. You’re here, okay? You’re safe.”

“I’m—not,” I gasped, feeling frustrated tears leak out of my eyes. “Not—sa—safe—”

Steve’s eyebrows drew together. “Okay, why aren’t you safe?”

“It’s—” I panted, my head growing airy and light, hyperventilation starting to take its toll. “In…side—” I put a hand on my chest, like I could show him through a window that something was physically inside of me.

Bruce and Tony stood back, watching worriedly. Tony had his mouth open, like he wanted to say something, but with a glance at Steve he backed up, watching with worried eyes. Bruce had his lips pressed in a thin line, eyes tainted green, hands gripping the workbench as he took deep breaths.

Oh. Maybe I should take deep breaths. When I tried, though, I couldn’t. My lungs wouldn’t expand properly.

Stella had stopped messing with Dum-E and had come over to me, standing on her back legs, pawing at my legs and the stool legs, meowing worriedly. I wanted to scoop her up, hold her, let her cheer me up, but I could barely move. I couldn’t breathe. The panic was settling in now, into my bones, my flesh, my blood, just like—

“Ste—” I gasped, breaths ragged. “Steve—”

“I get it,” he said, voice low, smooth. His hands tightened on my shoulders, holding me steady. “I get it. Remember? I said I was a sickly kid, right? I had asthma. Not quite as bad as a panic attack, but…it feels the same in some ways. Wanna hear a trick I used to take deep breaths? Yeah?”

I nodded, still wheezing in breaths, hands grasping his wrists desperately. He continued, “Okay. This is New York, and you’ve lived here your whole life. You must know a lot of streets, huh? Not all the numbered ones, like First Street. The good ones. C’mon, tell me as many as you can, okay? Think of all those streets.”

“Br—” I gasped, trying to calm my mind, choking on the word. “Broad…way—”

“Broadway, good,” Steve said, clenching my shoulders.
“Green…” I huffed, my chest expanding rapidly as I inhaled. “Street…”

“Green Street,” he nodded, looking serious. “Can you give me one in Queens?

I thought furiously, then I remembered where May and Ben and I used to go. We would take walks up and down the cobblestone, stopping for ice cream and taking pictures in front of our favorite shops. I’m sure I still had a picture somewhere in our old house.

“Ast—” I forced myself to exhale roughly, then sucked in a deep breath—still quickly, but I felt the lightheaded feeling lessen slightly. “Astoria…Boulevard.”

“There we go, buddy,” Steve said, relief evident on his face as my breaths became smoother, slower. “There we go. Deep breaths, that’s it.”

“Hey, FRIDAY said you guys were in he—Peter?” Rhodey’s voice echoed as he came into the lab, his braces back in place after his physical therapy session. “What happened?”

“It’s okay,” Steve said as Rhodey hurried over, hand on my shoulder as he looked between us. “He had a small panic attack, but we got it under control. You did really well, Peter.”

I nodded, still focusing on taking deep breaths, but I squeezed Rhodey’s wrist to let him know I was okay. “Sorry,” I breathed, feeling my cheeks heat up.

“No reason to be sorry, kid,” Rhodey said, clapping me gently on the shoulder, turning to Bruce and Tony. “What happened?”

“We, ah…” Tony said, rubbing the back of his neck. “We found out that the super soldier serum—Steve’s and Bucky’s—isn’t what Pete’s parents injected him with.”

Rhodey blinked, looking as surprised as the rest of them. “What? Then how…?”

“It’s something else entirely,” Bruce said, eyeing me warily.

I took a deep breath and nodded, relishing Steve’s comforting hand on my shoulder, though I kind of wanted Bucky. But I wanted to know now. I wanted to know everything I could. “It’s okay.”

“Well,” Bruce said, “we tried to…kind of guess what your parents were working on. You told us they were comparing the serum to different cross-species genetics, so we did some digging around into successful research in that area, but it’s very limited. Very few breeds have ever made it past the first couple of experimental stages, let alone gotten approval for testing.”

Tony tapped his StarkPad, throwing a holographic diagram of three double helixes onto the wall behind us. I watched, fascinated, as the holograms warped and shifted. “The one on the left is a sample of my blood, one hundred percent human, for reference. The one in the middle is Steve’s.”

I looked closely at Tony’s, and then my eyes shifted to Steve. I could tell immediately, even with my very limited knowledge of anatomy, that something was obviously different. “What is that…?”

“Good eye, Pete,” Tony said, zooming in on just his and Steve’s, putting them side by side. “So, a double helix is effectively a piece of DNA. The two strands are connected by Hydrogen bonds, in the form of nucleic acids—A, C, T, G. Put them in the right order, and you’re basically giving your body instructions on how to perform basic functions. See mine? Completely normal. On Cap’s, though, you’ve got some big differences.”

He zoomed in on Steve’s double helix, and the disturbances became clearer. “There are…bumps?”
“Not quite bumps,” Bruce said, enlarging a singular rung on the nucleic acid ladder. “More like spores. The molecules of the serum he was injected with all those years ago has dispersed throughout his entire body, seeping into his DNA and bonding with his nucleic acids. Like Tony said, each strand gives your body instructions—how much to eat, how fast you heal, the chemicals you secrete in certain situations…that’s why Steve is enhanced. The spores are literally enhancing his DNA right down at the source, making it superior to a normal human’s.”

Tony threw the diagram of Steve’s and his DNA into the back, and I sat forward, anxious to see where I stood in all this. “So…what? You said I don’t have the same serum as Steve and Bucky, but is the serum they injected me with like that? Do I have…spores…on the DNA all over my body?”

I chanced a look at Steve, to gauge his reaction to finding out he had chemical mushrooms growing all over his body that were practically invisible, to find him looking distinctly ill.

Yeah. Me too, Steve.

“No,” Bruce said, tapping the final helix, enlarging it on the screen. “This is yours, Peter.”

And suddenly, I wanted the mushrooms.

“What am I looking at?” I asked, my voice trembling. I slid off the stool and approached the wall wide-eyed, gingerly touching the holographic display. “This…can’t be mine. It’s…I don’t understand…”

“It’s yours, Peter,” Tony sighed, sounding grim. “We checked to be sure it wasn’t contaminated. Three times. And…this is what we got.”

I turned to Bruce and Tony, eyes wide, uncomprehending. I liked science. I loved science. But…when I thought about all the scientific reasons for this, all the possibilities, it…it was terrifying.

“But…what is it?”

“Well,” Tony said, sighing, rubbing his neck. “We’re still guessing. I’ve got FRIDAY running a program now, checking your DNA for similarities against successful diagrams of cross-species genetics in every top-name STEM corporation there is, but it’s a slow process. Here’s what we do know.”

My DNA was…warped. He zoomed in even further, to a singular rung, just like he had Steve’s. There were no mushrooms. Instead, parts of the helix were…broken, almost, but…together? It was like a broken bone that had grown back misaligned. This…was what composed my body. These broken strands of DNA. I suddenly felt like a house of cards in a windstorm, ready to topple at any moment, seeing the building blocks of my entire being so…misshapen.

“You have some kind or foreign DNA in your body,” Bruce said, taking over for Tony. “The reason it looks haphazard is because when you were very young—we assume when your parents gave you the serum—your DNA literally broke itself apart in order to bond with the foreign substance. I assume you don’t remember being injected?”

“N-no,” I said, transfixed by the diagram in front of me. “I mean, I think it was…right before they dropped me off at May and Ben’s. That would make…the most sense, right?”

“Did you feel sick? When they dropped you at your aunt and uncle’s, and for a few days after?” Tony asked, glancing up from his screen.

“Yeah, actually,” I said, confused as to how they knew that. “I…I was running a really bad fever
and in a lot of pain, all over. It got really bad after I got the news about my parents, so all of the
doctors and child psychologists told us it was…a form of shock, I guess. That I was…let me
remember…I was ‘manifesting my psychological pain to make it easier to deal with,’ or something
like that.” I glanced back at the screen. “But…that wasn’t it, was it?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Bruce said, and I felt Steve squeeze my shoulder reassuringly while Rhodey
paced and Stella rubbed her head into my chest. “That was your body trying to bond with the
foreign substance and keep it from killing you.”

“Oh,” I said shakily.

“Luckily, you bonded with it successfully, and it’s been growing with you, adapting to the changes
your body is naturally going through. It was probably only possible because you were so young,
and your body was able to adapt quickly.” Bruce continued. Tony was typing furiously, looking at
several other diagrams, laser focused. “So, instead of Steve’s, where the spores on his DNA are
enhancing his natural processes—speed, strength, healing, etc.—yours are just…completely
different.”

“But…” I started, unsure of where this was going. I was the opposite of Steve when it came to
physicality. I wasn’t fast, I wasn’t strong. I healed a little quicker than normal, but nowhere near
his level. “I don’t understand. I’m not very…enhanced…?”

“We’ve got a theory on that,” Tony piped up from the computer. “We think Cap’s physicality was
enhanced immediately because he was already an adult when he was given the serum, so all it had
to do was take the abilities he already had and…improve them. With you, you were still a little kid,
nowhere near your full potential. Bruce and I think that the foreign DNA had to adapt to all of the
changes your body has been going through, so it literally hasn’t had time to enhance most of your
physical abilities yet. Now, the abilities you have will probably depend on the type of foreign
DNA in your body. Animals have all different kinds of evolutionary techniques. Who knows, you
might grow a tail.” At my very unamused look, he coughed a laugh.

“But,” Bruce said, shooting Tony a look,

“we think we’ve found the cause of your dizzy spells.”

I perked up. May and Ben had taken me a doctor when the spells started getting bad, just after I
turned seven, but she never gave us a definite diagnosis. Having just taken me in, it wasn’t like
they had money to spare, so we had to just accept it and deal with them as they came. “Really?
What is it?”

“Well,” Tony said, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s…actually really boring.” He glanced at
Bruce, who nodded, and sighed. “It’s just…your metabolism, kid. The foreign DNA in your system
apparently requires a lot more nutrients to sustain all your natural functions than the average
teenage boy does. Since you’ve just started eating what was considered normal for others your age
and body type, and even before then not eating enough…well, it’s no wonder you’d get dizzy so
often.”

Metabolism.

My metabolism.

“You’re telling me,” I said, leaning forward, probably looking absolutely incredulous, “that I’ve
been getting dizzy my entire life because I wasn’t eating enough? Like, ever?”

“Nope.” Tony said, looking back at the screen. “You didn’t get them before you were six, did
you?”
“No,” I admitted, feeling my hands shiver.

“So. It’s the foreign DNA messing with your body.” Bruce said, cutting Tony off before he could open his mouth again. Tony pouted. “It’s also why you heal a little faster than average. Your rate of healing and metabolism are fairly constant throughout your life, so the first enhancements took place at the very beginning. We think your full potential of powers will start to develop when you get further along into adulthood. It could come out before then, but…it would be something like severe trauma to your entire body. I suppose it would come out as a sort of…defense mechanism, then.”

I ignored most of that in favor of thinking very deeply about what had just been said.

I was enhanced.

With foreign DNA.

Most likely animal.

“Oh, God,” I breathed, pressing a hand to my mouth, feeling my stomach flip. “I’m not gonna, like, turn into a werewolf or anything, right?”

Rhodey snorted suddenly into his hand, and Steve blinked in surprise. Tony and Bruce shared an amused look at my unsuspected comment. “No, Pete, you’re not,” Tony said with a cocky grin. “That was funny, though.”

“Not to me,” I huffed, looking back to the screen. “It was a legitimate concern.”

Suddenly, FRIDAY’s voice came over the speakers. “Boss, the others are back. Should I send them to the lab?”

Four pairs of eyes turned to me with questioning looks, and I sighed dejectedly, thinking of how well Bucky was going to take this. “Might as well.”

…

Bucky didn’t take it well.

He did that thing he does when he’s really mad. He ruffled my hair, got this thousand-yard-stare in his eyes, and walked away, disappearing for the next several hours without a word.

And if there were six destroyed punching bags the next time I stepped in the gym…well, crazy stuff happens in Avengers Compound all the time.

The others didn’t take it very well, either. Tasha did, since she was, ya know, a superspy. Clint was pissed, which I could understand, since he was a dad himself. That’s not something you do to your kids, under any circumstances. Thor was…understandably upset, but instead of going all god-of-thunder-and-lightning-raging-battle-mode, he sort of…sulked. He stole Stella for a while and took her outside to play around. I guess she made him feel better. Sam wasn’t too happy either, and went to stress bake.

And if the entire pan of brownies was gone after my next trip to the kitchen…well, like I said—just another mystery.

I slunk to my room not long after we told them and stayed holed up in there the rest of the day, trying desperately to process everything.
“FRIDAY,” I said to the ceiling, folding my hands behind my head and laying back on my bed, closing my eyes. “I don’t know how to deal with this.”

“If you’d like, I could compile a few helpful books on dealing with emotional or psychological trauma.” She said, her voice low and soothing. “You may find them helpful in terms of overcoming your initial fear or apprehension.”

I rolled over onto my side with a sigh, missing Stella’s warmth. I didn’t want to take her from Thor, though. “No, that’s okay. I just…it’s just a lot to process, you know?”

“Actually, I have the ability to process trillions of bytes of information per second, so I’m afraid I cannot identify with your feeling.” She replied, straight and to the point.

I put on my most unamused bitch face and looked at the ceiling.

“Your expression indicates that you are unhappy with my response.”

“Well, at least your powers of observation are still intact,” I huffed, getting up and stretching. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“Alright, Peter.”

I didn’t get to take a shower, though, because Clint dropped out of the vents and landed two inches from me, a grin on his face.

I jumped. I mean, I literally freaking leapt at least four feet in the air trying to get away. When I realized it was him, I panted, putting a hand to my chest and yelling, “Why is one of your primary hobbies scaring the piss out of me?”

“Aw, don’t be mad,” he chuckled, cackling at my reaction. “I need some of that brainpower.”

“You could have used the door!” I shouted, trudging to my bed and sitting down before the adrenaline crash took my legs out from under me.

“Geez, you’re a stick in the mud, today. Cap’s rubbing off on you.” He grabbed my forearm and tugged me out the door—thank God, not the vents—and down the hallway. “Come on. To my fortress of solitude. I need your help.”

“With what?” I huffed, shoving the hair out of my face, prying my arm from his grasp.

He turned around and put on a thousand watt smile only challenged by the resident billionaire. “Getting back at Tony Stark, of course.” At my confused blink, he grinned even wider. “Welcome, Peter, to your first official Avengers Prank War.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay, prank wars! Love the kids. Hope you enjoyed!
“No.” I deadpanned.

Clint’s dazzling grin faltered a bit, and his magnificently spread hands fell to his sides. “No?”

“Nope.” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “I’m not helping you with a prank war.”

“Aw, come on, little dude,” Clint whined, looking desperate. “Tony put googly eyes over every single thing in the fridge! When I opened it last night, I had a heart attack! It felt like…little creatures, watching me from every direction. I get enough of that at home. I wanna get him back, seriously!”

I laughed so hard I snorted, doubling over and wrapping my arms around my middle as the laughs continued, picturing Clint shuffling to the fridge at 3 a.m. for a midnight snack and opening the door only to find hundreds of big-ass googly eyes staring him down relentlessly.

God, his imaginary expression was priceless.

“FR-FRIDAY?” I cackled, still bent over, my ribs sore from the exertion. “Please tell me you have a video of that.”

“I do indeed, Peter,” she replied, sounding smug.

“Aw, no, you can’t find it funny!” Clint said, looking worried. “I recruited you first! You’re on my side! Mine!”

“If,” I managed, drawing a deep, shuddering breath to regain control of diaphragm, “if I agree to help you, you owe me a favor.” I smirked, watching his expression shift to apprehension. “A favor, no questions asked.” If the Avengers had taught me anything, it was that having someone owe you was much more empowering than anything material thing.

He studied my face, finally grinning. “Okay. You drive a hard bargain, kid.” He opened the door to his room, leading me inside, then shut it. “FRIDAY, turn off surveillance.”

“Surveillance disabled,” she said immediately.

“Okay,” he said seriously, turning to face me. “Here’s the plan.” I looked at his expectantly, and a few seconds later, he said, “The plan is…to let you come up with a plan.”

I gave him the flattest expression I could and sighed. “Fine. Uh…”

Then I remembered. I remembered this absolutely awful prank that Uncle Ben and I saw on TV once.

I gave Clint a shit-eating grin and said with glee, “I’m going to need all the glitter you can find.”
Clint and I sat in his room, watching FRIDAY’s live feed of Tony’s room on Clint’s television. Clint was grinning like there was no tomorrow. “I knew I picked the right pranking buddy. Tony’s going to flip.”

Stella, who was sitting on my lap, watched the screen intently, almost as if she too were waiting for Tony to fall into the trap.

Tony entered his room with a sigh, unaware of the peril about to befall him. Shrugging off his grease-stained t-shirt, he locked himself in the bathroom for his regular post-training shower. Through the speakers in the bathroom (no cameras, obviously, we weren’t peeping Toms, God) we heard him humming ACDC as he stepped into the shower and turned on the water.

Well, what he thought was water, at least.

Unfortunately for him, it was a more liquified version of superglue. He let out a string of curses that would have made a sailor proud, jumping out of the shower and throwing open the door to his room, a towel around his waist. What he didn’t know, though, was that Clint was eagerly clutching a hand-held remote in his left hand, waiting for Tony to enter the main room, where the piles of glitter atop the blades of his ceiling fan were waiting.

Grinning gleefully, Clint hit the button.

Glitter rained.

Tony was covered.

“LEGOLAS, YOU SON OF A BITCH, YOU’RE A DEAD MAN!”

…

Two days later, the video of Clint’s revenge had made it to every Avenger in the Compound.

Tony slunk around the Compound with a scowl, while Clint strutted like a damn pageant queen. Apparently, glitter > googly eyes. It had taken Tony three hours in the shower plus a special chemical dissolvent (from yours truly) to get all the glue and glitter off.

“I liked you better covered in glitter,” Tasha commented with a smirk, shooting Tony a wink. “Made you look like a vampire from Twilight.”

Rhodey snorted while Sam laughed out loud. “Nat, you watch Twilight?”

Tasha smiled coldly and twirled a knife between her fingers. “Yes. Anything to say, Wilson? Rhodes?”

They swallowed in unison. “No.”

“Thought so,” she said, standing and striding gracefully out of the room. “Also, don’t think I don’t know how much you two love to sing along to Moana.”

I almost passed out, I laughed so hard at the expressions on their faces.

…

“So, as of now, officially, you’re my minion, and you’re betraying Clint Barton,” Tony said during my next physics lesson. “I know you helped him with that glitter stunt. As much as I hated
it, since, you know, I was covered in glitter and superglue for a few hours, it was a good idea. Classic, simple, but effective.” He turned to me, a smirk on his face. “You have a bright future, young padawan.”

“Shut up and let me do my homework, Yoda,” I muttered, wondering what exactly I’d gotten myself into.

“Why do you and Clint love pranking each other so much?” I asked as I handed Tony a wrench.

We were in his garage working on one of his older sports cars. The engine wouldn’t turn over right, and Tony had a habit of trying to fix the unfixable when he had enough money to buy ten newer models out of pocket. It was one of his more redeeming qualities, honestly.

Thor had, once again, stolen Stella. I’d be pissed that he was hogging my cat if it weren’t so damn adorable every time they were together.

“Well,” Tony said, panting from his place underneath the car, the jack squeaking as he gave a particularly violent tug to one bolt. “I like pranking because I’m a grown man who tries to make up for all of his missed childhood by being immature and doing stupid, fun things. Clint likes to prank me because he’s…well, doing the same thing.”

I blinked, passing him a crescent wrench before he could ask, which he took wordlessly. “Why are you making up for a missed childhood? I thought you…” I stopped, realizing I didn’t know anything about Tony’s childhood. Or Clint’s, for that matter. “Just, uh…why do you feel like you need to make up for it?”

Tony sighed, securing a bolt and wheeling himself out from under the car. “Kid, I don’t…like emotions too much. They’re…messy. Sticky. They’re the cup of apple juice that every kid likes to push off the table, and then you’ve got a big mess to clean up.”

I gave him a flat expression and said, “You can’t compare emotions to apple juice, Tony.”

“Yes I most certainly can. Apple juice is messy. Emotions are messy. They’re practically synonyms.”

“Okay, but…you’re avoiding my question. It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it, you’ve just gotta, ya know…say that.”

Tony sighed, wiping his oil-stained hands on a filthy rag. “Look, Pete, I…I know I had a better childhood than some. If you compare. But that doesn’t mean it was…good. Jarvis, my family’s butler, and his wife Anna practically raised me. My Aunt Peggy dropped by when she could.”

“Peggy?” I asked, surprised at the connection. “Like, Steve’s Peggy?”

Tony smiled fondly. “Yeah. Like Steve’s Peggy. She and my dad worked together with Cap back in the day.”

“So, what happened?” I asked, leaning forward. “What about your mom and dad?”

“My mom had a life that didn’t include me. My dad was…busy. A lot. Expanding Stark Industries, dealing with the Board, looking for Steve in the ice…and I guess I got pushed down the
list. I was…never gonna be as good as Captain America. My therapist has told me that it’s called emotional neglect, etcetera, etcetera, but…I dunno, kid. Like I said, this is getting messy. My dad was busy, and I had people taking care of me. And if he forgot I existed every once in a while, well, then, what can you do?”

A thick coat of bitterness swallowed his words by the end, and I sat awkwardly, feeling bad about bringing it up.

Tony was always so sarcastic and snappy, and he always had a big grin on his face, but a lot of the time you could tell that he was struggling. I knew some of his past…at least, what they’d put in the news. About Afghanistan, and the Iron Man suit, and everything. But to think that even before that, his father and mother had…ignored him? My parents had experimented on me, but…at least I still had a couple good memories with them. Things I could hold onto and remember. Had he ever had a Christmas with his parents?

“Sorry, Tony.”

“For what?” He mumbled, grabbing a Phillip’s Head and sitting on the bench beside me, looking over one of his latest projects, gingerly turning a screw. “You didn’t do anything, Pete.”

“I brought it up.”

“I wouldn’t have talked about it if I hadn’t wanted to, kid. You’re a good listener.” He ruffled me hair with a little smile so uncharacteristic of Tony Stark it was kind of sweet.

I grinned at him, the guilt fading a bit. As I contemplated my next words, my smile faded, and I leaned my shoulder against his. “You know, I used to think I wanted to be just like my dad.” Tony stilled, listening. “I thought I was gonna be this great scientist that changed the world. Just like my dad. My mom was…well, she worked more in the math side of things. In the chemical engineering stuff. I never liked that. I just liked…chemistry, and my dad was so good at it.” I smiled sadly, remembering. “I was three or four, I think…he helped me make my first baking-soda volcano. I was fascinated, Tony. I was…mesmerized. It was the most amazing thing I’d ever seen.”

I paused, blinking rapidly as the memory washed over me. “He made me love science, Tony. I think like your dad made you love engineering. You love it, don’t you? And whether or not he taught you a lot, he helped you love it. Like my dad helped me love chemistry and science. But…I guess with everything that’s happened, everything I’ve discovered…” I shook my head, turning to him. He was watching me intently, something like anticipation on his usually sarcastic face. “I don’t want to be anything like him, and…even though I love science, even though I’m what he made me…I don’t think I am. I don’t think I ever will be. I think I can love science in a different way, you know? And…I think maybe it’s…the same for you too.”

I stopped, a little embarrassed, and said, “Ah, sorry. Um. Apple juice spilled, and all that.”

To my surprise, though, Tony just huffed a quiet laugh and smiled, ruffling my hair again. “You…you’re ridiculous, kid. You always know the right thing to say.” Discretely, he swiped something from his left eye and said, “Enough apple juice. Back to pranks. What did you have in mind?”

I grinned, happy with the lightened atmosphere. “Oh, don’t worry. It’s a classic. You’ll love it.”

…”

It didn’t go as we’d planned.

Tony almost died.
It was the middle of the night. I’d rigged up a platform above the entrance to the kitchen, held by titanium plating and industrial bolts, so it would hold Tony’s weight. I was crouched behind the counter, keeping lookout for the next person to come through the kitchen door.

Clint always got a midnight snack. Without fail. Every night. The others rarely came in.

“Howdy!” I whispered into the com, which we’d hooked up so we could communicate quietly in the dark. “I’m tired. Let’s try again tomorrow night.”

“Not an option, Pete,” Tony snapped, sounding as tired as I felt. “They’ll wonder what the platform is for. We do this tonight. Failure is not an option, soldier!”

“Shut up, Cap,” I muttered, leaning against the wall and feeling my eyelids droop.

Suddenly, a shadow slipped into sight, striding towards the door. “Tony!” I whispered frantically, eyeing his form crouched alert on the platform. “Incoming!”

“Ready?” He breathed, sounding battle-ready.

“Ready.”

“Three…two…SMACK CAM!” He screamed at the top of his lungs. As I jumped up to turn on the lights and disorient the victim, Tony folded his upper body over the platform and shoved the whipped cream-filled pie-tin into…

…the face of Natasha Romanov.

For a long, long moment, no one moved.

Slowly, ever, ever so slowly, Tasha reached up and wiped the cream out of her eyes, globs of the stuff clinging to her mussed curls. Her sharp eyes zeroed in on the terrified billionaire dangling in front of her, clinging onto the platform for dear life.

“Na…Nat?” Tony squeaked. “I…uh…we…Pete…?”

Her eyes flicked to me, and every bone in my body shuddered. “Tasha…we…thought, uh…y-you were C-Clint…”

“So,” she said, her voice ice, licking the cream from her lips, “this was Tony’s revenge attempt.” Her eyes slid deliberately to Tony, whose face, despite the blood rushing to his head from his position, drained of all color. “Therefore, you’re to blame.”

Free from the damning stare of Russian superspy Natasha Romanov, I fled, shouting, “Tony! I’ll remember you!”

His reply was lost among his screams.

“Wait, let me get this straight,” Clint said, his expression dumbfounded as he turned to Tony, who sat slumped against the couch. I sat in the armchair grinning, Bucky leaning against my chair with a smirk on his face, Stella curled around his broad shoulders, meowing tiredly. Rhody, Sam, Thor, and Bruce sat around the room, while Natasha and Steve listened from the kitchen, putting together a midnight snack for everyone, since we were all up anyways. Tony’s screams had woken everyone up. They thought we were under attack. “You pied Natasha in the face…and lived?”
“Barely,” Tony breathed. His clothes and hair were disheveled, and his face was pale. “I’m…
calling an end to the prank war, now, Clint. I don’t think I’ll live through another mishap like that.”

Clint, a horrified look on his face, nodded vigorously as the others laughed. “But…what did she 
do?”

“You don’t want to know,” Tony said with a shiver.

“You really don’t,” Tasha said sweetly, carrying in a platter brownies while Steve brought out hot chocolate. I snatched up a mug and a brownie and sat back in my seat.

Bucky ruffled my hair absently, and I leaned into him. “So…the prank war was interesting, at
least.” I said, munching on the heavenly brownie. “Didn’t think you’d turn me into a double agent, 
though.”

“Well, I didn’t think you’d turn traitor, but here we are,” Clint pouted, folding his arms over his 
chest.

“I think,” Steve said, an amused smile on his face, “that we’ve all learned a valuable lesson today, 
hm?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding heatedly. “Tasha’s off-limits for prank wars.”

Tasha bared her perfect white teeth in a terrifying grin and struck fear into the hearts of every man present.

…

“Why did you like pranking so much?” I asked Clint during my next English lesson. The 
Screwtape Letters lay open in my lap as I looked at him intently. “Tony said you and he were both 
trying to…make up for your childhoods, I guess?”

Clint blinked, looking surprised. “Why do you wanna know, little dude?”

“Okay, first of all, why do you keep calling me little dude? It’s embarrassing.”

“It’s endearing. Next.”

“My first question. Why do you prank so much? Was Tony right?”

Clint frowned and paused the music, taking the book from my lap and closing it, dog-earing the 
page. “Well…I guess partially, but not for the same reasons as him.”

“You don’t have to talk about it,” I said quickly, realizing how much I used this phrase on the 
Avengers. “I know it’s kind of a personal thing to ask.”

“It’s okay. We know all your dirty little secrets, so it’s a little unfair,” he said with a smile and a 
wink. I rolled my eyes and grinned, waiting for him to continue. “My dad was an alcoholic. Not
like Howard Stark, though. Tony’s dad just kind of….ignored him, from what I can tell, but…my
dad beat my brother and I pretty badly. My mom, too. We ran away and joined the circus. They 
taught me how to shoot a bow….Barney, too. My brother. He was older than me by a couple 
years.”

Clint sighed, obviously struggling with the next part. “We had…a fight, and he…kinda lost it.
Tried to…tried to shoot our ringmaster.” He blinked, looking away. “I almost killed him.”
He was rushing through the story, speaking the facts emotionlessly, looking apathetic as he told what, to me, sounded like a horror story. “He lived. Barely. I haven’t seen him since. He’s in... lockup somewhere, and...I doubt he wants to see me, ya know?”

He sighed. “Sorry for ruining the mood, little dude. Oh, hey, that rhymed!” He grinned, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Well, shit, Clint,” I said, looking at him with wide eyes. “You didn’t tell me you were in the circus. That explains a lot.”

The look on his face was absolute shock. I guess he thought I was going to go into some long and emotional speech, but...it was different with Clint. He didn’t need emotional reassurance, like Tony and Bruce, or encouragement, like Steve. He needed laughter. He needed comedic relief. That was his way of coping.

So, hell, if all I could do was laugh with him, then I was going to laugh with him.

No matter the hatred I felt for his father and brother.

He barked a surprised laugh, eyes lighting up when he realized I wasn’t going to press. “That’s your response? Seriously?”

I shrugged, grinning. “Laughter is the best medicine.”

He snorted, shoving my shoulder gently. “Okay, Ghandi.”

“Pretty sure that wasn’t Ghandi.”

“Yoda?”

“Probably not him, either.”

“I don’t know quotes!”

“It’s more of a proverb.”

Clint huffed a laugh and snatched my book, darting away. “You’re not getting your book back until you—WHAT THE—”

His threat was cut off as he threw open the door and ran face first into clingfilm stretched over the door, running so fast he fell into the film and hung there, twisted and sticking like a fly in a spider’s web.

I laughed manically, doubling over and holding my stomach. “FRIDAY! FRIDAY, p-pictures!”

“You little bastard!” Clint screamed, struggling in the confines of the film, tangling himself even more. “We called this off! No more pranks!”

“He was getting revenge for me,” Tasha said as she strode in, Polaroid in hand, snapping a picture of Clint’s indignant face as I cackled. “Our little triple agent plays the part well, huh?” She ruffled my hair gently and smiled.

And so, my first Avengers Prank War came to an end.

But I would be prepared for the next one, because my partner in crime was Russian superspy Natasha Romanov.
Poor Clint and Tony never stood a chance.

**A/N: That was fun to write XD**

Chapter End Notes

Smack cam prank taken from JustmeSpidey's Spiderling, Spiderboy, Spiderman, which is an amazing story that I highly recommend! not sure if it's on this site tho
“Why did you let me die?”

The voice echoed in my mind, sweeping through the darkness, brushing past me like a cold wind. I whirled towards the sound, but as soon as I turned, it was behind me.

“Peter? Why didn’t you save us?”

Two distinct voices, in perfect sync with each other, getting louder and louder with each passing moment. Like their owners were creeping in on me. But in every direction, there was only darkness.

“Why didn’t you SAVE US?”

Right behind me. Right behind me.

I whirled, my heart creeping up into my throat.

Darkness.

Cold breath on the back of my neck. Icy fingers on my shoulders.

I froze.

“Why did you hide?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but the breezed words became a violent torrent, gusting winds choking me as the breath left my lungs. I breathed. There was no air.

“You could have done something,” the voices continued. “If you really wanted to. Child or no...you hid. You did nothing.”

Voices. No. May and Ben.

May and Ben?

Fingers tightening, goosebumps creeping along my body as the cold breath washed against my skin.

“You did nothing.”

“I’m sorry,” I gasped, tiny slivers of air entering my lungs by sheer force of will. “I’m sorry. I—”

What could I say? I tried? I didn’t. I curled into a ball and waited until the gunshots were over.

I’d done nothing.

“You did nothing.”
I did nothing.

“You hid.”

I…I hid…

“You let us die.”

I…let them…no, I didn’t want them to…but I did nothing. I just hid. I let…

I let them…I let them die…

I let them die—

“Young Peter!”

Different voice. Warm breath. Gentle hands.

Huge hands.

I shot up with a gasp, the feeling of terror following me into the waking world, a vice grip around my heart and lungs as I looked wildly around, searching for May and Ben’s warped voices. “I’m sorry, I d-didn’t mean—I’m so sorry, I—” I gasped, feeling sobs build in my throat, the fear and guilt like bricks in my stomach.

“Hush, young Peter,” a voice said, strong arms pulling me to a huge, warm body, patting my back gently. “It was only a nightmare.”

“Th-Thor?” I asked shakily, the tears finally coming in full force once I knew that I was safe. Stella was perched on Thor’s shoulders, looking down on me worriedly, meowing. “Oh, God, Thor—I’m sorry, I—”

“Hush,” he said again, the hand not patting my back cupping the back of my head. “Even the bravest warriors are haunted in their dreams. Do not apologize.”

And good God in heaven, if that didn’t break the dam, nothing did.

I sobbed for a good few minutes, expelling the terror and disbelief of May’s and Ben’s haunting voices shrouding me in fear. Thor was huge and warm and strong and there, with a calm voice and gentle hands.

After I’d calmed down and my heart had stopped racing, I wiped my sweaty palms on my t-shirt and rubbed at my eyes, my head throbbing as it always did when I cried. I pulled away from him, but his steady hand remained on my shoulder. “S-sorry. Did I wake you?”

Thor smiled gently and patted my head, scooping Stella into his arms and passing her to me, where she snuggled happily, obviously trying to go back to sleep. “No, young Peter. I, too, experienced a nightmare earlier this evening and was lounging in the room with the talking box when I heard your crying.”

Well, that was embarrassing.

“Wow. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize I was that loud,” I huffed with a laugh, rubbing at my eyes again. Then I remembered the first part of his statement and sobered up. “A-are you…okay? Since your nightmare, I mean?”
Thor’s eyes darkened, and he looked away. “It was…unpleasant.”

Readjusting my hold on Stella, I glanced at my clock—4:56 a.m. I probably wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep anyways. I looked back at Thor, who seemed deep in thought, his eyebrows pinched in a way that suggested a mixture of anger and sadness.

I sighed, throwing off my sweaty covers and standing, handing Stella back to a surprised Thor. “Are you gonna go back to sleep?”

“No, I suppose not,” he replied, curling Stella in his arms, smiling contentedly at the cat. “Midgard times are still difficult for me to comprehend, though I recognize that going back to sleep would be futile at this juncture.”

The god had a bad night, so I decided not to call him out on actually using the word “juncture.”

“Lemme change, okay?” I said, smiling in his direction, my hands still shaking as I hid them from him. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

Though he looked puzzled, he did as I asked, whisking Stella away with him.

I took two minutes to stand under a cold stream of water from the shower, washing the sweat away before I toweled off my hair and changed into some clean pajamas. When I got to the kitchen, Thor was hand-feeding Stella some cat treats from the pantry. God, he spoiled that cat more than I did.

I grabbed a pot from under the counter and poured in some milk, setting it on high. “Have you ever had hot chocolate?”

“No,” Thor admitted, looking intrigued. “What is this ‘hot chocolate’? I have heard many great wonders of it, but I myself have consumed alcohol or…I believe it is called coffee?...on most occasions.”

I snorted, grabbing some ready-to-mix hot chocolate packets. “I knew that. Well, we’re going to fix that, because hot chocolate is always the best for nightmares.”

*Nightmares of your dead aunt and uncle’s spirits questioning your choices on the day they died, forcing you to wonder what you could have done differently, making you overthink your options, maybe you could have saved them, maybe I could have—*

“Young Peter, is that supposed to happen?” Thor asked, looking concerned. I whipped around to see the frothing pot of milk boiling over onto the stove.

“Shitshitshitshit,” I muttered under my breath, whisking the pot off the hot eye and turning it off, watching the bubbles sink back to the bottom. “Okay. I, uh…think it’s ready.”

I made two mugs of hot chocolate, handing one to Thor, and filled a bowl with plain milk for Stella once it had cooled down some. I grabbed Thor’s wrist and tugged him wordlessly to the back of the Compound, asking FRIDAY to disable the alarm systems as we slipped into the backyard.

I settled down on the grass, took a sip of hot chocolate, and laid on my back, glancing up at the stars littering the sky. I balanced the mug on the grass beside me, careful to make sure it wouldn’t tip over. Thor sat next to me, setting Stella between us, where she curled up. He carefully studied my position before copying it, flinging his long arms out by his sides. At this point, we
were both basically starfished on the ground.

“What did you dream about, young Peter?” Thor asked quietly, his hand brushing my shoulder, staying there. “You were quite distraught.”

The stars melded together as leftover tears blurred my vision, but there weren’t enough of them to fall, for which I was grateful. “I think… it was… I think I was dreaming about… my aunt and uncle. They were asking me why I didn’t save them. Why I hid. Cause I did, Thor. I curled up into a ball behind a dresser and put my arms over my head and I hid until it was over. They died protecting me, and all I did was… sit there and… let them die. And they were calling me out on it, in my dream.” I huffed a humorless laugh. “I deserve it. The nightmare. I didn’t do anything to save them. I… sat there, like a coward, and—”

“No,” Thor said authoritatively, in a tone that made me shut my mouth instantly. I’d never heard him use that tone before. He was always so… mild and kind, especially for what I imagined from the god of thunder. This tone made me glad I wasn’t one of his many enemies. “You were a child. You did not ask your mother and father to do what they did to you. You did not ask for HYDRA to commit the atrocity they did, nor were you capable of stopping it. We cannot take responsibility for situations we cannot control, young Peter. It is one of the hardest lessons we must learn as heroes, and so we understand. We strive to save everyone, though there will always be those we cannot rescue. And though it aches, and will be painful for a very long time… we cannot save everyone.”

I stared at the stars as he spoke, listening intently, letting the words and thoughts wash over me. I didn’t agree with him… not yet, at least… but it made me feel better that he understood the feeling of not being able to save someone.

“Thanks,” I whispered as he squeezed my shoulder. “I’ll… work on it.”

“That is all I ask.”

I paused before asking quietly, “What was your dream about?” Thor stiffened and stilled, going rigid in the grass. Oops. Obviously a sensitive topic. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. It just… helped me a little, talking to you, so I was wondering if you wanted to do the same thing.”

Gradually, Thor relaxed. It was silent for the next few minutes, but I didn’t press the topic or say anything, simply stroking Stella’s fur as she snuffled in her sleep curled up between us. I’d found both the Big Dipper and Little Dipper, as well as multiple weird shapes of my own design, when he finally spoke again.

“I spoke to you of my younger brother,” he said quietly, not looking at me as I turned my head to see his expression. It was completely blank. “Loki.”

“I spoke to you of my younger brother,” he said quietly, not looking at me as I turned my head to see his expression. It was completely blank. “Loki.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly when he didn’t continue.

“I’ve had many enemies, young Peter,” Thor said, his expression morphing into one of exhaustion. It was the kind of exhaustion you see in people who have seen too much in their lives, who have lived through too much. I’d seen it on all of the Avengers at some point or another. Hell, I’d felt it every once in a while, the blood and violence and death all catching up to me when no one was watching. But Thor’s was… worse. Much worse. “I’ve lived for over two thousand years and had twice as many enemies, but… I never wanted… to fight my brother.”

Oh. Oh, wow.
“Loki was…always a troublemaker, but…some children are,” Thor said, like he was trying to convince himself. “Always playing pranks around the palace, getting into trouble…and truly, I joined him sometimes.” He smiled fondly at the memory, but it was laced with sadness. “Loki was adopted by Odin, our father. He was…the son of one of our enemies, but…my father took him in. He loved Loki like his own, but Loki did not see that. He only saw that we had killed his family…which was true, I suppose, but…they were a threat to Asgard. And I realize now, I realize…that war is not always the answer. That violence is not a panacea.”

I listened to him, waiting for him to continue, feeling absolutely horrible. I could see where this was going, and I didn’t like it.

“But we made mistakes…Odin made mistakes, and I made mistakes. I should have been a better brother to Loki. Sometimes…I ignored him in favor of my studies, or I cast him out while socializing. There was no hatred or malice behind my actions, but…a child such as Loki…he could not see that. He grew up…twisted, and I did not realize it until it was too late.

“The alien invasion of your city…that was his doing.”

Well, holy freaking shit.

“He what?” I blurted before I could stop myself. “I-I’m sorry, it’s just…I didn’t expect that. I mean…why, though…?”

“Anger,” Thor said sadly. “Grief. Loneliness. There are many reasons, all of them…very preventable. I dreamed that…we did not thwart him in time. When the Avengers were only myself, Friend Tony, Lady Natasha, Friend Clint, Friend Bruce, and Friend Steve. We almost did not prevail. I dreamed of what would have become of your world—and of my brother—had we not.” Thor’s eyes darkened. “He would have been beyond saving had that come to pass.”

I was beginning to think family issues were a requirement for joining the Avengers.

“Where is he now?” I asked after a few moments of silence.

Thor gave a short, dark laugh. “I wish that I knew, young Peter. Death is…finnicky when it comes to Loki. By all rights, he has died three times, but…he is the master of illusions, the god of mischief. I cannot believe that he is dead.”

Oh. Wow. These were…not standard family issues.

Dr. Phil would have a conniption.

“I’m sorry,” I said, not knowing what else to say. “I’m sorry that you had to go through that. It sounds…really awful.”

Stella stretched between us, her small body filling the space, her little claws gouging small gashes in the soft earth, before she curled up against my side again in a more comfortable position.

Thor didn’t say anything for a while. I didn’t press him, either. I just stared at the stars and occasionally sipped my hot chocolate, which was growing cold.

“It is good,” Thor said suddenly.

His voice was so unexpected that I almost dropped my mug. Fumbling gracelessly for the handle, splashing a bit into the grass beside me, I stated eloquently, “Huh?”
Thor gave a small, amused smile. “This ‘hot chocolate.’ It is good. Especially for nightmares.”

“Oh,” I said, finally understanding. “Uh. Yeah. I’ll, uh… I’ll make you some anytime, Thor. Or I can teach you how to make it if you want. It’s really easy. Unless you almost burn it, like I did. Uh.”

Thor chuckled, reaching over and ruffling my hair. “Thank you, young Peter.”

A couple more minutes of silence had my eyelids drooping. I hadn’t thought I’d be able to fall back asleep, but apparently my body had other ideas.

I dozed off eventually but came awake a short time later when pale pink light hit my eyes. Blearily I blinked them open, shielding my eyes with my hand, and glanced over at Thor. He was smiling into the distance. When he noticed me watching, he smiled at me and pointed at the horizon, just visible over the trees. “Look,” he said, sounding… a lot better than before. “The sun is rising.”

I rolled over onto my side for a better view, careful not to disturb Stella’s sleeping form, and saw that Thor was indeed right—the sun was rising. A bit of it was already visible, glowing fiery orange, shimmering over the greenery. The light slowly stretched over us, bathing us in sunlight and warmth.

The sky, dotted with wispy, feathery clouds, changed colors almost every few seconds. It went from a white-washed dusky color to almost maroon, the sunlight bleeding into the dusk, and then shifting to a fiery red-orange. The brilliance of the color seemed almost like dispersed flames dancing on the edge of the world, slowly fading and rising into the sky as the entirety of the sun rose, painting pale pinks and yellows on the canvas of the earth.

“Whoa,” I breathed, unable to articulate my feelings any better. “That was…”

“Beautiful,” Thor said, a thoughtful smile on his lips. “Asgard has light, but… nothing like this.”

“Sucks that we had to have nightmares, but I’m glad we got to see it,” I said, lying back down beside him. “I’m glad you talked about it. Did it help?”

“In fact, it did,” Thor said, his blue eyes brighter than earlier in the night. “I am sorry to have burdened you with the information, though.”

“Ah, what the hell,” I said, yawning. “We burdened each other. No sweat.”

Thor blinked, looking puzzled. “No… sweat? While I agree it is not hot, and I am not sweating, I do not recognize how it relates to our current topic of discussion…”

I sighed and settled a hand on Stella’s head, shutting my eyes. “Forget about it, big guy. Just go to sleep.”

He smiled. “I thought you said you would not fall back asleep, young Peter.”

“I lied.”

He chuckled and closed his eyes, his huge hand covering mine on top of Stella, who shifted and nuzzled her head against us before stilling again, her breaths evening out.
And so Stella, Thor, and I fell asleep in the backyard of the Avengers Compound under a rising sun.

Chapter End Notes

My kids. Love Thor. Thanks for reading!
Chapter 24

Tasha said, aiming another soft punch at my midsection. I jerked away, avoiding the hit, but she took the opportunity to sweep my legs out from under me, slipping in a hand to cushion my head as I hit the padded practice ring with an oomph.

Tasha had gone from calling me “kiddo” in Russian to calling me Pyotr, apparently the Russian variation of Peter. I can’t say I hated it.

Tasha gave me a soft smile and helped me up. “You’re getting better.”

I huffed a laugh, still out of breath. “Not good enough.”

“You’re still a beginner. A good one, at that. Even if your reactions are a bit slow, your observational habits are good.”

I snorted. “Yeah, but I’m small, and I’m not really that strong. No matter how good my moves are, I’m not gonna be able to beat anybody if I can’t muster enough force to do anything.”

Tasha gave a small laugh. I loved Natasha’s laughter. She rarely laughed, but when she did, it was like…little bells, tinkling in harmony. Kind of a girly description, but since it was about a girl, I didn’t feel that bad.

“You’ll learn that good technique surpasses brute strength,” she said with a smirk, toeing back to the outside of the ring. “I’m small as well. I’ll admit that I’m stronger than you, since I have to keep in shape for SHIELD business, but I come across enemies all the time much stronger than myself.”

I backed up across from her, getting into position. She never said anything like “ready, set, go,” rather just attacked me sporadically to sharpen my senses and improve my reactions. “And you use good techniques to take them down like a badass?”

She winked. “You’re learning.”

A few seconds of silence. I raised myself onto the balls of my feet, readying myself for her attack.

She sprang into action with all the grace of a ballerina, springing towards me with a foot aimed for my ribs. Her hits were never powerful enough to really hurt—she always held back fighting me. Sometimes I’d have a couple little bruises, but it was more from constantly falling onto the mat than anything.

She was right, though—I did have fairly good observation skills. I figured she’d come at me with her feet first rather than her fists; she shifted her weight differently each time.
I jerked out of the way of her foot, but it changed course, following my body. Using both hands like she’d shown me, I blocked her foot at the ankle, shoving her leg down towards the mat. Any normal person would have been knocked slightly off balance, but this was Natasha.

She recovered immediately and let out a soft grunt as she pivoted, sending a loose fist towards my solar plexus. I jerked away too quickly and stumbled into the side of the ring, distracting me long enough for Tasha to grab my shoulder and my underarm, on opposite sides. I had only enough time to think “Oops” before she flipped me over her back and (gently) slammed me face-up onto the mat.

“And his name is JOHN CENA!” I heard Sam and Clint shout in unison from the weight machines to the left of the ring, followed by their cackling. Bucky gave me a small smile from where he stood to the side observing, arms crossed as he leaned against one of the poles on the outside of the mat, raising an eyebrow over at Clint and Sam.

Breathless, I could only glare at them out of the corner of my eye.

Tasha smirked in their direction and sat down next to me as I caught my breath, launching into her post-physical-beatdown education-beatdown. “Why couldn’t you stop me?”

She always started with questions that sounded rhetorical but definitely weren’t.

“Because you’re Russian superspy Natasha Romanov.”

She smirked. “Theoretically, if you could beat me, tell me why you couldn’t that time.”

“Your confidence in me is astounding,” I panted, flinging an arm over my eyes as sweat dripped down my temples. “Because I got distracted.”

“Distracted by what?”

“My surroundings. Namely the stupid pole that poked me in the back when I dodged you.”

She gave me a small, amused smile, her posture impeccable even sitting Indian style. “Good. It’s good that you’re aware of that. It’s one thing to be aware of your surroundings, but it’s another thing entirely to be distracted by them. Every time you walk into a room, you need to take in as much information as you can. This way, if it comes down to a fight, you’ve already got at least a general layout of the room. This will help you avoid obstacles that could get in the way during a fight, especially if it’s hand-to-hand. If it’s a gunfight—which you will never be in, because if you find your way to one of those, I can’t be responsible for my actions—you’ll already have areas of cover picked out.”

“Every time you walk into a room?” I asked dubiously, glancing at her, ignoring her gunfight comment. She knew I was getting more comfortable with guns—weapons in general, really—and she didn’t coddle me about my lingering fear, which I appreciated. The more I heard about the weapons, the more I accepted them as part of my reality, the less afraid I would be. Her expression didn’t look humorous, so I figured she was serious about what she’d said. “What kinds of information?”

“Everything you can, but escape routes and possible weapons are the most important for people in our line of work.” She continued, glancing over in Clint and Sam’s direction. “You two should probably listen to this lecture as well. You don’t have the best track record of doing your homework, so if you’re going to wing everything, you may as well be prepared.”
Laughing, I sat up to get a better view of their put-out expressions. Sam was spotting Clint behind the bench press, but Clint put the weights down and sat up to stare at Natasha incredulously. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I prepare for every mission as much as I need to.”

From the treadmills, Steve called, “Your preparations include scoping out bars in the area for after the mission.”

“I admire friend Barton’s preparations!” Thor shouted from the corner where he was playing with Stella. “They are indeed necessary.”

“Hell yeah they are,” Tony muttered from a workbench, where he and Bruce were completing some adjustments to Rhodey’s braces while Rhodey read a newspaper. “Or at least they were. Now I drink coffee to drown my sorrows. Which is fine. Totally fine.”

I knew that Tony was a recovering alcoholic, but as long as I’d been with them, I’d never seen him take a drink. I’d never tell him, because I knew it would probably embarrass him more than anything, but I was really proud of him.

“Hey, Terminator,” Sam called to Natasha, grabbing Clint’s towel from his shoulders and wiping his forehead. “Kid’s mine now. Psychology lesson.”

“Wilson, did you just call me Terminator?” Tasha asked, glancing at him with a completely neutral expression.

With bated breath, I watched Sam’s facial expression morph from confusion to realization to the kind of terrified confusion people feel when they have to choose between the lesser of two evils.

“Uh…I don’t really know what the right answer is,” Sam answered, backing up towards the door.

“Hm,” Tasha said with a look in his direction. “Pyotr, go study with Sam. Sam…” Sam swallowed. “I’ll decide what the right answer was after your lesson.”

“Tasha’s gonna kill you in your sleep and dump your body in the Hudson,” I deadpanned as Sam pulled up our online psychology textbook.

“My last will and testament is under my bed,” Sam sighed, looking resigned to his fate.

“That’s ridiculous,” I commented incredulously, looking appalled. “You live in one of the most high-tech secret government facilities on this planet, and the best place you can think to hide your will is under your bed?”

“Okay, well, I wasn’t always a superhero,” Sam muttered grumpily, flinging the chapter 16 cover page onto the projection screen against the wall of the living room. “My ma hid all our money in the mattress when I was a kid, so it stuck.”

“Isn’t that what people used to do, like, way before banks?”

“Yeah, and it worked, so there,” Sam pouted, looking a little miffed that I’d insulted his storage methods. But come on. Next he was going to tell me he stored his Falcon wings in a rented locker at his local body shop or something.
“Why’d your mom keep the money there?” I asked out of curiosity and out of a desire to put off our lesson for as long as possible. It was on psychological disorders, which included panic disorders and anxiety and all the stuff I totally didn’t have. “Why not just in a bank?”

Sam got a faraway look in his eyes and stared at the projection on the wall for a few seconds too long. “I grew up in a rough neighborhood in Harlem. Nobody trusted the banks.”

“Oh,” I said, unsure of how to continue. Did he want to talk about it? His posture and facial expression suggested that the surrounding details didn’t paint a happy picture.

“Um,” I started, looking towards the chapter cover. “Did you, uh—”

“Do you want to hear about it?” Sam asked, looking amused at my bewildered expression. “C’mon. I know that, like, seventy percent of us have already spilled all their guts to you. Everybody in the building’s got a tragic backstory, kid. Did you want to ask about mine?”

Well, Sam Wilson, everybody. The bluntest guy I’ve ever met.

“Only if you want to tell me about it,” I said, pulling my legs up to sit cross-legged against the side of the couch. “If it’s better left alone, I don’t want to make you remember.”

Sam gave a bittersweet smile. “I haven’t talked about it in a while. I used to be a therapist, but…going to therapy has never been a priority, you know?”

I nodded. I did know. For the few days between my aunt and uncle’s deaths and when I’d run from CPS, I had several psychologists try to get me to talk about what happened, so they could diagnose me or something. They’d been pushy, sometimes borderline aggressive, and it was one of the main reasons I’d decided to take what I could and disappear.

“My dad was a minister in Harlem,” he began, closing out of the psychology book. I figured it was a fairly long story, if he wasn’t bothering with the textbook anymore. “Lots of gangs in Harlem. Lots of gunfights and violence. My dad was killed when I was nine. He tried to be the good guy and stop a gang war.” Sam gave a wry smile. “I hated him for the longest time after he died. Leaving my ma to take care of us in a world where three kids and a single mom was barely better than a death sentence, especially in a neighborhood like that.

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“I was the oldest, so I helped where I could. Started delivering papers when I was eleven to get a few extra bucks, but it was hard to get everything we needed most of the time. My mom was beautiful and strong and she never complained. I never heard her complain about not having enough.”

Sam stopped, his voice choked, and looked away, clearing his throat. “My sister Eliza was a year younger and started doing laundry for work when she turned twelve. By then I was working in a little grocery shop in downtown. It paid a lot better than delivering papers. My younger brother Lucas was only eight then, so he couldn’t work, but between the three of us, it was good for a while.”

Sam stopped again, took a shaky breath and said, “My ma was killed in a mugging when I was sixteen.”

I blinked furiously, looking away. When I’d lost my aunt and uncle, I had been terrified of what was going to happen to me. I couldn’t imagine having two younger siblings to worry about, as well.

“I dropped out of college and started working full time to support the three of us. The
neighbors helped a lot. They’d make us dinner sometimes, or give us a few extra dollars where they could spare. Everybody loved my ma and dad, so whenever they could, they helped. I think that’s when I got so good at cooking; I worked with what I had, you know?

“When I turned eighteen, I enlisted. I figured I could serve for a few years and send the paycheck to Eliza and Lucas to get them through school until they could find jobs, and then use my pension to give us a little extra time to figure out something permanent. I thought they’d send me straight to army, but apparently, I was a genius and tested straight into the Air Force,” Sam said with a smirk, his eyes a little brighter than they’d been at the beginning of his story.

“I took a couple extra years to do some pararescue training and served for a while in Afghanistan. I’m not telling you those stories. You’re too young for that,” he said, ruffling my hair. “But when I got back, Eliza and Luke were doing well. My service had given them a steady income, and Luke had even made it through college on scholarship,” Sam said proudly, a fond expression on his face. “He’s an engineer now. I’m so damn proud of him.

“Eliza married her high school sweetheart and moved to Jersey. I’m glad. I’m happy she’s out of the neighborhood we grew up in, and Ray—her husband—is a good guy. They didn’t really need me anymore, so I moved to DC working with the VA, helping veterans re-assimilate into the general population. It was…good work. Very fulfilling. I volunteered as a social worker, too, when they were short-staffed. I was already a trained counselor, so they just had to get me into some Child Protection classes, and I was certified.

“And then I met Steve Rogers, broke a few laws, saved his ass a few times, and the rest was history,” Sam concluded, grinning at that last part.

I couldn’t help a small smile, too, though my mind was reeling from everything I’d just discovered.

That was…really detailed compared to the background the others had given me. Sam was such a fun guy. He was always laughing and joking around with everyone, and he never complained when we asked for his cooking. To think he’d lost his father in a gang war, his mother in a mugging…and then two years later he joined the army, not knowing if he’d come home, to support his siblings.

“Sam,” I said, my tone conveying my disbelief. “You’re…such a good guy.”

His head whipped around to face me as I laughed at his expression. “Where the hell do you get off sounding so surprised at that, huh? Of course, I’m a good guy! I’m one of Captain America’s best friends! I’m an Avenger!”

“But, like, before that!” I said, laughing at the way his mouth was hanging open in disbelief. “You just sound so noble!”

“I am noble, you twit!” He shouted, his affronted expression just adding to my laughter. “Steve! Steve Rogers, get your star-spangled ass in here!”

Six seconds later, Steve ran into the room, scanning for any threats. Bucky skidded to a halt behind him, eyes landing on me before he relaxed. “Sam? What is it? Is everything okay?”

“Tell this annoying little shi—brat that I’m the noblest freaking pararescue you’ve ever worked with!”

Steve blinked, eyes flicking between the two of us before coughing a little. “Uh…I mean,
I burst into a whole new fit of laughter, doubling over on the couch, the breath whooshing from my lungs with each second. Sam’s face slowly turned red as he looked between the two of us, Bucky standing amused in the doorway. Finally, Sam exploded.

“Steve, haul your patriotic ass back to Brooklyn where you belong, you traitor!” And he threw the StarkPad on the couch and stormed past Bucky and Steve alike, towards the gym. “Clint, get your feathery butt on the sparring mat so I can take out my frustrations on you!”

Steve looked at me for clarification, mouth open in an unsaid apology, eyes concerned, confused, and a little bit exasperated. “I don’t…uh…what did I say…?”

Bucky snorted as I drew in a shaky breath, my ribs sore from laughing so hard. “Punk, you made your wife mad.”

Steve went as red as Natasha’s hair, turning and spluttering indignantly, “Wha-what? Where did that come from? I—I don’t even—what?”

And it just escalated from there, really, as Steve followed Sam to the gym, trying to get Sam to tell him what exactly was the matter, Sam steadfastly ignoring him or threatening to fly him to Brooklyn and drop him in a Dumpster somewhere. But no matter how hilarious the spat was, it had done its job. I had escaped my psychology lesson. Wow, I was awesome. I’d used misdirection and distraction like a boss. Granted, I really had wanted to know about Sam’s past, since I knew most of the others’ as well, but that was like, a bonus. Standing, I stretched, glancing at the doorway. I’d earned this downtime. Maybe I could play some X-Box—

“Nice try, kid,” Bucky said, plopping in front of me and scooping up the discarded StarkPad with a smirk on his face. “Chapter 16, right?”

“What? Nooooooo, Bucky, gimme this,” I pleaded, looking aghast. “I earned it! I was awesome!”

He snorted. “Sure. Have a seat, kid, we’re starting.”

Sighing, resigned to my fate, I spent the next hour and a half listening to Bucky tell me about psychological disorders and lamenting the next unfinished level of Fortnight.

“I heard you and Sam had an interesting conversation,” Tasha said in Russian during our next lesson, smirking. “And then Steve joined in.”

I grinned at her, carefully remembering each word before I answered, my Russian accent still a little weak, but the pronunciation good. “It was really funny. Sam told me some about his past, and he asked Steve to prove to me that he was…’’ I paused, switching back to English. “How do you say noble?’’

“Благородный,” she responded patiently. At my dubious look, she repeated it again, slower.

“Благородный,” I repeated slowly, switching back to Russian. “To prove to me that he was noble. And Steve said ‘I guess’ or something like that, and Sam got really mad. Then Bucky made it ten times worse and said, ‘You made your wife mad,’ and Tasha, Steve was the color of your hair. It was so funny,” I finished, my accent suffering the more I spoke, as I drifted further towards
Stella paced underneath my chair, meowing insistently until I picked her up and put her on the table, where she paced between me and Tasha, snuffling at all my school papers.

Tasha gave a small grin, shaking her head in amusement. She switched back to English. “These boys. You’d think they’d mature some over the years, but they were just as bad when the Avengers formed.”

“I bet they were worse,” I said, laughing a little at the thought of the Avengers when they were still a young team. “At least you guys didn’t form as teenagers. That would have been a disaster.”

Tasha gave a half smile and glanced at the kitchen. She and I were in the big dining room, which had quickly been converted into a classroom, since we always ate in the living room, anyways. Sam, Steve, Bucky, and Bruce—Bucky and Bruce being the unofficial temporary buffers—were in there making dinner. One of Tony’s grandmother’s Italian recipes or something, that I was dying to try. Clint, Tony, and Rhodey were gaming in the living room, Thor watching and cheering at every explosion.

It was so stupidly domestic.

“Out of curiosity, why did Sam need Steve to reaffirm his nobility so desperately?” Tasha asked, glancing at the living room when a particularly loud explosion sounded, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, I told him he was noble for taking care of his siblings by enlisting,” I said, glancing towards the kitchen, where Sam’s raised voice floated out. “But, like, I didn’t know he was like that even as a kid, so I guess I looked surprised when he told me about it, and he got super offended.”

Natasha smirked. “Sam’s a very noble guy, when he’s not acting like a teenager. His sense of justice actually rivals Steve’s, if you get him going.”

I grinned, laughing at that image. “In that case, why is his name ‘Falcon’ and not ‘Eagle?’”

“Because ‘Falcon’ is way cooler than ‘Eagle,’ you ingrate,” Sam said as he sauntered in with a plate of pasta tossed in garlic, herbs, homemade Alfredo, and blackened chicken. The smell was divine.

Stella leapt onto my shoulders to get closer to Sam, stretching out and snuffling the edge of the bowl curiously, meowing up at Sam expectantly.

“At least someone appreciates me,” Sam huffed, lifting Stella with one hand and cradling her against his chest as he set down the plate between Tasha and me. “Fight to the death for it for all I care. I’m going to give Stella something good because she loves me.”

Sam exited in a huff. I laughed quietly, expected Tasha to laugh with me, but she didn’t. I looked at her across the steaming dish. To anyone else, she would have seemed perfectly relaxed, but I knew her well enough to see the little things.

“Are you okay?” I asked quietly, her steely gaze drilling holes in the plate of steaming, delicious looking/smelling food in front of her.

“Yes,” she said, smiling at me, though I could tell it was a bit strained.
When I didn’t move, she sighed. “Look at me. I’m supposed to be a superspy, and a fifteen-year-old kid can already see through me.” She said it in a joking voice, but I could tell it bothered her.

“You were the one who said I was observant,” I joked, earning a little half-smile. “And I know I don’t know you as well as Clint, or Bucky, or anybody else here, but…you’re not a stranger, Tasha. I can tell some things. I watch and I know a couple habits, cause I worry about you guys, sometimes.”

Tasha flicked her eyes up and smiled wanly. “You’re a little spy in the making, aren’t you?”

I grinned, embarrassed. “Only cause you taught me some tricks.”

Tasha sighed, relaxing into her chair, arms crossed. She looked back at the food again, flicking her eyes away. “I’m alright, Pyotr. Something Sam said brought up some memories.”

I waited, but she didn’t continue, and I didn’t ask her to. Glancing at the cooling dish, I got up and said, “Gimme a second.”

I went back to the kitchen. Instead of grabbing a second serving, I just grabbed another fork and went back the dining room, where she was waiting. “I doubt either of us can finish all that,” I said, glancing at the huge plate. I mean, now that I knew about my enhanced metabolism, I probably could. I didn’t want to tell her that, though. “We can split it, if you want.”

Tasha gave a grateful smile and took the fork, twirling some pasta gracefully around the tongs. I, on the other hand, speared it into the goopy beautiful mess like a shovel, piling it on high and shoving it all into my mouth at once.

Tasha glanced up and raised an eyebrow. “If the others have taught you nothing else, they’ve taught you to eat like a starved wolf.”

I grinned through the alfredo and swallowed, going in for another bite. “They’ve taught me to eat like a man.”

“I’ve eaten with many men, and all I see when I watch them eat are teenage boys who never learned any manners, with the rare exception of Steve.”

Our easy banter continued throughout the meal, lightly trading insults and feigning shock at some of the things said. Tasha won, of course, but that wasn’t unexpected.

“I’m so full,” I whined, laying my head down on the table and sighing contentedly. “That was so good.”

Tasha leaned over and ruffled my hair, smiling. “I’ll get some water.”

She came back with two glasses of water and another small bowl, which she put in front of me. “I know you’re still hungry, even though you tried to hide it. Go ahead and eat that.”

I grinned sheepishly and dug in, guzzling the water as Tasha rifled through some of my papers with a pensive look on her face. When I’d finished, I snatched a calculus sheet from her hand, scanning it and pouting. “I forgot I have to finish this.”

Tasha handed me a pencil and collected my dishes, returning with a book. She sat down across from me and we sat in silence, she reading and I calculusing. I kind of wished our tasks were reversed, but hey, oh well.
After a half an hour or so, she exhaled through her nose and set her book down. I looked up questioningly.

“You’ve already collected quite a few Avenger backstories, hm?”

Caught off guard by the question, I nodded. “Basically everyone’s except yours, Rhodey’s, and Bucky’s.”

She nodded, glancing towards the door. Sounds of rowdy gaming and cheering had been consistently drifting in from the living room, so she nodded almost to herself, confident that no one would hear her, I guess. “Feel like collecting another?”

I nodded, putting my pencil down and watching her intently as she studied my eyes. She did that a lot. “Only if you want to share it.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I don’t want to, but…you deserve a bit, at least.” She paused. “Thor told you about his brother?” I nodded. “He and I spoke, once, while he was in SHIELD’s lockup. I admitted to him that I had some ‘red in my ledger.’ That’s not accurate, Pyotr, and he told me so. My ledger is nothing but red. My entire past is nothing but red.”

If it had been Clint, or Sam, or maybe Rhodey, I could have joked Redder than your hair? to ease the tension. But this was Tasha, and if I knew anything, it was that making jokes would hurt her, and shut her down. I didn’t want to risk that, so I listened quietly.

“Sam’s comment about fighting to the death over food. It struck a nerve. I assume you know that an undercover branch of the Russian government trained me to be the Black Widow from a very young age.” I nodded, my heart beating faster. Tasha was here, safe, in front of me, but whatever she’d been through must have been awful to draw such a reaction from her. “When I was nine years old, they took the training past theoretical and put it into practice. They took my roommate and me separately. Her name was Vasilisa.”

She paused, composing herself. I only knew this because she rarely paused when telling a story. Her body language, her facial features…nothing physical changed. “We weren’t close. We couldn’t afford to be, in the training program. Love, friendship, compassion were all weaknesses annihilated very early in the program.

“They took us each to a cement room for three days with no food and no water. After three days, we were each given a small glass of water and taken to one of the training rooms. They brought out a bowl of thin oatmeal, barely enough to feed a small child. But we were both starving, wasting away, and they promised that whoever lived would get the food.”

She trailed off, and my heart dropped into my stomach, revolting against everything I’d just eaten. Every bite I remembered filled me with unspeakable guilt.

“You can imagine what happened,” Tasha said quietly, picking up her book, with no intention of opening it.

I could imagine. I could imagine, and it was revolting.

“Thank you for telling me,” I said quietly, glancing at her book absently. “I’m so sorry, Tasha. That sounds…God, that sounds horrible.”

Tasha waved a hand through the air, giving me a thin, sad smile. “It’s in the past. I told you because you’ve earned the right to know us. I have several things in my past that will haunt me until the day I die, but…I’ve found peace, here.”
“Good,” I said, reaching across the table and taking her hand. She looked up, startled (though the only way I could tell was the slight sharpening of her eyes). “You deserve peace, Tasha. You do. No, don’t cut me off. I’m serious. You’re just as much a victim as the little girl who died. They were starving you, killing you, and you did what you had to do to stay alive. If you hadn’t survived, if you hadn’t done any of those horrible things, then I wouldn’t have you,” I looked her in the eyes with as much conviction as I could convey with words and expressions alone. “And as much as I feel horrible about the little girl who died, and all the others, it wasn’t your fault. You never asked for it. And sometimes, bad things have to happen to you to give you something good. I lost everyone I ever loved, and I thought I would never find anybody else…and then I found Stella. And then I found the Avengers.” I smiled at her. “And as much as I’ll never say I’m grateful for the deaths of my parents, of my aunt and uncle, I know—well, at least I know my aunt and uncle would want me to be happy. I want you to be happy, Tasha.”

And then superspy Natasha Romanov did something I never, ever thought I would see her do.

She cried.

She didn’t take her hand from mine. Rather, she turned away from me, and let three tears fall before wiping them away, never looking any different than her usual neutral expression. But I’d seen.

“Thank you,” she whispered, rounding the table abruptly and pulling me against her, holding me so tightly I thought I’d pop. I didn’t mind, though. She felt like May, when she hugged me. “Thank you, Pyotr.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist and held on as she carded her fingers through my hair twice before letting go, no trace of her tears present. To observers, nothing had ever been wrong. Nothing had ever happened.

But I knew I’d seen a side of Tasha I may very well never see again. And I knew I’d treasure those raw moments with her for as long as I lived.

She smiled, flattening my hair where it stuck up from her fingers in a very motherly moment. “Enough of that. What do you say we go show the boys how it’s done on that game of theirs?”

I grinned, grabbing her hand and dragging her to the living room. “I thought you’d never ask.”

A/N: Omg I loved writing this chapter. I dunno why, but I ADORE Natasha. I actually named my car after her XD I hope you guys enjoyed reading it as much as I loved writing it!!!

Chapter End Notes

We're approaching the end of the bonding and the chapter of UTTER ANGST AND CHAOS (26) Hehehehe
“Put it higher—no, not like that—no, dammit, higher—”

“Do you want to do it yourself?” Clint muttered, lazily holding the corner of a huge banner, leaning against the ladder. He looked bored out of his mind. “C’mon. Get up here, Stark. Let’s see how well you can do it in your heels.”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and said, “They’re lifts, jackass. And I’m the planner. Pepper can’t make it over from California, so this is all my job now. Planners don’t do work, they order other people around.”

“So how is that different than normal?” Sam asked from the industrial kitchen. It had a bar that opened into the gigantic ballroom the Avengers were decorating. Sam was charged with cooking, since, ya know, everything piece of edible food that Sam touched turned into ambrosia.

“It’s not,” Steve murmured, sitting at one of the white cloth-covered round tables, putting together expensive party favors. Bucky was sitting with him, folding programs. Bruce was at the other end of the large hall, settling tablecloths over the tables that hadn’t been covered yet. Thor was having a grand old time sprinkling glitter around, dropping it in Stella’s fur as she pounced around at his feet.

I was sweeping ahead of Thor, since the room hadn’t been used in a long time and was pretty dusty. I couldn’t stop sneezing. Tasha was setting the places with cutlery and plates and those super extra-fancy folded napkins. And Tony was standing in the middle of it all, barking orders.

In response to Steve’s comment, Tony pursed his lips. “I don’t usually order you around. I make non-negotiable suggestions that you guys follow because it’s smart. Because I’m smart. And I have smart ideas. And then everybody’s happy.”

“Remind me again why Earth’s mightiest heroes are setting up for a gala?” I asked, leaning against the broom, sneezing after I’d finished. We’d been at it for a couple of hours, and I was hungry. I wandered towards the open bar while Tony responded.

“Because the people I hired to do it didn’t show up,” Tony grumbled, glancing at the floor to ceiling glass windows at the end of the large room, where the sun was starting to dip in the sky. “At least, that’s the story we’re feeding Pepper if she happens to ask.”

“So, in translation, you forgot,” Sam explained, sliding me a plate of cheese cubes, cookies, finger sandwiches, and some type of sushi-sashimi-fish-thing. I grinned at him and grabbed it. He winked back, going back to a pot on the stove before it could boil over.

“No.” Silence. “Maybe. That’s not the point. The point is we don’t tell Pepper.”

“I still haven’t met Pepper,” I murmured around the (surprisingly delicious) fish thingy.

They ignored me. “This is why you don’t plan things, Tony.” Steve murmured disappointedly, tepidly glaring at the party favors. “We could be training. Or strategizing. Or doing anything else.”
“Double time it, people!” Tony yelled, clapping his hands together. “Guests start arriving in two hours. And you guys still need to get ready.”

“What’s the gala for?” I asked, breaking off a corner of a cheese cube and setting it in front of Stella, stroking her tail as she licked it up. “I thought this was a high security off the grid place.”

“It is,” Clint said, hopping down from the ladder once he’d finally secured the banner. “It’s a SHIELD – Stark Industries cosponsored gathering for rich people to have pissing contests.”

“And this is why you never managed to climb the social ladder, Clint,” Tony said sadly, tsking. “It’s a sophisticated event in which society’s elite—in this case, society’s super-secret spy elite—gather to compare experiences and information while relaxing and having a few whiskeys. Or coffees.”

“So, a pissing contest with snacks.” I clarified, sweeping up the crumbs from Stella’s snacks. Bucky looked up and smirked at me.

“You’re all incorrigible,” Tony muttered, adjusting his designer suit.

“See? You’re already breaking out the big words.” Steve chuckled, dropping another party favor into the pile to his left.

“Peter, would you go get Honey Bear from the gym so I have someone who supports me?” Tony grumbled. “Since no one here seems to want to back me up.”

“Sure,” I said, shoving the broom into his hands and grabbing my plate. “You can finish my job, planner.”

I ran to the elevator before he could protest, grinning as he started cursing the broom. I popped another cheese cube into my mouth as the elevator descended to the ground floor, where all of our rooms were, then made my way to the gym. I stopped short outside the door when I heard two voices.

“Good, Rhodes, a bit more,” a young, female voice said, sounding coaxing and demanding at the same time. “This is all you, James. I’m not touching you. C’mon, this is mental, now. A bit further.”

Rhodey’s ragged panting followed her voice, small grunts worming their way out every now and then. I felt bad listening in, but at the same time, I didn’t want to interrupt them. It was Rhodey’s weekly physical therapy appointment. I knew he didn’t like any team members or me with him during these sessions.

“Nice job, Rhodes! That’s a personal best!” The woman’s voice said, sounding excited. A slap reached my ears, and I assumed they high fived. “You’re regaining control at an incredible rate.”

Rhodey gave a breathy chuckle. “Thanks to Tony’s tech. I wouldn’t be able to move without it.”

I cringed at his tone. Though joking, I could hear the bitterness.

The woman didn’t seem bothered. “Even without the tech. Your control is amazing, and it’s getting better every day. You really are improving.”

Rhodey sighed. “Thanks, Amanda.”
A few seconds of silence, then Amanda spoke again. “Guess our time’s up. I’ll see you next week, Rhodes. Do those independent exercises and don’t you dare think I won’t know if you don’t.”

Rhodey gave a quiet chuckle. “Yes, ma’am.”

There was another exit on the other side of the gym that led straight to an elevator used for employees or people who didn’t come to the Compound regularly. I assumed she left through there, since she didn’t open the door in my face or anything.

Unsure of what to do, I shuffled from foot to foot for a moment or two and finally knocked on the door. “Come in,” Rhodey’s tired voice drifted through the door. I shoved it open and walked inside.

Rhodey had his braces on and was sitting on a stool over by the parallel bars, a towel over his shoulders and a water bottle in his hand. He was still breathing heavily. “Hey, kiddo. What’s up?”

“Hi,” I said, shifting awkwardly. He glanced at me questioningly, probably sensing my indecision. Should I tell him I overheard part of his conversation? Or would it just embarrass him? In the end, I decided not to address the issue at all for the moment, instead shoving the plate of food in his face and shouting, “Cheese cube?!?”

Surprise flickered across his face, but then he smirked, plucking one off the plate. “Sam snuck you food again, didn’t he?”

I grinned at the floor, pink dusting my cheeks. “Maybe. There was extra anyways.”

“He spoils you.”

“You all spoil me. Don’t stop.”

Rhodey laughed, his eyes crinkling. I swiped a cookie from the plate, setting the plate on the bench beside him and sitting cross-legged in front of him. Tugging at my sleeves, I said, “Uh. I didn’t really mean to, but…I kind of overheard some of your session. Just a little bit. Like, the very end.” I looked down. “I’m sorry. I know you don’t like anyone down here during those.”

Rhodey was silent for a second, then he smiled and leaned forward, gently ruffling my hair. “It’s okay. You didn’t know.”

I nodded slowly, glancing at the braces. The cloaking technology was working well, but he didn’t have it on right now. There was no reason to. I glanced at the brace on one knee, eyebrows furrowing. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

Rhodey sighed through his nose and glanced at the braces silently. “It’s slow. It’s frustrating. But, yeah. Amanda swears I’m gaining more control over my legs.” Rhodey smiled grimly. “It’s just not happening fast enough.”

I nodded slowly, glancing at the braces. The cloaking technology was working well, but he didn’t have it on right now. There was no reason to. I glanced at the brace on one knee, eyebrows furrowing. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

Rhodey glanced down. “Doesn’t what hurt?”

“That,” I said, scooting closer and gently grasping the mechanism, studying the bolt in the
knee joint. It was structured in such a way that it enclosed the patella to support the joint without causing pain, but the bolt on his left brace seemed a little snug. “The bolt. It isn’t digging into your kneecap?”

Rhodey’s brow furrowed. “I mean, my nerves down there aren’t all that great yet. They’re healing slowly, but I can’t feel much. Sometimes it twinges, I guess.”

“Wait here,” I said. I ran to Tony’s workshop (up one floor and down the hall) and grabbed one of his tool kits.

I adjusted the bolt a little, unscrewing it enough to take the pressure off the kneecap, then slipping a small piece of padding I cut from the lining of Tony’s toolbox (if he noticed, I seriously doubted he’d care) and fastening it on. I screwed it back in, a little looser than before, but secure enough to support him.

Putting the screwdriver back in the kit, I leaned back to examine my work. “Can you walk around a little bit and tell me how it feels?”

Rhodey, who had been watching me work, stood slowly and flexed his leg, testing out the joint, his brow furrowing as he walked around a little bit. As he doubled back, he grinned and shook his head. “I didn’t even know it was bothering me that much, honestly. That feels a lot better. Thanks, Peter.”

I smiled up at him and packed up the tool kit as he sat back down, taking another swig from his bottle. “I’m glad. If anything else is bothering you, you can always ask me. Or Tony. I figure you’re more comfortable with him.”

Rhodey snorted. “Comfortable is a strong word.”

I grinned, shaking my head. “Your relationship is ridiculous.”

He smirked. “Ridiculous relationships are the best. We’ve known each other since college. We’ve got so much blackmail on each other it’s not even funny. We’ve just been through a lot together, that’s all.”

“If what you told me about his college days are true, I’m sure it’s a truckload of blackmail.”

Rhodey winked. “Most definitely. I mean, a lot of our friendship was just having fun, showing each other up with our stupidity, but Tony does mean a lot to me. And no matter how much he denies it, he cares about me a little bit somewhere behind that big suit of armor.”

I paused, looking down. “He hides his emotions a lot, huh?”

“Yeah,” he sighed, sounding sad.

“You do, too.”

“Hm?”

“Hide your emotions a lot. I can tell the braces make you feel bad. Feel…I dunno, inferior, or something, but that’s not true at all.”

Rhodey pursed his lips, his grip tightening on his water bottle. “Not now, kid. It’s—”

“You never talk to anybody, though,” I said, my voice taking on a pleading edge. “I know I
may be annoying or pushy or whatever, but you gotta talk to somebody, Rhodey. I can tell you’re unhappy with them, and I don’t want to see you upset. You don’t have to talk to me. Or Tony. Or anybody here. But you can talk to somebody. Please?” Rhodey didn’t look at me. “Just…promise me you’ll think about it?”

Rhodey turned and looked me in the eyes. I stared up at him, the most pleading expression I could muster on my face, hands clenched in my lap. Rhodey’s eyebrows drew together and he stared at me for a long minute before finally looking away, grunting. “You and those damn puppy dog eyes. Fine. I’ll talk to somebody.”

I beamed up at him, grinning. “Thank you!”

“You’re adorable. You’re just freaking adorable, Peter. It’s your greatest weapon.”

Recoiling, I shouted, “I’m not adorable, I’m a teenager! I’m…okay, no, I’m not manly, but I’m not adorable, Rhodey!”

“You are, though. You’re like a furry puppy that just tripped over nothing and rolled over. You’re that level of adorable.”

“I’m not a damn puppy!” I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. Then I realized as he laughed that sitting here like this, I probably actually did look like a kid. I uncrossed my legs and my arms and leaned back, though I was far less comfortable, in attempt to look a little bigger. “Way to make a guy feel mature. Call me adorable and then a puppy all in one breath.”

He grinned, ruffling my hair. I swatted his hand away, though I couldn’t hide the smile that crept in. “No wonder Stella loves you so much. She probably thinks you’re her kitten.”

In complete shock of what had just come out of Rhodey’s mouth, I spluttered indignantly, unable to actually articulate a response. Rhodey burst out laughing at my expression, and eventually I joined in, his infectious laughter irresistible.

Companionable silence stretched over us for a few moments after that. I munched on another cookie, wondering if Tony was expecting us back anytime soon. I hoped not.

“Tony sent me to get you,” I said around the cookie, “but I’m comfortable.”

Rhodey smirked. “You and me both.”

…

Tony wasn’t happy we’d ditched the rest of set-up, but he was too busy and flustered to yell at us too much. All the Avengers had to be present, but with SHIELD still questionable in terms of HYDRA spies, they decided it was best if I didn’t come.

I holed up in the common room with Stella for company and turned on the TV for background noise, lying on the couch and reading one of the encyclopedias Bruce had gotten me. I set one of Stella’s electronic toys to automatic and let her chase it around the room, only stopping when it got wedged into the corner and wouldn’t roll any further. When that happened, she pouted on top of my chest, staring at me over the rim of my book, finally curling up against my side.

When I was hungry, I helped myself to some leftover pizza and finished my encyclopedia, setting down a little bowl of food for Stella, then lay on the couch in boredom. Eventually, I drifted off, Stella leaping up to curl against me.
It couldn’t have been much later that I was awoken by a foreign feeling on my bare arms. Blearily, I blinked my eyes open, only to see Bucky above me, draping my fuzzy Avengers blanket over my body.

“Bucky?” I slurred, rubbing my eyes.

Bucky gave a little half smile and sat down where my head had been as I sat up, ruffling my hair. “Hey, kid. Didn’t mean to wake you.”

Stella, having also been woken up, leapt off the couch and into the armchair, curling up where she could sleep undisturbed.

“S’okay,” I yawned. “How was the party?”

Bucky’s hair was slicked back with gel and product, making him look ridiculously like a vampire. His necktie hung open under his collar, his dress shirt untucked and unbuttoned at the top. He looked like one of those fashionable bad boys in every cliché spy movie.

He gave an exasperated chuckle. “It was hell. I barely escaped with my life, and I left early.”

“What, kiss-ass socialites just not doing it for you?” I asked with a grin, tugging the blanket up higher.

Bucky gave an exaggerated shiver of disgust, rolling his eyes. “You were right about the pissing contests. It was ridiculous out there, I won’t lie.”

I huffed a laugh, leaning against him. He put an arm around my shoulders and leaned back into the couch, his head resting against the seatback.

I’d almost drifted off again, but his words startled me awake.

“I’m a lucky son of a bitch, aren’t I?”

Puzzled, I sat up, glancing at him. “What do you mean?”

He shook his head, smiling, staring at the now-muted TV with some ridiculous comedy show blaring across the screen. “I used to think I was the unluckiest bastard on the face of this planet. I fell off a train into a snowy, deserted wasteland, only for HYDRA to drag me back from death and brainwash me into killing hundreds of innocents for seventy years. Then when I woke up, I realized I’d almost killed Steve. I used to be almost as protective of Steve as I am of you. He was scrawny and small and always getting into fights. He never knew when to back down. I don’t think I would have been so fond of him if he hadn’t always been sticking up for the little guy, actually.

“And then I realized that even so, Steve had almost given up everything he’d worked so hard for after being recovered from the ice. For me. And I felt so guilty. He stashed me away in Wakanda for a while, and I went back into cryo until T’Challa could fix me. Gave me a new arm and everything. Then it all…settled down, I guess, and we all lived happily ever after. But I was still having flashbacks, and panic attacks. Nightmares. Steve did his best, but he couldn’t be with me all the time. It got really, really bad a few months ago.

“Then you came along. And as I got to know you, it was…worth it. Everything I’d been through to hit this point. It was worth it.”
Bucky looked away, seeming embarrassed. I was sitting up straight by now, eyes wide, completely attentive. Bucky was never this open. Ever. He always kept everything in a neat, tight little box behind a padlocked door. This was super rare.

And super sappy.

And super necessary.

“You mean that?” I asked, my voice shaking despite myself. “You really mean that? I mean—why, though?”

Bucky glanced at me, a smile gracing his lips. “I’ve seen too much weird shit to not believe in fate or destiny. Some people are just connected, Peter, from the get-go. I feel like—for me, that’s you. I never had siblings. Steve was the closest. The others aren’t…siblings. Maybe Natasha sometimes, but all the others are…valued friends. You started out as a street rat. A gutsy street rat that I respected. And then you were an ally, and then a friend. And now…well, you’re the closest thing to a kid brother I think I’ll ever have, Peter. And I don’t want to waste this chance. I’ve had so many choices, so many chances, taken from me, and I’ll be damned if I let go of this one.”

Somewhere during his spiel, I’d felt tears start trickling down my cheeks, unaware that I was even actually crying. The weight of his words were more important than he could ever imagine.

“I can trust you,” I whispered, my forehead settling on his shoulder, his arm tightening around me. “I can really trust you.”

“What? Of course you can,” Bucky said, sitting up, sounding a little worried.

“I know,” I choked, drawing the blanket around my shoulders. “I know. I knew. But n-now I know. I can stay. Right? I c-can stay?”

“Of course you can stay, Peter,” Bucky said vehemently, ruffling my hair and leaving his hand cupping the back of my head, holding it against his shoulder as I just…breathed. “Where’s this coming from?”

I breathed out shakily, my head still against his shoulder. "I love you, Bucky."

Bucky froze. I froze. I hadn't said those words and meant them to anyone since May and Ben, because there hadn't been anyone else who deserved them. I had somewhere along the way convinced myself that I would never say those words to anyone again.

But I found that my words were true. Bucky was family. Bucky was real, and here and warm and solid and staying.

"I love you too, kid," Bucky said, and I could hear the smile as his metal hand gently settled atop my head, his thumb massaging the scalp there. "I do. I really do, street rat. I love everything about you."

Something between a sob and a laugh left my lips, and I swallowed thickly, decision made.

“I’m ready,” I breathed, sitting up, wiping my face on my sleeves and looking at him straight on. “I’m ready to…to give you the formula. To give you what you wanted.”

But we both knew this was so much bigger than just the formula. It had evolved way beyond that. Giving them the formula would be giving them my complete, whole, unadulterated
trust. Because after that, they didn’t have to keep me here anymore. They could ship me off to Nevada or God knows where else.

This was me trusting that they wouldn’t.

Bucky breathed in a sharp breath, turning completely to face me. “Are you sure, Peter? You don’t have to. You know you can take as much time as you need.”

I shook my head, giving him a watery smile. “I want to. I w-want to.”

Bucky isn’t the most expressive person. It’s usually all patient smiles or resting bitch face. But he broke out into a grin that lit up the room, his eyes crinkling, his cheeks stretching. Because he knew how big this was.

“That’s amazing, Peter,” he said, sounding…almost relieved. I supposed he’d been worried I’d never trust them enough. “You’re amazing, kid.”

I grinned at him, months—years—of stress and doubt and guilt and worry and bitterness draining from my body all at once, letting me almost deflate in relief. I slumped against Bucky and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, peering over his shoulder with blurry eyes, just relishing the feeling of someone who wasn’t going to ever let go holding me.

…

We told the others after the party.

They were all exhausted when they got back—fraternizing with suck-up socialites apparently drains you of energy pretty quickly (except for Tony, of course, who was more than used to it)—but at the news, it was like they all got twelve hours of sleep.

Natasha gave me a genuine smile and ruffled my hair, kissing my head and wandering to the kitchen to make hot chocolate. Bruce gave me a rare grin, and Clint yelled in joy. Tony’s bright smile got brighter as he told me it was about damn time, and Rhodey gave me as wink as he cuffed him on the head. Sam gave me a high five and told me he was proud of me. Thor leapt from his chair, pumped his fist in the air, and yelled, “TODAY IS A JOYOUS DAY! LET US CELEBRATE!” And rumbling thunder on a starry clear night was heard in the distance.

Nope, not weird at all.

Natasha came back with the hot chocolate, and we all sat and talked and planned. Planned who was going to be present when I gave the formula, when I wanted to do it, etc. Tony took a phone call at some point, but Steve was the official SHIELD liaison, so his presence wasn’t mandatory.

For my part, leaned into Bucky, fuzzy blanket wrapped around me, hot chocolate in my hands, Stella against my side, content to let my family plan for me. For the first time since May and Ben, I felt true, pure peace. Trust, acceptance. Love.

I should have known better.

Tony came back into the room, his posture tense, his body rigid and coiled, shoulders stiff. I sat up, immediately recognizing bad news as he cleared his throat, drawing the room’s attention. “I hate to interrupt the strategy meeting, but…we have a problem,” Tony said, dragging a hand down his face, looking older than he was, shoulders slumping with fatigue.
“What’s wrong?” Sam asked, setting down his cup. Everyone else in the room looked up intently, on edge from Tony’s tone.

Tony grimaced and glanced at me with worried eyes. “Ross is coming.”
Please save your pitchforks for after I’ve metaphorically fled the scene. Thanks!

General Thaddeus Ross was, in summation of the accounts of various Avengers, a bastard-asshole-sonuvabitch-demon-spawn.

Bucky was on edge leading up to the visit, never letting me out of his sight, pacing back and forth like a caged animal. The others were obviously on edge as well. This guy was bad news.

“He’s basically Satan,” Tony said, and his facial expression indicated that he was not joking. “He’s tried to kill Bruce numerous times—old story—and he’s tried to lock Bucky in a government testing facility on more than one occasion.”

I grimaced, immediately on edge. Anybody who messed with Bucky—any of the Avengers, really, but most of all Bucky—earned themselves a one-way ticket to the top of my shit list.

Granted, I had a small shit list, but that just meant the people on it were really bad.

I adjusted Stella in my arms. Her stiff posture reflected the tension seeping into the air, putting me even more on guard. “What do I need to know?”

“That he’s going to try to manipulate you into seeing things from his perspective,” Steve said calmly, using his leader voice. “You’re strong, Peter. You can’t let him.”

“Okay,” I said, sounding more determined than I felt. “I...he’s just g-gonna talk to me, though, right? It’s not, like, an interrogation...?”

“No, Peter, nothing like that,” Tony promised. “He’s Secretary of Defense, and this is...I mean, it’s a pretty big thing. Having such a powerful formula in the head of a kid is already a crappy situation, but the fact that they used something similar on you is...well, even worse. He’s going to want to meet you, talk to you, pick your brain for stuff. He has to be in on every delicate situation there is, which is probably why everything always gets so screwed up.”

“I have never felt positive feelings for this Ross,” Thor proclaimed, looking grim as he stood to the side, arms folded, looking like a pissed-off bodybuilder.

And geez. If Thor didn’t like him, the guy must have been positively evil.

“That’s because he’s a self-righteous, arrogant asshole who thinks everybody is under his thumb,” Rhodey muttered.

“You’ll be fine, Малыш,” Tasha said with a small smile. “You’ve got a strong mind and a strong heart. We’ll be waiting for you when you’re through.”

“And if he does anything we don’t like, I’ve got some exploding arrows on hand,” Clint commented, looking deadly serious.

I gave a nervous chuckle, mostly to relieve the tension building in my chest.

“Boss?” FRIDAY said, sounding as apprehensive as she could without emotions. “General
Ross and his escort are here.”

Bucky swore and looked around the room. “I don’t like this, guys. I don’t like him going into a room alone with this prick.”

Oh. That was another thing. Tony had been instructed to grant access to a windowless, sound-proof, FRIDAY-proof room, to make sure that none of the Avengers influenced my answers or questions in any way while I was talking to Ross.

I was…not happy.

But life sucked and there was no getting around it.

“Can somebody just have hot chocolate and a Disney movie waiting for when I’m done?” I mumbled, my heart beating faster as Tony and Steve went to escort the men to the room, where I’d meet them in a minute. I clutched Stella tighter, wishing I could take her with me.

“Oh. That was another thing. Tony had been instructed to grant access to a windowless, sound-proof, FRIDAY-proof room, to make sure that none of the Avengers influenced my answers or questions in any way while I was talking to Ross.

I was…not happy.

But life sucked and there was no getting around it.

“I’m not leaving it. If you have a panic attack, if you need help, anything, I’m going to be literally twenty feet from you, okay?”

I sighed shakily and smiled. “Okay. Thank you.”

He returned the smile, trying to look calmer than he was, and opened the door for me. The hallway was twenty feet long, gray and dim with soundproof walls, reserved especially for very sensitive conversations. The heavy door at the end was as ominous as the room, all pale gray and cold and unforgiving. It wasn’t terrifying at all, no.

Tony and Steve looked up from where they were waiting, grim-faced. “He’s demanded that his guards stay with him. Something about concern for his personal safety or some other bull-sh—crap,” Steve corrected quickly, light pink dusting his cheeks.
Despite the impending doom clawing at my insides, I managed a small laugh. “Watch yourself, Cap.”

Tony, wearing a tense smile, ruffled my hair. “Go get him, Pete. Piss him off for me.”

He and Steve, who patted my shoulder encouragingly, exited behind us. Bucky pulled me in, squeezing me a little tighter than necessary, reluctantly letting go. “Just a few minutes, Peter. Nothing big and elaborate. You’re a strong kid. You’ve got this. Just…remember that we’re waiting for you.”

I grinned at him, and it was genuine. “I know. I’ll be done before you know it.”

…

I didn’t like Ross.

I hated his mustache.

“Pleasure to meet you, Peter,” he said with a benevolent smile. “I’m Secretary of Defense, General Ross. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“I bet.” I responded shortly.

He gave a small laugh. “I can see this won’t be easy.”

“I’ve been told before that I’m a problem child,” I said with a smirk, trying to sound more confident than I was with the two hulking, stoic guards at my back. I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms. “You have questions for me? Ask them.”

And he did. They were all questions I’d answered before. The monotony of the situation replaced my fear with…well, boredom. And confusion. He was being…nice. He was nothing like the Avengers had described him. I could only assume he was putting on an affable persona to win me over, but I wasn’t stupid.

He asked me about my family and even respected my wishes when I said I didn’t want to talk about it.

He was really laying it on thick, wasn’t he?

“Okay, the million-dollar question,” he said with a smile, looking apprehensive. “Do you…enjoy living here? With the Avengers?”

I blinked. This was a new question. “Of course. It’s amazing. They’re the best family I could ever ask for.”

Ross paused, looking up from his papers at my steady tone. “And you’re sure of this? They treat you like family?”

“All the time,” I said, confusion breaking through my easy façade. “You sound like you don’t believe me, but…it’s true. They’re all…my family, like overprotective brothers and sister, just one cause Tasha, or uncles or dads…I mean, they’re all just…family. I can’t really explain it. I just know. There’s this connection.”

“Connection,” he repeated dubiously, something like pity entering his eyes. “Dammit.”

Something was off about his reaction. He didn’t seem surprised. He seemed…
disappointed, and…sorry for me, almost. Like there was something I didn’t know. “Why do you say that?” I asked, unsure if I really wanted an answer.

“Peter,” Ross says, looking weary. He takes off his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose, looking torn. “I… I didn’t want you to find out this way, but…I have a son not much older than you, and a daughter I love very much. If something like this was happening to one of them, I’d want someone to tell them.”

My heart was hammering in my chest. I didn’t like where this was going. “Something like what?” I asked, my voice smaller than I’d intended.

He sighed audibly and closed his eyes, looking regretful. “They’re using you, Peter. The Avengers. They only want the formula and your DNA to recreate the enhanced version in your bloodstream.” He paused. “They don’t care about what happens to you, in the end.”

“You’re lying.” My reply was instantaneous. There was no reason to even entertain an idea as stupid as that. The thought was… unthinkable. There was absolutely no way it could be true. There just…it wasn’t...it wasn’t possible. “There’s no way. I talked to them about it.”

Ross spread his hands pleadingly. “I know it’s hard to believe, Peter, trust me. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to be the one to tell you.”

“You’re lying,” I hissed, standing up and stalking to the door. I intended to bust out and find the Avengers and make them kick this guy to Kingdom Come, but the guards dropped heavy hands on each of my shoulders, blocking my exit.

They had to let me leave. I needed Bucky.

“Peter,” Ross said, and dammit, he sounded so sad.

I whirled around, furious. I saw red. “They warned me about you. They told me you were a liar, and that you were going to try to manipulate me against them. It won’t work. They’re my family! The things they’ve done for me, the emotions, the…everything, you can’t fake that!” I heaved another breath, rage consuming me. “They told me everything…about their pasts, and fears, and...they wouldn’t…share so much, if they were just going to drop me. They would…never hurt me like that.”

Ross sighed. “I’m so sorry. You’re too young to have to deal with this. They were told to do whatever was necessary to gain your cooperation, even if it was sharing personal information…they’re just doing their job. I just…Peter, do you know the things Natasha Romanov has done?”

“I do. She told me. They don’t matter.”

“They do. She has slaughtered people before. An uncountable number of people have died by her hand. The same hands that ruffle your hair, that hold you, are drenched in blood.”

“It doesn’t matter. She loves me, they love me.”

“She was trained from six years old, Peter. You think love wasn’t the first emotion they taught her to recreate flawlessly? She first killed when she was nine years old. The little girl she killed was seven. I’ve read the account. She didn’t even care. She was completely emotionless. If she can kill someone so cold-heartedly, someone younger than you, you think she would have any qualms about using you and throwing you back onto the street like yesterday’s trash?”

I was shaking. I couldn’t tell if it was from rage, or from terror. “You’re wrong. She was
“Clint Barton. He’s a spy, too. He already has two families, his own and the Avengers. Why would he need to add you? Why would he want to? He was the first one to call you the team’s ‘little brother’, you know. Do you know what happened to his brother? Clint shot him. Multiple times, with his own arrows. He almost killed one brother. He made it sound tame, like he was defending his ringmaster, but once Clint started, he didn’t stop. He mutilated the man. How easy would it be to abandon another?”

“I—you’re not—”

“Tony Stark. He has all the money in the world. You know he used to be called the Merchant of Death, Peter? The things he built, the weapons of mass destruction he created? They slaughtered families. *Children*. You are just another child to him. He doesn’t care about you. He has absolutely no reason to. He could buy ten children just like you. You’re nothing special.”

“I won’t—”

“Steve Rogers. *He* cares for you. You know why? *Obligation*. He is obligated, as Captain America, to care for every American. You are not *special* to him. Anything he has done for you, he would do for *any* other child. There is nothing about you that makes you special to him.”

The words wouldn’t come anymore.

“Sam Wilson. Same as Steve Rogers. He protects America. He’s a soldier. He’s protecting you as another American child. He doesn’t care what happens to Peter Parker. Why would he? He’s got his siblings to protect, you know. He hasn’t been able to visit them in months because of you. You think he’d thank you for that?”

The room was spinning.

“Thor Odinson. He’s a *god*, Peter. You’re not even from his world. Why in hell would he care about you? You’re just another child. A teenager with issues he’s not equipped to handle. What reason would he have to care about you? Why would he take his precious time to deal with your issues if he has a world to rule? He just wants to help SHIELD get the formula from you. They’re giving him something in exchange, I heard. A new power device of some sort from their research on Loki’s scepter.”

My knees were trembling. I felt like I was falling.

“Colonel Rhodes, ‘Rhodey.’ Another soldier. Obligated to care. He has his own family. Why would he need you? We would he *want* you? He already has Stark to keep track of. He doesn’t need or want another distraction.”

I tugged at the chair weakly and fell into it before I could collapse.

“Bruce Banner. One of the greatest scientific minds in the world. You’re smart, Peter, but you’re just a teenager. A child. Why would he possibly think you could help him with his experiments? He’s humoring you and keeping you comfortable with the lab until the day he wants to use you for more testing. Getting you to trust him, so when the tests become invasive and painful, he’ll tell you he’s sorry and continue on, and you’ll let him.”

My vision blurred.

“And Bucky Barnes. Seems you’ve grown closest to him. Did you know that HYDRA
brainwashed him, and tortured him? Made him kill men, women, and children? Made him try to assassinate Steve Rogers, his best friend? Bucky hates HYDRA with his entire being. Why would he love you, when your parents worked there? Why would he care about you, when you’re just another one of their experiments? What better way to get back at them than to keep their greatest weapon from them? He’s using you for nothing more than his own revenge, Peter. He doesn’t care that it’s you. Any love he’s shown you is a clever façade to keep you from HYDRA out of spite.”

I couldn’t breathe.

It would have been easy to call him a liar, to scream and yell at him and not believe him, if he looked angry. If he looked threatening. If he was…aggressive.

He looked sad. He looked near tears.

He’d taken every one of my deepest fears and insecurities and laid them out in front of me. They were all on full display, now. I couldn’t even pretend they didn’t exist anymore. I knew it, he knew it, the guards knew it.

I clutched the chair so hard I thought it or my fingers or both would break. My words were quiet, so, so quiet. “Wh-why are you d-doing this to me? Why…w-would you say all th-that?”

“I didn’t do it to hurt you, Peter,” he said, sounding frustrated. I looked away from him. I stared at my knees. “I can’t sit by another minute and watch them treat you like family when you’re nothing to them. I can’t let you get to the end, when you give them everything and they throw you away, because they will.”

“No,” I choked out, tears streaming down my face. The agony was a palpable thing invading the most secret parts of my heart. It couldn’t be true. I couldn’t believe it. If I did, then…everything I’d built, everything I’d let myself come to love, every vulnerable part of myself I’d hesitantly exposed to them, would come crashing down around me, and I honestly believed that I would never recover from something like that, so I couldn’t let myself believe it. “I won’t believe you. I—you—those are j-just assumptions…y-you don’t have any p-proof.”

Ross rubbed his suspiciously wet eyes. I didn’t know what to believe. He seemed so genuine. Why would the Avengers call this man a liar, call him manipulative and cold hearted, when he was sitting right in front of me, crying over what he thought they were doing to me? Was it all part of his act? Was he trying to convince me with false concern?

Or—the unthinkable thought somehow wormed its way into my vulnerable mind—was he right? If the Avengers really didn’t care about me, if they were just using me, of course, of course they’d tell me not to trust Ross.

But…it didn’t prove anything. It didn’t mean anything. Ross had no proof. He had no—

“There’s a tape, Peter,” he said quietly, bringing out a small, sleek object and pushing a few buttons. It was a voice recording. His finger hovered over the play button. “Would you like to hear it?”

“No,” I said immediately, my voice shaking violently. “No, I would not like to hear it.”

He played it anyways.

“Nice work, Avengers,” Fury’s voice came on, a bit more distorted than the rest. He must be speaking through a video call. “Mission was a total success. Peter Parker is, for the moment, safe from HYDRA.”
The sounds of shuffling filled the audio with broken static, then Tasha’s voice came on. “Fury, how long are we going to be saddled with this kid?”

What?

“Yeah,” Clint agreed, exasperation clear in his voice. “Dammit, Fury, I’m wasting time on this kid when I could be with my own. I don’t want to miss them growing up, but this is a full-time mission. I need some downtime with just Laura and the kids, man.”

“I’m working on it,” Fury said. “He’s a stubborn little shit, that’s for sure, but you guys are playing the part well. He’ll crack eventually, and then I’ll take care of it.”

“Indeed!” Thor shouted, and the familiarity made my heart ache. “I wish for the new power source you have promised me, son of Fury! My Asgardian people will be well taken care of with such advanced—what is the word—technology?”

“A+ for Thor,” Tony said sarcastically. “Seriously, though, the charade’s getting old. That kid is a freaking attention whore. He’s always just…there, hovering, whenever I want some peace and quiet, and I just have to slap on a smile and let him tinker. He’s smart, but he’s so damn annoying.”

Suddenly, the grout between the tiles on the floor was the most interesting thing in the room. It wasn’t for long, though, because I couldn’t see anything past the tears blurring my vision.

“Tony, be nice,” Steve said, and however small, I allowed a small tendril of hope to emerge. “The kid’s been through a lot. I saw kids in Germany with that look he’s got. Yes, I agree that he’s a little needy, but try to be patient. This is our job, remember? It’s not always glamorous.”

The hope was crushed, mercilessly.

“A little?” Sam scoffed. “The damn kid never leaves. Seriously, I thought teenagers were supposed to be all moody and reserved from society. He follows us around like a puppy. And that damn cat. God, he treats it like a baby. It would be easier if he just shut himself in his room and never came out.”

“Then we wouldn’t have any opportunities to get the formula, genius,” Tasha—Natasha—said affectionately.

Almost the same voice she used with me.

I was falling. I was falling down an endless slope, no one to catch me, nothing to break my fall, no end in sight. No release from this fear, this agony. I was free-falling in my own despair, and I seriously doubted anything, or anyone, could catch me.

“Yeah, I get how important this is, but…I need some time with my family, man,” Clint said again, sounding almost desperate. “I haven’t seen them for more than a few days in months. He made me miss Lila’s birthday, Fury. I’ve never missed one of my kids’ birthdays. She was heartbroken.”

“You can take some downtime, Clint; I know with three kids already an emotionally needy teenager isn’t your dream job,” Rhodey joked. “We can take care of it.”

“I don’t know,” Bruce said jokingly. “Even one less person to shoulder the responsibility of this kid may bring the Hulk out. He’s a little fed up, too. It’s one thing we actually agree on—this kid needs to go soon. I’m not getting any work done.”
They laughed.

They laughed.

I wasn’t breathing, anymore. My lungs burned. I couldn’t care.

Bucky. Bucky would set them straight. Bucky would defend me. He cared. He cared, he had to. Bucky would help me, Bucky would—

“So, we got a time frame, Fury? I don’t know how much longer I can effectively play ‘parent/big brother/guardian’. Also, can we just reiterate the fact that I am the least qualified person for this role?” Bucky said jokingly, drawing more chuckles from the others.

“C’mon, Barnes, you’re perfect,” Clint said sarcastically, and I could hear the teasing smile. “You’re all soft and fluffy.” A pause. “I am surprised, though. You play the part pretty well.”

“Yeah, well,” Bucky scoffed. “Anything to screw HYDRA over. It’ll be a different story if he has another nightmare, or gets caught by another HYDRA agent, or needs another damn diaper change. Seriously, my patience is twenty feet under and counting. He’s just another HYDRA lab rat. I care as much about him as I do any other HYDRA bastard. Fury, I can’t believe you made me get temporary guardianship for this kid.”

“Don’t worry,” Fury said, sounding amused. “You can retract it after you have the research, and after you figure out the science behind his mutations. Which, by the way, is coming along nicely. The formula will probably help us complete our research, and then you can officially revoke any responsibility for him. Guardianship will be immediately transferred to SHIELD.”

“Oh, thank God,” Bucky said, huffing out a laugh. “As soon as we’ve got the info I’m revoking that shit so fast he’ll get whiplash.”

“Language,” Steve breathed, though it came with an amused chuckle.

From the others, I just heard laughter.

Laughter.

Pain tore at every part of me. Not physical. Physical would have been better. This was like…this was…

This was the worst pain I’d ever experienced.

I’d been abandoned. My entire life, I’d been abandoned. My mother and father had left me, after they experimented on me. They’d left me. They’d had, however questionable, a reason.

My aunt and uncle had left me. It wasn’t their fault. They’d been murdered protecting me. They’d had no choice.

The Avengers.

They had no reason. They had a choice.

Doubt was a funny little thing. It was a parasite, a leech that attached itself to everything solid and unbreakable and ate away at the foundation until it crumbled. Doubt was a termite eating away at the infrastructure of every solid, true thing, collapsing it from within. I could feel it, feel it,
violating every happy memory with them. And once the infection had settled, it only spread.

The clap on the back Tony gave me when I built something impressive now had sinister undertones I’d never even thought to imagine. Natasha’s small, warm smile was laced with ill intent. Bucky’s grins and laughs and the way he looked at me like he was proud and happy, all those thoughts and feelings were tainted and stained with malice.

For some reason, I thought of Les Misérables. I thought of Marius’ song, towards the end.

*There’s a grief that can’t be spoken. There’s a pain…goes on and on. Empty chairs at empty tables…now my friends are…*

*Dead and gone.*


Something broke, then, inside me. Nothing physical. Nothing tangible. That would have been easier. Something irreparable fractured within my being. I wasn’t having a panic attack. That may have been easier, if the world was blurring around me. No. No, everything was sharp, crystal clear. I heard everything. I understood everything.

I understood *everything.*

I gripped the chair, head down. My knuckles whitened.

“Peter?” Ross said tentatively, turning off the tape, the sharp sound of metal on metal as he dragged the device carefully towards himself making me flinch. “Do you understand?”

“Get out.”

A pause. “Peter, they don’t—”

“Get. Out.”

A beat of silence. A chair scraping against the tile. Shuffled footsteps toward the door. The guards, shifting their positions, opening the door to follow him out. A pause. “What are you going to do?”

An excellent question. An excellent f***ing question.

“I don’t know.”

Silence. Shuffling footsteps. The light click as the door shut.

This room was soundproof. FRIDAY proof. From no point could you see inside this room. It was completely isolated from the rest of the Compound.

Wobbling on shaky legs, I dragged myself to the door and locked it from the inside with trembling fingers. I put my back against the door, breathing in, breathing out, and slid down until I was sitting on the cold tile, hands useless by my sides, legs stretched out in front of me.

The room was soundproof.

The room was FRIDAY proof.

I was alone.
I don't know how long I screamed.

Okay, in my defense, I DID warn you.

Chapter End Notes

Whoops. Sorry about that. So right now I'm going to try to post chapters 26-49 to make up for my stupidly long delay. One chapter left!!! I'll post that one in a few days. Hope you guys continue to comment / leave Kudos :) thanks so much!
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N: Here you are :) 

I didn’t stay in the room for very long.

I couldn’t bring myself to move for a few minutes. Ross was probably in the midst of debriefing the other Avengers. Bucky said he’d be waiting. Maybe he would be. If I didn’t make a decision, they’d come looking for me soon.

What was I going to do?

I’d promised to give them the formula today. Their reactions…they’d been happy. Ecstatic. Was it because I trusted them so much?

Or was it because they were counting down the minutes until they were rid of me?

The first emotion Bucky had exhibited when I told him I’d give him the formula had been relief. Not joy. Not pride, not happiness. Relief.

What did that mean?

I used the time in that room and I thought. I thought furiously. I took a fine-toothed comb and I swept through every single memory I had with them, and I examined and cross-examined and inspected.

Was it all a lie? Was it really all just a big elaborate scheme to get me to give up the formula and more of my DNA? Was it so important?

I wouldn’t even entertain the thought, but…that tape. That damn tape.

It had shattered part of me. How could I ignore it?

They don’t care about you.

I sobbed into my hand, curling into a ball against the door, my knees tight against my chest. Arms wrapped tightly around them, I buried my face into the space between my chest and knees, trying so, so hard to disappear.

He’s just a job.

What was I going to do now?

They’re using you, Peter. The Avengers.

Where would I go?

They’re using you.

Would they even let me leave?
Slowly, deliberately, using so much more energy than I should’ve needed to, I grabbed the door handle and dragged myself up, inch by inch. When I was standing, however unsteadily, I unlocked the door and leaned against the door frame, opening it and sulking down the dim hall.

When I reached the end, I opened the door. Bucky was there. Just like he said he’d be.

I was numb.

“Hey, kid,” he said with a small smile. It instantly disappeared when he saw my face. He took my shoulders, gently turning me to face him. “Peter? What happened, are you alright?” Anger clouded his features in a matter of seconds, and I couldn’t help but flinch at his steely eyes. Luckily, he looked away. He didn’t see. “Did Ross do something? Peter, if that bastard hurt you, I swear, I’ll—”

“I’m fine,” I cut in, though my voice shook. “He didn’t—he didn’t do anything.”

Bucky’s brows furrowed, and he looked me in the eyes, expression still angry. “Don’t lie to me, kid. I know that look. Please, if he did something—”

“He didn’t do anything,” I snapped, more bite in my tone than I intended. Immediately I tugged my arm from his worried (worried? More like demanding) grip and said, softly, “Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap. I’m…just tired.”

His eyebrows crinkled, but he didn’t push it, thankfully. “Okay. If you need anything, though…you know I’m always here for you. Right?”

Here for you? Or here for your memory and your DNA?

“Right,” I said, tone flat. “I’m…going to lay down for a little while. It…I’m just…tired. Can I, uh…give you the formula later?”

Bucky blinked, then understanding crossed his features. “Shit, kid, if you’re that tired, don’t worry about it today. I forgot anyways.”

He “forgot?” How could he “forget” when that’s all he wanted?

“It’s okay,” I mumbled, somehow managing a tiny smile, though every part of my mind was in agony. “Just…don’t…bother me for a while, okay? I’m going to sleep.”

Bucky looked concerned (annoyed) but he relented with a sigh, dropping a hand on my shoulder. I went rigid to hide the flinch. “I’ll walk you.” He’ll make sure you don’t run away.

“I can go by myself,” I countered feebly.

“I’m gonna walk you, kid,” he said, leaving no room for argument.

I exhaled and followed him.

When we got to my room, I opened my door and turned to him. I opened my mouth, closed it. What could I say? Could I ask him? What would happen then? If it were true, he’d deny it, obviously. They still needed the formula, and more samples of my DNA.

I didn’t know what I was going to do. Closing the door on him now…

I took a deep breath, ignoring the worry (caution) in his eyes, and stared at his chest instead, on eye-level. “I…” I bit my lip, feeling tears well in my eyes, and choked them down. I wouldn’t. I
wouldn’t cry, not again. Not in front of him. “I don’t…”

“Peter, you’re kind of scaring me, kid,” he said, his expression tense.

_He’s scared that you know that the charade’s over._

_Because it is, isn’t it?_

_It’s all over now._

_Whether it’s true or not, it all has to be over._

_Because your pathetic, fragile little mind can’t handle anymore disappointment._

_You knew vulnerability would get you here._

_You’re better off alone._

“I’m sorry.” I whispered, leaning my head against the door and taking a deep breath. “I guess I…don’t feel well.”

“Okay,” he said slowly, sounding confused (exasperated. _Can’t you tell he’s sick of you?). “Can I get you anything? Hot chocolate? It’s ready, I just need to grab it—”

I shook my head, turning away from him, pulling the door closed. At the last second, I stopped, hiding my shaking fist behind the door. “You…kn-know that I…want t-to stay, right…?”

His brow furrowed. “Of course, we know. We’ve known for months, Peter.” _You wouldn’t shut up about it._ “We decided on it just weeks after you turned up.” _We decided we’d let you think that until we got what we wanted._ “You know you’re family, kid. We all love you.” _They love what you have, and they’ll love it even more once you’re gone._ “You’ve gotta know that we want you to stay with us as long as you want to be here.”

And if that didn’t rip what was left of me to shreds, nothing could.

But I didn’t show it. I gave him the smallest smile and whispered, “Bye, Bucky.” And I closed the door.

I laid on my—the—bed. I waited until I heard footsteps padding away several minutes later.

“FRIDAY?” I asked, tears streaming down my face, showing no signs of stopping. “Do they love me? D-do they love me?”

These questions made me feel so weak. So young. I shouldn’t have had to ask these questions. Millions, billions of kids never had to ask these questions. They knew they were loved. Why couldn’t I be the same?

I went on and on about how I wasn’t a kid. I was fifteen. I’d seen too much, been too traumatized, to really be a kid at all. But…I still was. There was no denying it. I was still very much a child.

And all I wanted was to be loved. All I wanted was someone, _anyone_, who would be there for me, without fail, to tell me they loved me and _mean it_. I wanted someone who would wake me up from a nightmare and stay with me when I couldn’t go back to sleep. Someone who didn’t mind
that I had panic attacks and who would help me.

Why?

Why was that so much to ask for? Why, when millions of kids in New York alone had two parents, a dog, an annoying sibling, and a white picket fence, did I have to ask the question of whether or not these people loved me for me or for the information I held?

Where was the justice in that? The fairness?

FRIDAY hesitated before answering. “I’m not sure I understand, Peter. I cannot understand human emotions.”

“Do…do they even want me?” I breathed, sobbing into the pillow.

“Of course,” FRIDAY said immediately. “They value you very much, Peter.”

Value.

Not love. Value.

“Why?” I asked, my voice shivering, my body jerking with each spasm of my lungs, shoulders convulsing with each sob.

“I do not understand the emotional side of it, though I recognize that there must be one, but you have valuable information and data. They value your body and mind for these reasons, but they may value your heart for reasons I cannot understand.”

“Is it possible…that…they d-don’t value m-my heart?” I asked, not wanting to hear the answer. “That th-they only want m-my body and…m-mind?”

“Peter,” FRIDAY said calmly. Sadly, almost. “I cannot answer this question. Emotions are not in my database of understanding and comprehension.” A pause. “Would you like me to call —?”

“Don’t call anyone,” I snapped.

FRIDAY went silent.

“Turn off surveillance.”

“Surveillance disabled.”

I sat up, scrubbing at my face, and changed my shirt.

I grabbed my tattered backpack from my homeless days and shoved two sets of clothes, a toothbrush, and some bills inside. I grabbed my family pictures. Out of spite, I left the Avengers’ pictures tacked up on the board.

Out of desperation and sentimentality, I took the fluffy Avengers blanket.

I slipped into my sneakers.

I sat down at my desk and wrote.

I shrugged the bag onto my shoulder.
Numb to almost everything, I could only pray they took care of Stella for me.

I opened the window, slipped out, and darted to the forest, where the vegetation swallowed me. Using the skills they’d taught me, I used the sun to determine which direction North was, and then went South, towards the city.

I hiked four miles to the highway, covering the distance in just over an hour.
I hitchhiked thirty miles down the Interstate, less than half an hour with the lack of traffic.
I thanked the driver and disappeared into the streets of New York.
For the second time in my life, I faded.
I was the one who did the leaving. I did the leaving, so nobody could leave me.

... 

Bucky Barnes

Something was wrong.

I knew it like I knew my own name. Ross screwed everything up. Everything he touched just…crumbled. And if he’d been effectively alone with Peter for so long…

“Pyotr’s sick?” Nat asked. She didn’t look concerned, but all of us knew that wasn’t the case. “That’s what he said?”

“He said he didn’t feel well,” I replied, pacing despite myself. After I’d left Peter, I’d gone to gym and destroyed one or two punching bags—my go-to whenever I was frustrated or upset, or dealing with a flashback—and an hour later found me with the others, wondering what was wrong with our kid. “He asked me if he could give us the formula tomorrow. He looked…” I shuddered as I remembered the look on my kid’s face.

I never wanted to see that expression on Peter’s face again.

“If you’d seen him…” I trailed off, sitting heavily next to Steve. “He looked…broken. Almost like…like he looked when he first got here, when he thought no one was watching. Like he was watching his back every second. He was…scared.” I didn’t want to voice my next thought—it was…too painful to even consider—but I did, somehow. “It was almost like…like he was scared of me.”

And I wouldn’t be able to handle that. I’d worked so hard to put the Winter Soldier on the back burner of my mind, to make sure people weren’t afraid of me anymore. If one of the most important people in my life felt that way…

“What? Of course, he’s not,” Sam spoke up, his tone disbelieving. “He’s latched onto you like you’re going to disappear any second. I’d call it an unhealthy attachment if it weren’t so damn adorable.”

“You didn’t see him, though,” I argued, leaning back, running through all of the things I’d said to Peter before the meeting with Ross. Maybe Peter had overthought something, or maybe I’d said something wrong?

But nothing came to mind. It all came back to one point—the meeting with Ross.
“Ross did something,” I said resolutely, leaning forward and putting my face in my hands, shudders wracking my shoulders as I thought about the monster who tried to lock us all away. “I know he did. Peter denies it, but...I mean, what else could it be?”

“I’d ask FRIDAY what happened, but she really doesn’t have access to that room,” Tony said, looking guilty and pissed. I knew how he felt. “I know I should’ve bugged it somehow, but the guards had bug detectors on them. They wouldn’t have let it stay.”

“Why don’t we just go talk to him?” Clint asked, sitting up, looking determinedly towards the hallway where Peter’s room lay. “If Ross really did something, shouldn’t someone...ya know, be with him?”

“He said he wanted to be left alone,” I countered feebly, even though I wanted nothing more than to run to Peter and just be with him until he told me what I could do to fix it. I hated not being able to fix things for him. “He...he asked if we knew he wanted to stay.”

They hadn’t been expecting that. Their faces gave it away instantly.

“What did you say?” Bruce asked tentatively, his book forgotten in his lap, reading glasses abandoned in his pocket.

“What do you think I said?” I scoffed, dragging a hand down my face again. “I said of course we wanted him to stay. That we loved him and we’d decided to keep him from the get-go. He just...didn’t look convinced.”

“That’s it, I’m going to talk to him,” Clint said, jumping up and striding towards Peter’s room. “I have experience with kids. The longer you let them think about something, the worse the thoughts get.”

“Clint, don’t,” Steve said, trying to grab him before he left the room. “Peter’s not like other kids. He’s been through too much for classic parenting hacks to work on him. We need to really think about this before we decide anything.”

“Maybe if I talked to him?” I said hopefully. “I know it didn’t go over well before, but...I mean...”

“Maybe,” Rhodey said, though he didn’t look convinced.

“If young Peter is distraught, should we not first understand the root of his distress?” Thor asked darkly, holding Stella to him. She looked on edge, just like the rest of us. I always found it amazing at how well this cat could read human emotions. “Then we can understand his reluctance and help him overcome it.”

“It has to be Ross, but he’d never tell us if he did something,” Rhodey said thoughtfully. “Peter’s our best bet.”

“FRIDAY, what’s Peter up to right now?” Tony asked, glancing at the ceiling worriedly.

“Peter has requested that I turn off surveillance for the time being, so I am unable to tell you,” FRIDAY replied, sounding apologetic. “I may have upset him.”

“Upset him how?” Bruce asked, looking concerned.

“He asked me if all of you loved him, but I cannot understand emotions. I was unable to provide a definite answer. I offered to call for assistance, as he seemed to be in quite serious
emotional distress, but he declined my offer immediately.” She paused, but before anyone could react, she continued, “He then asked if you wanted him. I replied that you valued him very much for his body and mind, for his knowledge and DNA, but that you valued his heart for reasons I could not understand. He seemed…unconvinced.”

My gut rolled. The whole inside of my body heaved.

Peter wasn’t supposed to be asking questions like that.

Peter shouldn’t have had to question that he was loved or wanted.

I’m pretty sure Tony started cussing FRIDAY out, but I couldn’t hear it. I was already moving towards Peter’s room, sprinting with everything in me, trying to decide what words could possibly fix this.

I threw open the door and my heart leapt into my throat.

Peter was gone.

All that was left was a messy room, an open window, and a letter on the desk.

…

Peter Parker

I was alone again.

I didn’t know where to go. I was back to that point in life where all I had to rely on was occasionally Jason and the stuff in my backpack. At least I didn’t have the papers to worry about.

Nah, all I had to worry about was HYDRA on my tail, SHIELD on my tail, the Avengers on my tail…

But hey, no papers. I was moving up in the world. I was finally rid of that damn formula, sitting innocently underneath the letters I’d left on my desk. I’d had enough. They could have it.

The shadows stretched over me like a film of gloom as the sun sank behind the horizon. I sat perched on a high branch in a tree in Central Park, watching it through the swath of greenery in front of me. My backpack sat in my lap, my fluffy blanket rolled up behind my head and tucked around my shoulders as I sat in thought.

Even if the…domesticity, I suppose…was a lie—which was still only a possibility—the skills the Avengers had taught me were very real. My balance and agility had improved, and scaling the tree hadn’t been nearly as difficult as it would have been before their training.

Another reminder of the things I might never have again.

A light breeze whistled through the leaves around me as the last tendrils of light started fading. In the darkness, the whistling sounded almost like whispers, keeping me company, replacing the voices of the people I’d never hear again.

I drew the blanket closer around me, grateful for the heat it provided.

People sometimes passed below me, talking and laughing, their voices drowning out the comforting whispers of the foliage.
I would watch them as they passed, envy igniting a spark of life somewhere inside me, but the apathy, the inability to really comprehend emotions right now, would snuff it out immediately.

I felt a tear slip out of my left eye and wiped at it. Not angrily, not gently. Just...I didn’t want it there.

I didn’t want to feel anymore. It always hurt. All good things must come to an end.

And what a violent end it was.

Was this how I would spend the rest of my life? Running around, sleeping in trees, looking over my shoulder every few seconds, waiting to get caught? Trudging through life with no relationships, no one to go back to? Would I sit on a street corner every few days, begging for loose change, until I finally died of starvation in some wet, dark alley? Alone?

Did I even care that this was what my life had ultimately become?

“Hey,” a voice shouted below me, and suddenly, a flashlight shone on me like a spotlight. “Kid, you can’t be up there. It’s getting dark.”

Silently, I stuffed my blanket into my backpack and climbed down, coming face to face with a police officer.

“Sorry,” I said quietly, slinging my bag over my shoulder. “I’ll go.”

The officer put a hand on my shoulder. I didn’t flinch. I didn’t really react other than stopping. I looked at him without curiosity, without apprehension, simply waiting for him to say his piece.

The officer looked concerned as he slipped his flashlight back into his belt. “Are you okay, son?”

I gave him the smallest smile and said, “No.”

That wasn’t the reaction he’d been expecting. It showed on his face. I hitched my bag higher onto my shoulder in an attempt to walk away, but he said, “Can I help you at all? Drive you home? Could I...call anyone?”

And weren’t those questions just the mockery I needed.

“There’s no one to call,” I said, walking away. “Forget about it.” Forget about me.

After all, I’d faded again. I didn’t really exist, did I? And even if I existed, I didn’t matter.

*It matters, kid. You matter.*

I didn’t.

Just another homeless kid in New York City, trying to survive. In time, I’d be whisked away by one organization or another, and...dealt with.

And no one would ever be the wiser.

A hand on my shoulder again, gentler this time. The officer handed me a card. Questioningly, I took it. “It’s my card. It’s my work number, but my cell number is on the back of it. If you...need anything, if you change your mind about needing help...call me, and I’ll do my
best to answer, okay, kid?”

I hesitated. I’d been let down so many times, it was…impossible not to. But this man didn’t
know me. Didn’t know anything about me, about any knowledge I possessed, or what lay in my
DNA. He didn’t know all the valuable things I had, so he couldn’t possibly want anything from
me, could he?

I looked at the card and squinted to read the name in the dark. The man’s name was Officer
Scott Travis.

“Thank you, Officer Travis,” I said quietly.

“What’s your name?” He replied, still looking hesitant to let me leave.

I thought about it. What could my first name hurt? “Peter.”

“Peter.” He smiled. “Good name, son. Do you have somewhere to go tonight?”

Despite myself, I nodded. When he didn’t look satisfied, I said, “I have a…a friend in
Queens. At one of the homeless shelters. I’m going to, uh…figure things out tonight.”

His brow furrowed. “Homeless shelter?”

“I’m okay,” I said, his questioning starting to put me on edge. I took a few small steps back.

He seemed to realize he’d pressed too much and sighed. “I’m sorry. I just…want you to be
careful, okay? New York at dark isn’t all that safe. Crime’s been on a rise lately.” He fished in his
pocket and brought out his wallet, handing me forty dollars. When I didn’t take it, he said, “Come
on, kid—Peter—let me do something for you. Please?”

I wanted to point at that by giving me his card without asking anything of me he had
done something for me, something big, but I took the money and gave him a grateful smile. “Thank
you.”

“Of course.” He smiled at me and turned away, then thought better of it. “I mean it, though.
You need anything—I don’t care if it’s a ride, or to talk, anything like that—call me, okay?”

I paused. I didn’t want to lie to him, but I doubted I’d call him. I clutched the card tight and
said, “I…I’ll think about it.”

Officer Travis sighed, then gave a small smile accompanied with a huff. “Guess that’s the
best I’ll get, huh?” He patted me on the shoulder. “Take care, son.”

I walked away.

…

Walking to the Queens homeless shelter took a really long time.

I stopped every so often to rest my feet, but I didn’t like staying in one place for too long. It
made me paranoid.

I was stupid for going here. It was the first place they’d look for me—and I didn’t even
know who ‘they’ was at this point—but I didn’t plan on staying long. Just long enough to tell Jason
that I wouldn’t be stopping by anymore.
Finally, as dawn broke through the heavy clouds, I reached the outskirts of the camp. A couple early birds were awake, but I didn’t stop to speak to any of them. Instead, I went straight to Jason’s tent, sitting down outside and waiting for him to exit.

I only had to wait ten minutes or so; Jason always was an early riser, waking just after the sun. He exited the tent groggily, glancing around before his eyes settled on me. “Peter!”

“Hi, Jason,” I said, giving him a smile that didn’t reach my eyes.

“Hey, kid, what are you doing here?” He asked, crouching in front of me. “Where’s the cat?”

“She’s, ah—still with the Avengers, I guess,” I said, clutching my backpack a little tighter as I thought of her. “I…kind of, uh…ran away.”

It sounded so childish when I said it like that, but…that’s what happened. I’d run away. I’d run away before they could throw me out, before they could use me further.

“Okay,” Jason said slowly, concern etched on his face. “Why?”

I hesitated, then ultimately shook my head. “I don’t wanna talk about it, Jason.”

“Okay,” he breathed, tugging at my arm. “Come on. You can sleep in here for a while, okay? You look like you didn’t sleep much.”

“Been walking all night,” I muttered tiredly. “I was too scared to stop.”

“Scared?”

I bit my lip, feeling the tears prick my eyes as I say down inside his tent. “I’m in… I’m in trouble, Jason, and…I just came to tell—tell you I wouldn’t be stopping by anymore.”

“Shit, kid, okay, it’s okay,” he said, looking worried. “It’s okay, just…uh…aw, hell, just hang on, okay?”

He disappeared outside, the tent flapping closed behind him.

I shivered in the cool air, thinking over and over about my and Ross’ conversation. The more I thought about it, the more I replayed it in my mind, it couldn’t… it couldn’t all have been a lie. Every moment, every emotion, every shred of comfort and love… no one could keep up such a detailed, scripted façade like that for… for months, could they? Granted, the beginning didn’t count, but still…

It had been an impulsive, reckless decision to run away so quickly, but… I needed time that I didn’t have there. I needed time to process everything, to think things through without having them around constantly. I needed space, time to think, to plan, to… understand.

It had been stupid. I shouldn’t have left, and I briefly thought about getting up and walking back.

But…the tape. I’d say it had been recorded in the very beginning, when they and I still didn’t have a very good relationship, but… I mean, Bucky had complained in the tape about getting guardianship of me. That was… that was after.

Did they really hate me that much? They couldn’t.
I couldn’t believe it was all a lie, but…that didn’t have to mean it was all true. It didn’t even have to mean most of it was true.

I felt tears falling again and swiped at them, frustrated. I’d cried so much. I had reasons, but…it reminded me of my weaknesses, of my shortcomings. Maybe if I’d done something differently…maybe if I’d…if I’d been better—

Stop.

I hated that thinking. I hated thinking that I had to be a certain way to make people love me. It made me feel…unreal. Fake. Scripted. If someone loved me for putting on a show for them, I wasn’t loved anyways.

But still…I’d thought…I’d thought I could have both, with them. I’d thought that I could be loved and be myself. Maybe it hadn’t been enough. Maybe I hadn’t been enough.

Maybe one day, I’d go back, if I lived that long, or avoided capture. Maybe I’d ask them. I’d see how they reacted to my return…maybe that would tell me something different. Maybe they did love me. Maybe…the recording was…

But it…

I shook my head, scattering my thoughts as Jason ducked back in, holding a soda.

“Looks like you’ve calmed down a little,” he said with a half-smile. “Got some of the good stuff. It’ll help you calm down and sleep for a while.”

I hesitated, gingerly taking the cup from him. “The good stuff? Like…like drugs?”

I’d never been one for drugs, even though they were everywhere among New York’s homeless. Even on the days I couldn’t sleep from the hunger pangs, even on the days when I was dangerously dehydrated and really thought it was the end, and I was scared of dying alone and afraid, I couldn’t take drugs. May and Ben had made sure I knew the consequences…from them and from the drugs themselves.

“Wh-what is it?” I asked, thinking about all the different drugs that could send me into hallucinogenic nightmares, altered states of reality, make me walk in front of a truck or something…

Jason snorted at my expression. “Just boring old sleeping pills, and only one and a half, which is less than a normal dose for someone your size. I checked. I crushed them up in there, so you can’t taste them. It’ll just make you sleep, nothing weird or trippy.”

“I dunno, Jason, I—”

“C’mon, Peter. I’ll be here the whole time. I can see the wheels turning in your head, alright?” He was right about that, at least. I knew, no matter how exhausted I was, that I’d never sleep with my mind so screwed up. “Just drink the damn soda, kid, I’m exhausted just looking at you.”

I stared at the bubbling liquid fizzing gently in the can, sitting so innocently in my palm, and thought about how nice it would be to just sleep for a while. Thought about not having to think at all. No worries about who loved me, no worries about who I could trust, no worries about who or what would be coming for me…
“Not here,” I said quietly, clutching the can a little tighter. “It’ll be the first place they look. And if…i-if anyone comes looking for me, p-please—”

“Kid, this isn’t my first rodeo,” he said with a smirk. “It’s a homeless shelter. People are always hiding.”

I gave a shaky nod and followed him out of the tent, backpack over my shoulders and soda in my hand, the innocent liquid sending my stomach rolling as I thought about its contents. I had a horrible feeling.

But I wanted to sleep.

I just wanted to sleep.

He led me to the outskirts of the camp, to an abandoned tent that stood erect for wandering residents. I’d used it several times. Opening the flap, I ducked inside and sat down on the sleeping bag that always lay welcome.

“Drink,” Jason ordered, sitting down in front of me. He sounded a little impatient, but it may have just been my imagination. “You’ll feel better, kid.”

I slipped off my backpack and pulled out the fluffy Avengers blanket, tugging it tight around me, desperate for any comfort. Jason smirked a little, but he didn’t say anything, and I ignored him.

“You’re, uh…you’re sure—”

“For God’s sake, man, just drink the damn soda!” Jason snapped, eyebrows pinching together in anger.

I recoiled at his tone. I hadn’t expected him to get angry. I raised the soda to my lips. Every fiber of my being screamed at me, telling me this was a bad idea. I could be caught, I could be attacked…

And Jason was scaring me.

This was a bad idea.

“This was a bad idea,” I voiced, setting the soda down shakily, reaching for my backpack. “I’m sorry for bothering you—”

I didn’t get a chance to finish. Jason surged forward, knocking me onto my back with strength I didn’t expect. The air whooshed out of my lungs as I landed flat and he straddled me, sitting on my chest, keeping me pinned. Somehow, the soda can appeared in his hand.

“No—” His hand came down over my mouth before I could call out, stifling any sound. I tugged at his wrist, pushed at his chest, stomped my feet against the ground to try and buck him off, but I was weak compared to him. I was exhausted and dehydrated, and so emotionally compromised it wasn’t even funny. He was bigger than me, too. Taller, stronger, heavier.

I didn’t have a chance, and I was scared, because he looked really, really mad.

All the training, every defensive move they taught me, slipped out the window as I panicked.
“Shit, kid, you had one job,” he muttered, sounding aggravated. “It’s not that hard to drink a can of soda.”

My reply was muffled behind his hand. I sucked in air through my nose, but it wasn’t enough for my panicking lungs. Spots danced in my eyes, wide and wet beneath him.

“Look. Let’s get one thing straight—I’ve got the upper hand here. I’ve got friends waiting outside for you, m’kay? Called ‘em as soon as you showed up. Oh, come on, don’t look surprised. You should know by now—” he grinned down on me. “—you can’t trust anyone.”

He took his hand away from my mouth, and I had just enough time to suck in a breath, ready to scream, when he shoved the soda can between my lips. I inhaled some of it, coughing and hacking, choking up as much as I could, but he smacked his hand over my mouth again and pinched my nose shut. I fought, I scratched and clawed with everything I had, terrified and alone, but it wasn’t enough. My lungs screamed for air.

I swallowed.

The effect was instantaneous. My limbs fell heavily.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” He asked sarcastically, climbing off of me. “Wait here. I’m getting some friends.”

He ducked out of the tent.

I couldn’t move.

He’d obviously lied about the sleeping pills. I could tell there was some sort of sedative in there, as I could feel the undercurrent of unconsciousness tugging me into darkness, but I could barely move. There was obviously a paralytic agent of some sort mixed in.

Shakily, clumsily, I rolled over onto my side to try and crawl away, but that was as far as I got. The fluffy Avengers blanket was still draped around my shoulders, warming my shivering form.

And among all my doubts, all my fears, all my anger…I just wanted them.

All I wanted was them.

All I wanted was Tony’s ego, Clint’s laughter, Tasha’s smile, Thor’s innocence, Bruce’s intelligence, Sam’s patience, Rhodey’s strength, Steve’s warmth…Bucky’s love.

Feeling the darkness creep in, I cried.

My vision was tunneling by the time Jason came back, grabbing my ankle and dragging me out of the tent into the open, where five people stood waiting. The black uniforms, even without the masks, were unmistakable.

“N-no,” I slurred as my foot was dropped. The blanket had been dragged with me for a few feet, but ultimately snagged on the corner of the tent and fell from my body. Instantly, I felt so much colder.

“Well that was disappointing,” one of the agents commented, kneeling beside my body. It was consuming all my strength just to keep my eyes open in slits. “Your dad’s gonna be real happy, Jason. Good work.”
Jason’s dad?

Jason grinned, and even with my failing vision, I knew it was a completely different smile than I’d ever seen on him.

I was looking at a completely different person.

“I’ve been waiting over a year for this moment, Peter,” he said, crouching beside me. “Trust me. We haven’t even gotten started.”

His manic eyes and wide, terrifying grin were the last things I saw.

A/N: I did a thing.

Whoops.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Comment / leave a kudos if you want!
Chapter 28

Tony, Steve, Sam, Rhodey, Thor, Natasha, Clint, Bruce, and Bucky—

I don’t really know how to say this.

Um. Ross played a tape for me. In it, you guys said some things. And I…think I understand now. I understand that this must have been a really hard job for you guys, and I’m sorry for coming into your lives unexpectedly and screwing everything up.

In the tape, I guess I…heard how you really felt. I think, anyways. If it was real…I know that you must have just been acting. To get what you needed. I won’t say it doesn’t hurt, because it does. But it’s my fault, too…I should have expected it.

Clint, I’m really sorry I made you miss Lila’s birthday. I never meant to. Just bad timing, I guess. I’m sorry. Bruce and Tony, if I hovered over you in the lab, and Thor, I’m sorry…for eating your Pop-Tarts, I guess. I don’t know what else I did. Maybe I pried, or something, but I hope you get the power source you need for Asgard. Rhodey, I’m sorry if I was…I dunno exactly what you said. Emotionally needy? I think so. Steve, Sam, I’m sorry if I was annoying. Natasha, I’m sorry if I made your job harder than it already was, and Bucky…I’m sorry you got saddled with me.

Tell Fury I’m sorry, too, even though he doesn’t really deserve an apology from me. I don’t even know what for. I guess for annoying him.

Even if it was you guys doing your job, for a while…it was nice. Even if it was a lie. I think I can remember some of it as real.

I want you to know that I didn’t believe him. I was strong, like you told me to be. He told me you were using me and manipulating me to get the formula, to get the serum, and I called him a liar and tried to storm out, but they wouldn’t let me. And then Ross played the tape, and I still didn’t want to believe him. I don’t really know if I do, fully, but the tape was…really bad. And I couldn’t ignore it, no matter how I felt.

So, I’m leaving.

I don’t…want to. I want to stay. I want to stay with you. But if it really is real, if I stay and you send me away…I don’t know what I’ll do. I wouldn’t be able to handle that, I don’t think. So, if you…if you come find me, if you find me and you want to bring me home, I can know.

Behind the letter, I left you the formula and all the schematics. Don’t worry, I remember it all…everything’s there. That’s what you needed in the first place, right? It’s why you asked me to stay. It’s my thank you for taking care of me for four months. I was going to leave you some more blood to test, but I couldn’t get down to the lab without you seeing me, and I don’t really know how to draw my own blood. So, uh…sorry. I hope you have enough. I just…I don’t want this anymore. I don’t want this knowledge, this unbearable weight anymore. You can have it.

If I’m being stupid…if you really do care about me…come find me. As fast as you can. Don’t stop until you find me, because if you really care about me, I don’t want to be anywhere else. But I’m begging you. If anything in that tape was true, if it really were all just you doing your job, trying to make me feel safe and trust you enough to give you what I had, just so you could hand me
off when I did…don’t ever contact me again.

Do me one last favor. Take care of Stella. I don’t think you would’ve bothered getting close to her unless you really loved her, so please make sure she’s okay. If you don’t want to keep her, give her to a good shelter, or find her a good home. I wanted to take her with me, but…I couldn’t face you.

I meant what I said. I really did love you. I really did think of you as family.

I’m sorry for any part I had in ruining that.

I’m sorry that your job is more important than me, because I think we could’ve been…a really good family.

If we can be, please find me.

Take care.

--Peter

P.S. Bucky, there’s a separate letter for you underneath the formula.

…

Peter Parker

An engine hummed beneath my head, the vibrations traveling through my entire body, reaching every nerve and setting it afire.

There was something I was scared of. Something I was worried about.

But that seemed so distant now.

I was so tired.

Raising my eyelids was the most I could do in my lethargic state, but it was all black and gray and dark. Dark clothes, dark walls, dark floor, dark windows.

Dark eyes.

“Burned through it pretty quickly, huh?” A familiar voice said to my left, rummaging through one of the bags at his feet. Unable to turn my head, I rolled my eyes to the side, but my peripheral vision was too blurry to see the person. I knew them, though. Of that much I was sure.

“Time for another dose, then,” the voice said, and I somehow realized it sounded too happy. I wasn’t happy. Was I? Was this what happiness felt like? Everything was too muddled to really understand, but I didn’t think this was happiness.

For some reason, when I thought of happiness, I thought of a big room with lots of people and a cat. I thought of a man with a metal arm. Was that normal? Was that happiness?

This was a small room with not as many people, and no cat. And no one had a metal arm. So it wasn’t happiness, right?

Was it even a room? It was moving. Did rooms move?
I felt a small prick in my arm, but my eyes still wouldn’t move far enough to see what happened. A chill traveled through me from the sight of the prick, slithering through my veins and numbing me. Unable to keep them open any more, my eyes fell closed.

“Sweet dreams,” a voice said, but it wasn’t like when May used to say it. This voice didn’t really sound like they meant it. I wasn’t sure I liked this voice.

I couldn’t think anymore. Sleeping was probably easier. I went to sleep.

…

Bucky,

I don’t know what to say to you.

I wanted to give you something else, because I don’t think the other letter accurately describes everything I’m feeling. I’m having a really hard time believing it was all a lie. But at the same time, that might be me being naïve. It’s international security and intergalactic secrets and all that. I guess it really is bigger than just me.

I wanted to believe my happiness was more important than keeping the world safe, and I know that’s really selfish. But I believed I could have both. I guess…I might have been wrong.

The tape Ross played for me was…it was really bad, Bucky. And it sounded just like you. Just like all of you. God, look at me. Even writing this letter to you, I’m trying to convince myself that it wasn’t real, but it was. It was, and I heard it, and that’s why I have to leave.

Even if it’s not true, I can’t take the chance. I don’t think I could handle it. I’ve been hurt so many times, Bucky, and this would be it. This would be the…the straw to break the llama’s back, or something…I don’t think that’s the right expression, but you get what I mean, right? I’m weak and I’m a coward, because I probably could have asked you. We probably could have resolved this with just a couple of ass-kickings. But I can’t, I can’t, take the chance that it’s all true. I couldn’t fathom giving you the formula—giving you my complete, uncensored trust—and having it thrown back in my face when I was shipped away.

You have to understand. The things you said on that tape hurt me more than anything. Even if some of it was real, even if there were moments when you did think of me as more than a ward forced on you by SHIELD, I couldn’t ignore them. Any of the things any of you guys said, but especially you. You know why, right? You knew me best. I trusted you most.

But I really did mean what I said. If the tape was…wasn’t real, or something, or didn’t tell the whole truth, or something else I’m just not seeing, please, please come find me, because I’m terrified of being alone. There are going to be so many people chasing me, and I miss you already. But I meant the other part too. If that tape was real, if everything in the last few months has been one big elaborate Broadway production to get me to give you what you wanted just so you could toss me aside and never think about me again when you were through, then I never want to see any of you again.

I really hope it’s the former, but I know that even if it’s that latter, it’s not all your faults. It’s your job. You had to do it, even if it wasn’t glamorous.

If the tape was real, thanks for everything you did for me, even if it was a lie. I learned a lot of useful things I can use to make sure you never see me again. I appreciate the memories I can hold onto for a little while. Take care of Stella.
If the tape was fake, come find me and kick my ass for being an idiot. I love you. I really do.

--Peter

... 

Bucky Barnes

Peter had been crying.

In some places on the page, the ink was smeared. Not enough to mess with the legibility, but enough to make it noticeable that something had been dripping on the page every few seconds.

Peter had been crying.

The paper crinkled in my hands. The ink was running now. There were some dry spots, but some were still wet. Were his tears that fresh? If they were, he didn’t leave long ago. We could still find him. We could still—

“Buck?” Steve’s voice shook me.

Oh. The ink was running because I was crying.

Stella pawed up to the bed and snuffled against it, meowing sadly, demandingly. Demanding Peter to appear, safe and unharmed and alive and okay. Or was it me?

“Bruce?” Natasha asked, worry leaking into her neutral voice. I half-turned to see green creeping up Bruce’s neck, the letter clutched in his green, oversized hand.

“Find,” Bruce—Hulk—growled, starting to grow. “Find.”

“Yeah, we’re gonna find,” Tony said, anxiety, worry, anger all melding his voice into a venomous tone. “Calm down, Big Guy. We need Bruce’s brain for this, okay?”

“Puny Banner find?” Hulk rumbled, his head brushing against the top of Peter’s ceiling, the tiny letter dwarfed in his hand.

“Yes,” Steve said calmly. “Banner can help us find Peter. And as soon as we find him, you can see him.”

“Sun’s getting real low,” Natasha slipped in, edging towards Hulk with an outstretched hand. “We’re running out of time.”

And it wasn’t just her lullaby. She was right. The sun was setting, and Peter was about to be alone on the streets of New York with HYDRA, SHIELD, and Ross on his heels.

“How can we track him?” Rhodey asked worriedly as Bruce slowly shrunk, Hulk receding reluctantly.

“His homeless friend. Jason?” Sam said, rubbing his chin, looking like he was about to strangle something. “He’ll be going there. There’s no doubt.”

“But he knows we’d look there first,” Clint commented, fingering one of the pictures left on his tack board. It was one that FRIDAY had taken when we’d all fallen asleep during a movie, sprawled out across each other in the living room. “Maybe he’s going in the complete opposite
direction.”

Natasha helped Bruce sit down against the wall where he took a deep breath. Peter’s ultra-stretchy pants had worked well. God, the kid was brilliant.

“This Jason may still have valuable information, however,” Thor said, scooping Stella up for comfort, eyes shining in the light. “It is imperative that we investigate.”

“Bucky?” Steve asked gently. I flinched at my name, eyes never leaving the open window. “It’s your call.”

*Please find me.*

*I’m terrified of being alone.*

*Please find me.*

I took a breath, staring at the crinkled paper in the metal arm I used to hate so much. The one that Peter sometimes helped Tony tinker with. The one that he would fix. That huge, dimpled grin he’d give me when something worked right. The way his face collapsed in relief, every time we gave him love or affection, and the way he’d try to hide it behind a smile.

This was my fault. I should have known. Should have known Ross would find something like this to use against him.

Ross was the master of manipulation and lies, and Peter was a very, very fragile kid with little to nothing to solidly hold onto.

We’d almost been there. We were *almost* there.

It wasn’t Peter’s fault.

*I’ll find you, kid.*

“He told us what to do,” I said angrily, staring at the letter in my hands. At the tears of my kid. “We find him.” I looked at the others. Never, *never* in my life had I been surer of anything. “We find him, and we kick his ass for running out on us. And then we bring him home.”

…

**Natasha Romanov**


The blood of a certain Sec Def.

Despite my nature, I truly was a forgiving person. I had to be, to live and work with and love so many idiotic young men. Mistakes were made. I’d killed enough to know we were all only humans, imperfect and flawed. Even with good intentions, everyone made bad decisions.

But I would not forgive this.

Never, never would I forgive this.

*Pyotr* was a light in my life that I had begged for every day since murdering Vasilisa. Clint had been an escape. A pathway to a better life. A better me. But he too had seen too much to have
the innocence, the light, to make me see the future as a little brighter.

Pyotr was like the sun.

All smiles and excited rambling. When he started spouting scientific jargon and grinning like an idiot, he looked so young, so innocent, so much like the little girls I’d killed to stay alive. But those girls had all been burned out stars, used up and wasted away by the age of six or seven.

I had vowed to protect Pyotr’s light, for all the little girls I couldn’t.

General Thaddeus Ross had taken that chance from me.

So I would let the boys have their fun. I would let them mutilate him, bring him to the brink of death. I would stand back, arms crossed, and I would watch. I would allow them to do anything they wished to the man.

But so help me God, I would be the one to kill Thaddeus Ross.

…

Bucky Barnes

We sprang into action immediately.

We divided into two teams. One team was going to visit the homeless shelter in Queens, hopefully to find Peter—or at least see if his friend Jason knew anything—and the other was going to track down the bastard guards who had let Ross terrorize Peter.

I was, quite frankly, a nervous effing wreck. Peter could have been captured by now. We didn’t know exactly how long he’d been gone, but Tony had done a thermal sweep of the forest and found nothing but animals. If he were on the highway, he’d go straight to Queens.

We could only assume he’d gone to the homeless shelter already. He had a hell of a head start, but we’d find him. We had to find him.

The Quinjet touched down silently in the same secluded patch that it had last time we’d come here, just before the disaster on the Helicarrier. Sam, Steve, Bruce, and I filed out of the aircraft. I walked ahead of the others, eyes scanning the foliage for any sign of Peter, any clue that could lead me to him.

“Buck,” Steve said, jogging to catch up with me. “Bucky, I know you’re scared and you’re angry, but you need to calm down. You’re not going to find him like this. We need you sharp. We need you to be on top of your game.”

I knew he was right, but I shrugged him off and plowed ahead, glancing around fervently.

“Not now, Steve.”

Underneath the worry, beneath the incessant thoughts of Peter being scared and alone and in pain, I was livid. I was angry, and I was frustrated, and ashamed.

And while I was admitting it, I was hurt.

The tape must have been bad to make Peter flee as quickly as he did. The tape must have been horrible and cruel. It must have been Peter’s nightmare.
But I really thought he trusted us—trusted me—more than that.

I knew it was Ross’s fault. But now that it had sunk in, I thought…I thought it had been enough. I thought we had been enough.

And then I thought how Peter must have felt.

All alone in a room with a man he didn’t know, telling him things that hurt him beyond tolerance, things that he’d probably dreaded hearing from the start. Things, doubts, that he’d probably been quashing constantly over the past few months.

Emotional recovery was tricky, long, and very, very fragile. One incident—an incident just like that—could cause an entire relapse. He could be just like he was before we took him in—a broken kid with nowhere to go. I knew from first-hand experience.

And my hurt evaporated, because compared to his, it was nothing.

I took a deep breath through my nose, the fingers of my metal hand twitching—a nervous habit. I glanced around at the homeless residents staring curiously at us, looking for any sign of him.

Sam was talking to some children in one corner, asking them if they’d seen Peter—holding his picture up for them—and Bruce, who’d regained his strength from his brief Hulk-out, was talking with some older residents on the side. One of the older men pointed towards a secluded part of the camp, and Bruce smiled and nodded in thanks.

I jogged over to him, Steve on my heels. “He’s here,” Bruce said, eyes excited, scanning the entire expanse of the shelter. My heart rate picked up, hope entering my tight chest. “At least, he was a few hours ago. Some residents said he showed up really early this morning, and Jason took him to some tent reserved for wanderers to rest.”


“He gave directions,” Bruce said, not bothered by my tone. I knew he was worried too.

Sam joined us as we crossed the camp. “Nothing from the kids,” he said, disappointed. “Did we get a lead?”

“A tent for wanderers,” I said shortly, walking as fast as I possibly could without running, desperate to see my kid alive and well and whole. It came into sight a few seconds later, and I took off running, ignoring Steve’s warnings about traps and danger, because dammit, they didn’t matter right now.

I skidded to a halt and yanked back the flap, my heart dropping into my stomach.

His blanket.

That damn blanket that he’d been so attached to. It was lying, crumpled and useless, partially on the sleeping bag and on the grass. His backpack lay haphazard to the left, on its side, discarded. On the other side of the tent, a soda can with sticky, white powder lining the edges lay abandoned.

He’d been here.
We were too late.

Always too f***ing late.

Steve stopped short behind me, surveying the scene, a heavy breath leaving his lungs. “Maybe he’s wandering around somewhere,” he said, little hope in his voice. He left to join Bruce and Sam in their continued search, patting my shoulder as I crouched beside the backpack.

Even as they searched, I knew they wouldn’t find him.

The grass was flattened, bent to one side in a steady path, leading outside the tent. Then, it was flattened straight downward, like someone had been dragged out of the tent and dropped.

I shut my eyes against the terrifying visions those thoughts conjured up.

I gently gathered the blanket, folding it. He’d want it. When we found him.

When we found him, he’d want it.

I opened his backpack to shove it inside, but something caught my eye. Among all his belongings he’d quickly packed was a business card. Was it someone he would have contacted if he were in trouble?

*Officer Scott Travis. NYPD.* Below the card was forty dollars.

My kid wouldn’t steal. He’d be appalled at the very notion, damn his noble little soul. So it must have been a good Samaritan. But hell, they’d seen him, knew where he’d been and when.

He wasn’t here, and we didn’t know where he’d gone without his stuff. My gut told me he’d been taken, no matter how much my heart and mind fought the idea tooth and nail. I knew HYDRA. I knew what they were capable of.

The thought of facing them again terrified me. But for Peter, I’d face them ten thousand times.

And then I’d do it ten thousand more.

I fingered the card, staring at it with no small amount of contempt, and gently, determinedly, gathered Peter’s belongings.

We had a lead. No matter how small, we were one step closer to bringing our boy—*my kid*—home, for good.

…

**James “Rhodey” Rhodes**

Finding Ross’ guards had been surprisingly easy.

We’d never be able to get our hands on Ross. He was too important and too public. His guards, however…they were trained to be able to fade into the background without anyone noticing.

So when one of them went missing under mysterious circumstances, no one batted an eye.

The man we’d tailed—Kyle Randall—had been on security detail for the Secretary of
Veterans Affairs, and had been called away to investigate a mysterious object in one of the janitorial closets.

Little did he know that the mysterious object was an empty box, and more interesting threat was a certain redhead crouching on the top shelf.

I’d never say it out loud, but sometimes, Natasha terrified me.

This was one of those times.

I stood on the private side of one of our interrogation rooms, arms crossed, eyes drilling a hole in one of the men who’d let Peter be hurt and manipulated by that snake Ross. Clint stood beside me, lips pressed into a thin line, glaring much the same as I was.

I was terrified for Peter. I figured it was the same with everybody else—especially Bucky, God bless the man—but Peter meant a lot to me, too. He was smart and funny and kind. Just…a great kid, who deserved so much better than what the world threw at him. And we’d all tried to give him better, but then Ross came and screwed everything up.

So here we were, as we always were, trying to pick up the pieces. Trying to find Peter and bring him home.

Thor was somewhere around, trying to reach Asgard to find some magic to help pinpoint Peter’s location, but so far he wasn’t having much luck. Tony was in his lab, looking up everything on HYDRA he could find to make any connections. And Natasha was interrogating our prisoner.

“I will not ask you again,” she said, her green eyes hard as vibranium, boring into the man’s own. Randall, for his part, was handcuffed to the chair by the arms and legs, still in his dark suit—minus his suit jacket—with his sunglasses hanging from his pocket.

“I’ve done nothing but my job,” he said calmly, staring straight ahead, just like he’d been trained. “I accompanied Secretary Ross on an interview for his own protection. I’m not allowed to disclose anything that occurred or was said in the interview, for security purposes.”

Natasha didn’t move for a moment. When she did, she stood with graceful, controlled movements, sashaying around the side of the table.

But I knew the stance, because we knew each other well, all of us.

Her movements may have suggested flirtation, but we knew they promised answers. And if she couldn’t get answers, she’d take blood instead.

And from the look on Randall’s face, he was starting to get that idea, too.

She stopped behind his chair, placing her small, delicate hands on his shoulders, and leaned down, her lips right next to his ear. The mics Tony had set up in the room were good, though, and we heard every word. The man’s eye ticked, letting us know he was at least uncomfortable.

“There is a boy out there,” she whispered, both seductive and threatening, “that means very much to me. He is alone. He is scared.” She paused, digging her nails into the flesh of his shoulders, small pinpricks of red appearing on his white dress shirt. He barely, barely flinched. “And I am willing to do quite literally anything to get him back. Do we understand each other?”

Randall nodded slowly, though he still didn’t speak. His Adam’s Apple bobbed.
With a sharp jerk and an expression that could cut a diamond, Natasha hissed, “I asked you if we understood each other.”

“Yes,” Randall said quietly, though it came out a bit breathy. I saw sweat invading his temples.

Clint and I glanced at each other, the same thoughts going through our minds as he started telling Natasha about the interview.

Natasha Romanov was not a woman to be trifled with.

But that ship had sailed, and there would be blood.

... 

Peter Parker

I was so cold.

That was the first conscious thought I managed. It was so, so cold. It seeped into every pore like a living, writhing thing, invading every nerve, settling on top of every organ, every bone, every muscle. Barely conscious, freezing, I tried to flex my fingers, but the stiff extremities barely twitched.

From the concentration of the cold on my left side, I figured I was lying on it. Pain flared in my neck as I realized my head was lying against the cold floor at an awkward angle, my back twisted as well.

Blinking once, twice, I still couldn’t see. Finally I squinted long enough for my vision to clear slightly. I saw my hands on the ground in front of me, chained together with welded cuffs, barely shivering against the unforgiving concrete. Why did I have chains on my arms? My breath clouded in front of me, staccato puffs in time with my shaking form. I focused on the background, only to see rusty, iron bars blocking the entrance.

However little, feeling began to creep back into my limbs, a bit at a time. I managed to tug my arms in against my chest, conserving my body heat as I shivered, and I dragged my legs up a bit. Something resisted, a grating sound echoing around the cell as my legs moved.

Craning my neck, I looked down to see shackles on my ankles, bolted to the wall a couple feet behind me.

No.

No, no, nonono, oh God, oh my God what do I do—

Adrenaline filled my veins, forcing my stiff limbs into action. I wedged my arms under me, pushing myself up into a sitting position, my body twisted from the restraints on my arms. I dragged myself feebly to the wall, tugging at the bolts, pulling, heaving, but they wouldn’t break, they wouldn’t—

“It’s useless,” a voice said from the doorway, I whipped around, scrambling back from the door, putting as much distance between us as I possibly could. “It’s Vibranium. The Hulk wouldn’t be able to bend them.”

I swallowed thickly, unsure of whether or not I was supposed to respond. The shadows
crossing the door made it impossible to see who the figure was, but I was sure I’d heard them before.

Jason had been the one to drug me, but it wasn’t his voice. It was someone else. But I knew them, so who—

Everything stopped as it clicked into place.

“Ross?” I asked quietly, my voice hoarse and shaking as my body shivered violently pressed up against the cold stone wall.

He stepped into the room, approaching the bars, hands in his pockets. His stupid mustache was turned up in a smile, much more sinister than the amiable one he’d given me just hours (or had it been days?) ago, and he was wearing what looked like winter boots and a thermal jacket, a scarf around his neck. “You burned through the sedatives a lot faster than we thought you would. Looks like we’ll have to recalibrate some of our projected numbers for your abilities.”

I shifted, desperately trying to produce any sort of heat, but I couldn’t. My teeth chattered. “Wh-why d-did y-you…li…lie t-to m-m-me?”

Ross laughed. “All I had to do was make you doubt the Avengers. After that, HYDRA would have a much easier time getting their hands on you. But I’ve gotta say, I never expected you to run on your own. You made our job so much easier.”

“B-but…the t-t-tape—”

“Did you ever once think how we got such a sensitive tape?” Ross questioned, quirking an eyebrow, looking amused. “Didn’t cross your mind? I’m disappointed, they said you were smart. The tape wasn’t real, Peter. You’d be a fool to think it was. HYDRA’s technological advancements over the past couple of decades have been phenomenal. We’ve got a device that can flawlessly recreate voices—intonation, pitch, you name it. Our algorithms can even replicate speech patterns, adding in colloquial terms specific to the person. It’s very advanced, very specialized. The Avengers really do care about you.” He grinned, sadistic, terrifying…satisfied. “And you left them.”

I didn’t even know what emotions were supposed to come into play at this point.

I was feeling so many things. I was feeling betrayed and terrified, guilty, angry and afraid, and so, so cold.

“And J-Jason?” I asked, anger, betrayal, hatred, hurt bubbling to the surface. I wanted to say more, but I could barely keep myself upright. I was still feeling the effects of the sedative, and the cold was sapping any strength I had left.

“Oh, he’s one of HYDRA’s best agents,” Ross said, a gleam in his eye. “I’m very proud of him.”

So Ross was HYDRA. The slimy bastard was one of them.

I should have known.

“Y-you c-c-care…so much f-for o-o-one age…agent?” I asked bitterly, drawing my knees closer to my chest, trying vainly to conserve any warmth left, only for the bitter cold to viciously sap it away.
Ross smirked. “As much as any father cares for his son.”

What?

“All right, son,” Jason’s voice drifted in through the doorway where he appeared, dressed similarly to Ross, in thermal clothing. “I wanted to tell him.”

“Sorry,” Ross said, smiling, though he didn’t sound too terribly apologetic.

I couldn’t wrap my mind around what had just transpired. There had been…absolutely no indication whatsoever. How…how did they…?

“Well, I guess I should make it official,” Jason said, piercing eyes locking onto me, a sick grin twisting his face as I shivered in the corner of my cold cell, staring at them wide-eyed, disbelieving, afraid, guilty. Scared. Betrayed. Alone. “My name is Thaddeus Jason Ross, the second. And I’m going to really, really enjoy watching you scream.”

A/N: I know. I know. I’m a horrible human being. ALSO may be kind of cliché, but…I figured you wouldn’t see that coming.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! Please leave a comment if you want!
Officer Scott Travis

Damn paperwork to hell.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose to give my blurring eyes a bit of a break. The pen in my hand twirled between my fingers anxiously, the stack of papers littered on the desk mocking me as the clock to my left blinked 5:23.

Damn paperwork. Damn overtime.

I refocused my efforts on the papers in front of me, though my mind wandered. I couldn’t stop thinking of the boy I’d met—Peter had been his name. He’d seemed good, but he’d obviously been emotionally unstable.

He’d mentioned homeless shelters, and it hadn’t seemed like he’d had anyone to call. My job would have been to park him in the back of my squad car and hand him over to CPS, but...the look in his eyes had steered me in a different direction. I could get fired for it. I had a family of my own—a beautiful wife and a little girl and a baby boy. This job barely scraped together enough to support us, and I’d jeopardized it over a young kid I didn’t know.

But there had been a feeling in my gut. I knew if I’d taken him in, if I’d put his name in the system, there would have been consequences. I was an officer; I could tell when somebody was hiding.

A commotion arose to my left, and I spared a glance to see a couple of officers trying to reason with a very angry man. It was fairly warm, but he was wearing a coat and gloves, and his hair was longer than most, falling past his shoulders. I sighed, spinning back to face my ‘mountain of doom’, as my daughter Eliza liked to call it. I’d help out if he became violent.

I’d barely even touched the pen to the paper before a hand slammed down onto the desk in front of me, entirely covered in a heavy coat and a thick glove, but making a distinctly solid metallic ringing sound that echoed throughout the now-silent room.

Though I’d jumped nearly out of my skin when it happened, I looked up slowly, a little surprised anyone would be so aggressive when I hadn’t even met them. If it had been one of the perps I’d arrested, I wouldn’t be so caught off guard.

“I need to speak with you privately,” the man said, his eyes dark, determined.

I swallowed thickly, his tone making me nervous for a peaceful resolution. “Sir, you can’t just barge in here and demand hearings with officers. That’s not how it works. You can talk to our receptionist and schedule an appointment—”

“The kid I’m looking for doesn’t have time for your damn schedule,” he growled, glancing back at a couple of people who had wandered in behind him.

My jaw dropped.
I recognized them all as—as the Avengers. Four of Earth’s Mightiest Heroes were sauntering into my little precinct in Brooklyn, looking like somebody had just died. Sam Wilson, Bruce Banner, Steve Rogers, and now that I recognized him in context, Bucky Barnes were all staring at me with something I didn’t want to mess with.

The officers surrounding me, men and women I’d worked with for years, looked just as stunned as I did.

I opened my mouth to reply—what I was going to say was still a mystery—when Steve Rogers came up and placed a hand on Barnes’ shoulder.

“Calm down, Buck,” he said quietly, glancing to me. “He hasn’t done anything that we know of.”

This was looking less and less like a peaceful resolution.

Barnes fisted his hands, glaring at me, and turned away, walking back to where Wilson and Banner were hovering anxiously. Steve Rogers turned to me with a polite smile, though the strain was obvious. “Officer Travis. We’d like to speak with you in private, please.”

Every person in the room knew it wasn’t a request.

Swallowing thickly, I stood, hand twitching for my service weapon at my belt, and followed Captain America numbly though the doors. Other officers stared as we passed them, my partner Collins shooting me a worried look as I exited the doors.

I didn’t know what could have possibly happened to make them drag me from my work for a private meeting, but it wasn’t anything good.

…

Tony Stark

Another One Bites the Dust by Queen started blasting through my speakers just as another algorithm failed. Any other day, I would have found it a hilarious coincidence.

Today, I just wanted the effing systems to work.

Absently, I downed the dregs of my coffee, too engrossed in my current project to refill it. Rhodey, Clint, and Natasha were still interrogating Ross’ bodyguard, while I sat in my lab, trying desperately to find a certain kid.

Even if I was a genius, New York City had so many damn cameras.

“FRIDAY, tell me you’ve got something,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose and leaning so far back in my chair I almost tipped over backwards.

“Nothing yet, boss,” she stated, sounding remorseful.

But that wasn’t right, because she was an AI. Artificial Intelligence. And no matter how good I was, I wasn’t to the point of creating emotions yet. Artificial sass, sure. I’d gone overboard with that, I’ll be the first to admit it. But emotions? Those were the stupid little sippy cups of apple juice I didn’t want to spill, because I didn’t like messes.

Now, I wish I had, because if FRIDAY had even one shred of empathy, maybe Peter
wouldn’t be alone on the streets right about now.

I dragged a hand down my face and stared at the blurring letters and numbers, lines and lines of code snaking down the right screen as the holographic representations on New York’s CCTV system filtered through millions of bustling people, searching for a particular babyface.

“Turn the music off,” I sighed, the noise muffled.

Silence engulfed the room.

I bent forward, elbows on my knees, head heavy in my hands, shoulders sagging. Steve had called just a little while ago. He’d given us an update, one no one wanted to hear.

HYDRA probably had Peter.

They didn’t know for sure, but they found Peter’s stuff, but no Peter. Signs of a struggle. Traces of a paralytic. Bruce had analyzed it on the Quinjet’s mini forensic lab and concluded that it would have been strong enough to knock Peter out for a few hours even with his ridiculous metabolism.

God, my gut was rolling.

I knew captivity. I knew torture, and constant fear, and loneliness. Aside from Yinsen, no one had been in that cave that cared about whether I lived or died. I knew despair.

It killed me to know that those were probably the exact things Peter was feeling.

“Boss,” FRIDAY said, her accented voice thick in the silence.

“Not now,” I said, turning back to the code. “I’ve gotta find a teeny-bopper.”

“Boss, I think—”

“Is it an update on Peter’s location?”

“Not directly, but boss—”

“FRIDAY, I swear, baby girl, Daddy’s not in the mood. I’ll give you to a nursing home as a Smart TV. Don’t think I won’t.”

“Boss, I really—”

“FRIDAY—”

“Boss, SHUT UP.”

Damn. Hot damn.

Apparently, Pepper had been giving FRIDAY lessons without my knowledge, because I shut up real quick.

“Do you remember the laptop from the HYDRA agents who broke into the compound on Christmas Eve?” She asked, sounding miffed, but satisfied.

Struggling through the shock of being silenced by my own creation, I numbly muttered an affirmative.
“After several months of trying several theoretical specialized algorithms, I’ve gained access.”

“You what?” I yelled, racing to the biometric safe across the room and scanning my cornea, fingerprint, and palm before it opened with a hiss. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

I will swear to the day I die FRIDAY rolled her eyes.

…

Peter Parker

I thought I would eventually get used to the cold.

I didn’t.

The numbness spread. My fingers, probably my toes as well, were pale shades of blue, like the color of the sky in summer. I shivered, curled in the tightest ball I could physically make, the freezing wall pressed against my back doing nothing to help. My short sleeves and my jeans did little to protect me. Thankfully, they’d left me with my shoes and socks, so at least my feet had some insulation.

My breath clouded in front of me. I wanted to tuck my hands under my armpits, but the awkward chains and cuffs prevented me. Instead, I tucked my hands as close to my stomach as I could, my chained ankles pressed tightly together, in a little ball against the wall.


I could have had that. I could have had all the jackets and gloves and blankets I wanted. I could have had the warmth of a fireplace and hot chocolate and soup. I could have had a warm spot in my lap where Stella lay curled, and a warm, solid body pressed against my side. An arm around my shoulders, domestic chatter in the background as I dozed, warm and safe and content.

Instead, I was here, in a freezing, dark, lonely dungeon, chained up like an animal.

They will hunt you down, Peter, like the animal you are.

I started as Emmanuel Jaeger’s words rang through my head, so hauntingly similar to my own thoughts. My mind flashed back to our only conversation, his words sending tremors through my already shuddering frame, the urge to sob growing with every word I remembered.

I will tell you my name, Peter, so that when you are reduced to a sad heap of what once was human, when you are at your very lowest, you may think of my name and remember that I had a hand in putting you there. Emmanuel. My name is Emmanuel Jaeger.

And here I was.

And I remembered his name.

The thought sent shivers through my body that had nothing to do with the cold.

The heavy door at the far end of the room opened, the shadows from the meager lighting in the room swallowing the doorway as Jason stepped through.

He’d been my first visitor since he’d revealed his heritage to me. After that, Ross 1 and
Ross 2 had leered at me through the bars some more and then departed. I couldn’t tell how long had passed since then. I’d tried to sleep, but the bitter cold wouldn’t let me.

He walked in slowly, purposefully, coming to a stop just in front of the bars, his gloved hands hidden in his pockets. He stared at me, eyes blazing, lips curled in a vicious sneer I could never have imagined on him. I shuddered under his glare, but I didn’t give him the satisfaction of glancing away. I stared back, my anger the only warmth within me.

His lips curled upward at my defiance. “You always were a stubborn little shit, weren’t you?”

I didn’t reply, but I didn’t back down.

He scoffed. “You think you’re impressive? You’re nothing, Pete. Hate to break it to you.”

“D-d-don’t…c-c-call m-me P-P-Pete,” I managed, shifting. That was Tony’s name. Nobody else’s.

He raised an eyebrow. “Aw. That’s cute. You think they still care.”

I narrowed my eyes. I wasn’t falling for that. Not again. “F-fool m-me once.”

He smirked, sitting himself down in front of the bars, getting comfortable. “I guess the same trick won’t work twice, huh? Worth a shot, at least.” He eyed me, looking satisfied. “How are your accommodations, hm? I talked to my dad, made sure you got the five-star suite.”

“L-little ch-chilly,” I said, glancing at the rusty iron bars. I knew I was digging a bigger hole, but he was pissing me off. “S-sucky v-view. Lack…l-luster s-s-service.”

Surprisingly enough, he grinned. “You’re still sarcastic as ever, hm? I can change that, Peter. I can change that very, very quickly. I can make sure you never want to speak again.”

I didn’t say anything. My heart, though slow from the frigid temperature, picked up.

“Oh, now you’re quiet,” he smirked, leaning back on his hands. “We’re getting somewhere.”

“What d-d-did I d-do?” I asked, turning to gaze at him, not quite able to mask the hurt on my face. When I thought about his actions, how he’d betrayed me and dragged me here, made me feel safe only to be my ultimate captor, I was angry. But when I thought about how he’d treated me, how he’d taken me in and given me a sleeping bag when I had no bed, how he’d given me food and water when I was starving and penniless, how he’d given me a friend when I had nobody left, I was…confused. Confused, and hurt. Hurt didn’t do this feeling justice. Betrayal came close, but…not close enough.

His betrayal hurt me more than the Avengers’ had, when I thought the tape was true. Because they’d taken me in and gotten close to me, originally, because I had something they needed. And I knew that, and I accepted it.

Jason…I thought he’d taken me in because he was…good. Because he knew that I was fourteen and alone.

But he’d wanted something from me, too. And now he had it. But…it had felt real. When he worried about me walking to another camp. How he offered me his own food, when I ran out. How he gave me his last water bottle before I departed. How he gave me his own sleeping bag,
once, on a particularly bitter night.

Rationally, I knew Jason was only playing a part, but...I didn’t know...why. He’d known my location, been with me when I’d been asleep and vulnerable, countless times. For months. Why had he just taken me now? Why had he waited?

“What did you do to make me turn you over?” He asked, sounding incredulous. “I never cared, Peter. I was playing a part. You’ve gotta know that by now.”

“B-b-but...w-we...d-d-didn’t know eachoth-th-ther before....wh-why d-do you hat-t-te m-me so m-much?”

And that was another question ringing in my mind, because...well, he looked at me like...like he wanted to kill me. And he said he wanted me to scream and suffer and a bunch of other dark thoughts, but...I couldn’t remember anything I’d ever said, or done, to make him hate me so much.

His lips curled in a sneer, but where his previous ones had been amused, satisfied, haughty, this one was angry. It was furious. “Because it was supposed to be me.”

I didn’t speak, a particularly violent tremor wracking my body, but he went on without my prompting him.

“You don’t know how it feels, Peter,” he said bitterly, staring at the wall to his side. “I’m a bastard child. I love my father, but my mother wanted absolutely nothing to do with me. She was one of my father’s secretaries. It was a big affair, but my dad shut down the press. Paid them all off. Apparently, my mother was a weak woman, because she blamed everything on my father. Said it was all his fault, that he’d forced himself on her, but she’d wanted it. My father destroyed her.”

He got a slight smile on his face, as if remembering the events, though he’d only been a child. “She committed suicide when I was one and a half years old. A weak, stupid woman who didn’t know what a gift she’d been given. I was going to be a king. She could have lived the life she’d always dreamed of if only she’d followed my father’s plans.

“But she was selfish, and wanted me to have a ‘normal’ life, away from my father’s work—government and other,” he added with a smirk. “She tried gaining custody, but he absolutely destroyed her in the courts. He showed me the videos; God, it was a beautiful thing.” He said whimsically, leaning back, his face adopting an almost dreamy quality. “And so my father took me in a raised me. He hid it from the press—made my sister Betty swear never to speak of me to anyone—and I was raised within HYDRA, by some of the finest men and women of our generation.

“I’m the perfect soldier. I follow orders, I’m a good leader, I’m a trained martial artist, I’m level-headed, and I can play any part I choose, as you know now. So when I was twelve years old, he sat me down and told me that some of HYDRA’s finest scientists had created an alternate version of the super soldier serum—those scientists being your parents. He asked me if I wanted to be better. Obviously, I said yes, and he promised that I would be the first one to receive the serum. I would be the first human test subject.”

Eyes blazing, he turned to me, a look of absolute hatred marring his features. “And you took that away from me.” He shook his head angrily, his hands tightening to fists at his sides. “Those powers you can’t even use yet, those glorious abilities you acquired by sheer accident, should have been mine.”

I stared at him through the bars. I wasn’t really able to articulate how pissed off I was, because according to just his account, I was fifteen years old, alone, cold, afraid, in chains behind
“You’re…y-you’re t-t-telling me…th-this shit a-all h-h-happened b-because y-you’re b-b-being p-petty?”

Obviously, that wasn’t the right thing to say. He stood abruptly, and I flinched at his sudden movements, but he couldn’t get to me through the bars. “I’m not being petty, Peter. You received the closest thing to Captain America’s serum in seventy years, and I’ve spent nine years of my life trying to get it back. That’s not being petty. That’s fighting for what’s mine.” He paused, still angry, but more thoughtful than he had been. “I suppose I’m also angry with your parents. It was their fault, after all, but they’re dead. And since I didn’t get to kill them, I’m going to make sure I get to kill you.”

I flinched at his words, his intense gaze forcing my eyes down as I swallowed thickly. I hated myself for shrinking under his stare, but I knew that he was absolutely capable of killing me. He had the means and all the opportunity he could ask for. I knew it was a definite possibility, and it scared me to think I was so vulnerable.

I needed them. I needed them, and I needed Bucky.

But I’d left them.

“Your parents knew it was going to me; it’s part of the reason why they stopped their research,” he continued, unaware of my internal distress. “Criminal organization, unethical human testing, and all that other bullshit the media has made up to demonize us. They knew it would go to me if they left it, but SHIELD had also been trying to use it for ‘good,’ whatever the hell that means, for decades. So they couldn’t get rid of it.” He glanced at me, smiling. “How does it feel to be option 3?”

“It s-sucks,” I spat, curling tighter into myself. “I d-didn’t w-want this.”

“No, but you got it,” he said, nonchalantly, waving a hand through the air. “So now you’re going to pay for it.”

He’d said that multiple times now, so I tried steering the conversation in another direction. “Wh-why did you w-wait?” I asked, still confused as to why he’d known my relative location for over a year and I’d just been captured.

“Why did you wait to bring you in?” He asked, smirking again. God, I was starting to hate his facial expressions. They were so…not Jason. “This was the first mission I got to be in charge of. An exam, if you will. I was told to bring you in within eighteen months, whatever means necessary. My first day was the day your lovely aunt and uncle were brutally murdered in your home.” He grinned straight at me, my body trembling, eyes stinging, as the gruesome memory resurfaced. “I saw the pictures. My agents did wonderfully.”

“You’re s-sick,” I spat at him, turning away, trying desperately not to cry in front of this maniac.

“Maybe,” he conceded, looking thoughtful. “Some people did say I’ve always been a bit off. But I get things done, don’t I?”

I didn’t justify that with an answer. Shrugging, he continued. I stared at the cold wall to my right, listening, avoiding looking his threatening frame. “Anyways. My initial plan was to pass as a seventeen-year-old and join you in foster care, but you threw that plan out the window when you
raw away. Thanks for that, by the way. I had to retract and revise my entire action plan because of your stunt."

I scoffed, shuffling my feet, pins and needles prickling along the numb extremities as some blood flow returned to them. “S-so sorry f-f-for the inconvenience,” I muttered.

He shot me a dark look. “I dare you to make another comment, Peter. I dare you. One phone call, I’ll have you on an operating table and they’ll eviscerate you alive. You can watch as the lift your intestines from your body, link by link.”

I shut up.

He smiled. “Thank you. As I was saying, I revised my plan. I followed you around, watched your pattern of staying in different homeless shelters. I must say, it was smart of you to hop between them. An amateur would have had a difficult time catching you, but I’m not an amateur. I figured you’d stick close to Queens at first—familiarity and all that—so I picked one and got all the residents comfortable with me. I’m charming like that. By the time you showed up, they were all singing my praises. And then you fell for it, too.” He smiled in my direction. “HYDRA always wants willing test subjects and soldiers. They’re more than willing to take them by force—as you can see—but somebody willing to do whatever we ask because they want to? Always a much easier process.

“So I had eighteen months to get you to trust me. To come back with me, and do our work of your own free will.” His grin fell away, melting back into that disgusting look. “I had you, too. I can see it on your face. You trusted me, and I almost had you. Then the Avengers ruined the months of work I put in, like they always do.” He shivered in rage, staring at a point in space, his pupils blown wide in his anger. “I stuck around. Thought maybe I could swing you back to our side after my father completed his step of the process—planting doubt in your mind.”

His grin returned, wiping out all former traces of anger or hatred, replacing it with a crazed glee. The mood swing was so sudden, so unexpected, I swear I got whiplash. “Don’t you just love doubt?” He waited for me to answer, but I didn’t. “I love it. It’s such an elegant way to tear down a world. I saw it in you. Just one little tiny shred of doubt was enough to make you turn your back on nine people who arguably love you like they love their own family.”

I jerked at his words, not quite able to keep the shame from leaking into my expression. I curled tighter into myself, my gut dropping as I thought of how they must have felt at my letter. Did they feel like I had? Did they have to experience the same gut-wrenching, aching betrayal that I did? God, did I really put them through that, when all they’d done was be there for me and take me in and care for me and love me?

I didn’t deserve them. I wanted them, God, I wanted them, but I didn’t deserve them, because if I’d put them through the same unspeakable pain I’d suffered through…I didn’t know how they could stand me. It gave me hope that they’d hated Ross from the start, but…

Doubt.

An elegant way to tear down a whole world.

I was doubting them, doubting their love for me, and God, it was tearing my world to shreds.
Jason plowed on. “Anyways. Once you came to me, I knew it was time to bring you in. I wish I’d had a bit more time, because I really think I could’ve recruited you the old-fashioned way, but the Avengers were bound to come for you. I had to get you to our base as soon as possible.”

He spread his arms wide, looking around himself with pride and satisfaction, and then back to me. His lips were curled. “And here we are.”

“Perfect timing,” a voice said from the doorway. I whipped my head around to the voice, startled. I hadn’t thought anyone else was in here. Ross stood there, in his winter attire, looking smug. “You always were a wonderful orator, Jason. And punctual, too—it’s time for Peter’s first tests.”

My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach. The shaking, which had abated a bit as I was distracted by Jason’s story, starting violently. My body shook.

Comprehensive thoughts were gone. I was left with nothing but a blank slate of terror ringing through my mind, word after word after thought after image after scenario flying through my mind at top speed, bringing me to the point of nausea.

Jason’s face lit up. He looked to me and grinned. “Let’s get started, then, Peter. We’ll see how great your parents’ gift to you really was.”

Bucky, please, please, please I need you to find me oh God I need you to get here—

But as two guards entered and unshackled my feet, lifting me roughly and eventually dragging me down the hallway, as I was too weak to walk on my own, I was met with nothing but blank looks and terror and silence.

I almost started dry-heaving, as the nausea increased but there was nothing in my stomach to bring up, but I swallowed it down. I was close to tears, and I wasn’t going to make it worse by puking in front of my enemies. No matter how terrified I was, I didn’t want to sink any lower than I already had in front of the Rosses.

They dragged me through sterile white hallways, where the air turned much warmer. Pins and needles danced agonizingly through my muscles, and I winced as my foot bumped over a dent in the floor as the passive guards dragged me by the arms.

We finally came to an infirmary-like room, maybe the size of the Compound’s gym, but with a lower ceiling. There was sterile white beds lined up against two opposite walls, standard medical equipment hovering over each one. The far wall was filled with charts and doors, some of which were obviously offices. A set of double doors led to what I assumed was another hallway.

The beds were all unoccupied, and the entire room was a ghost town. In the deep state of shock and terror, my blank, rubbery mind half expected to see a tumbleweed roll through. The guards dragged me through the room to the menacing double doors, Ross 1 and Ross 2 hot on our heels.

They opened to another white hallway. My heart was beating out of my chest, my palms sweating, my neck clammy with terror. I struggled to get my feet under me as they dragged me, eventually gaining enough strength—through sheer willpower and stubbornness—to stumble along between them. Their pace didn’t change, and I had a hard time keeping up.

The silence, the lack of taunting or jeering or amusement, was more terrifying than anything. Jason had made a point to embarrass me, to subordinate me, whenever he had the chance, but he was quiet now.
I knew he was serious. This was serious. This was _happening._

We approached a final door. One guard opened it, and they threw me into the room unceremoniously before I had a chance to look around. Instinctively I tucked my head, my elbow and the right side of my body taking the brunt of the impact. I grunted as I hit to floor, pain lancing through my side and arm. Dizzily, I pushed myself up.

My throat closed. My body tingled, my breaths stopped, my heart pounded.

Several people in scrubs bustled around a large operating room, the florescent lights above us blinding and invasive. Two small carts were stashed to the side, lined with rows of gleaming silver surgical tools. Monitors of every kind lay strategically around the center. In the center was a shiny metal surface, maybe six feet long and three or four feet wide.

There were cuffs attached to the table. Six of them. Two at the feet, two at the hands, one at the waist, one at the neck.

Oh God.

Oh _God._

_God, save me,_ I thought desperately, unable to move, the heavy shackles at my wrists clanking in time with my shaking hands. _Bucky, please, I need you here. Tony, Steve, Bruce, Clint, Rhodey, Tasha, Sam, Thor, please, help me, oh God, help me—_

But there was no one here to help me.

There was no one.

I was alone.

Alone.

…

**Officer Scott Travis**

“This is about _Peter_?” I asked incredulously, staring at the four solemn men in front of me. I won’t say I wasn’t intimidated, but we were in my own precinct, for Pete’s sake (A/N: see what I did there? ;) I’m hilarious okay on with the story).

“Yes,” Steve Rogers said, sitting across from me. He was sitting pin straight, very no-nonsense as he explained the situation. Sam Wilson sat to his right, arms crossed, rigid in his chair. Bruce Banner leaned against the wall on Wilson’s side, looking nervous. The man was fiddling mindlessly with his glasses. Finally, Bucky Barnes was standing rigidly to Steve Rogers’ left, arms crossed, scowling. His eyes were darting impatiently around the room, and his posture was coiled tight.

“He’s been under our care for the past few months,” Rogers said effortlessly, his words deep and authoritative. “We found his belongings. In his backpack was your business card, so we wanted to see if you had any additional information. He’s missing, as of a couple hours ago.”

My heart fluttered at those words, worry sparking in my gut. “The kid’s missing?”

“Yes.”
I leaned back, rubbing my jaw, staring at the floor. “Dammit. I knew I should have brought him in.”

“So you had contact with him?” Banner broke in, pushing away from the wall. “When and where was this?”

“Uh…Central Park. He was sitting in a tree. It was getting dark, so I asked him to come down; it was… I don’t know, around 7:00 last night, I think. He looked… well, upset is an, understatement, but he said there wasn’t anyone to call.”

Barnes flinched and growled low in his throat, glancing at the wall opposite him. I pretended not to notice.

Steve sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “So you have no new information to give us?”

“He said he was going to find a friend in a homeless camp, if that helps,” I said hesitantly, not wanting to piss off Captain America. “In Queens.”

“We know. We found his stuff there,” Wilson cut in. “And signs of a struggle.”

I sighed, taking in the information slowly. I dealt with missing persons cases more often than I’d like to admit. “Who’s the prime suspect?”

“Unfortunately, that’s classified SHIELD information,” Rogers said, standing, preparing to leave. “Thank you for your time, Officer Travis. Please contact us at this number—” he handed me a card, which I took— “if anything else comes to mind.”

“Wait, that’s it?” I said, standing as the four of them prepared to leave. “You can’t just give me that then leave. I tried to help this kid. I can’t just walk away from it.”

“But you could let him walk away?” Barnes growled, taking a threatening step forwards. Rogers stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

I flinched, but stood tall, defending my position. “He looked like he was being… chased, almost. I knew if I tried to bring him in he’d run again and probably just call more attention to himself. I did what I thought would be safest for him.”

“And we appreciate it,” Banner smoothly interjected, trying to pacify the situation. “I’m sorry, I know it’s not an ideal situation. We just don’t have time to keep you informed.”

As Rogers ushered Barnes out the door, I made one last attempt. “What if you partnered with the NYPD, and I was your liaison?”

Banner and Wilson stopped, looking back at me incredulously. “What?”

“This seems like a big deal,” I said, crossing my arms, gaining confidence as the idea formed. “A random kid wouldn’t be in your care for no reason, so he’s… what, security threat? National secret? A big deal. You need help finding him, but SHIELD isn’t centered here. They’re international. NYPD knows these streets inside and out. We have statistics, homeless outreach shelters looking for witnesses and victims of hundreds of crimes as we speak, and resources you may not even know you need. Partner with us to find this kid. I’ll talk to my colleagues, form a volunteer task force. We’ll get him home safe.”

“And what would you be getting from this?” Wilson asked, dubiously glancing at Banner.
I gave him a serious look. “I’d be getting peace of mind that a good kid is safe with good people. I’m a cop, Wilson. You may be doing large-scale heroics, but down here in the world, we don’t need selfish reasons to do good things. I want to do this because that kid deserves a home and a family, and I’m hoping he can get that one day.”

Banner gave me an approving smile, and left the room, saying, “I’ll get Bucky and Steve back in here and we can talk logistics.”

Wilson shook his head, smiling slightly, and said, “You’ve got grit, Travis. You’re right.” He stuck his hand out, and I shook it firmly. “I look forward to working with you.”

I shook his hand then broke the hold, standing straight, determination in the pit of my stomach. “Let’s get this kid home.”

I decided not to think about how my wife was going to murder me for picking up more overtime.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much! Leave a comment if you have a sec!
Tony Stark

If I weren’t a dedicated Avenger with a teenager to find and revenge to execute, I would join HYDRA just for their beautiful tech.

It was a work of art. The flawless lines of programming protected the files of information behind a nearly impenetrable wall of failsafes. Each character, each letter, was so articulately, carefully inserted into the scrolling lines of text. This was a masterpiece. If I had two less IQ points, it would be impossible for me to breach the first firewall.

Luckily for us, I’m Tony Stark.

FRIDAY had tried every combination of firewall hacks that I’d developed over the course of my life—which was a freaking lot—and none of them had made a dent. So, over the past couple of months, she’d been working with a specialized program I’d given her to analyze patterns of exit and entry into the program. She observed, watched, waited. And finally, like the beautiful AI I created her to be, she struck with no mercy.

That is to say, we couldn’t get in through normal means, so she piggybacked her way in through another server.

So here I was, staring at hundreds of classified files on HYDRA’s elite. I scrolled through in awe, quickly downloading the priceless information in front of me.

Their motto was something like “cut off the head, and two more will grow back.” Supposedly, that made them unkillable (unless you struck straight at the body, because, you know, anatomy).

Well, I’d just found the body.


I kept scrolling. I was just about to tear myself away to contact SHIELD and share the goods when something caught my eye.

A face.

A familiar face.

“Son of a bitch,” I breathed, my hand shaking as I tapped the picture, enlarging it and pulling up the attached personnel file, flicking it over to the big screen on the wall. I stared, mouth open, unable to move.

Thaddeus freaking Ross.
The file on him was extensive, detailing his exploits for the terrorist organization and commending him on his brilliant work for HYDRA’s cause. He was a leader. He was a leader of HYDRA, and he was in charge of the entire United States Defense System.

I knew, consciously, that I should be sending all of this to SHIELD. Calling Cap. Calling everybody. Hell, calling the President.

But I couldn’t stop reading. This was a man that was…annoying, sure, and we’d all hated his guts from the beginning. But even with my genius, even being able to read people, I never would have guessed—

Something caught my eye, and my reading stuttered to a halt.

He had a daughter. Bettie Ross. I knew that, because a tipsy Bruce had spilled that entire catastrophe to us all after a night of steady drinking.

_Biological Children_

_Elizabeth “Bettie” Julia Ross. Currently estranged. Threat level: Minimal._

Some additional information, standard facts you’d find in any file, rested below.

That didn’t surprise me.

But nowhere, in any press conference, in any personal file or page or document, did he ever have a son.

_Additionally: Thaddeus Jason Ross II. Active HYDRA agent, clearance level 11. See additional personnel file._

My gut rolling, I tapped the hyperlink, the screen shifting and melding into a separate file. When the picture cleared, revealing the smiling young man with light hair and dark, crazed eyes, my heart dropped through the floor.

Jason.

Peter’s homeless friend. Peter’s homeless friend Jason.

_Thaddeus Jason Ross II._

He’d been playing Peter—playing us—from day one.

Shakily, my eyes never leaving the twisted face in front of me, I called Steve.

_“Hello?”_ He said, sounding weary, but hopeful. _“Tony? Do you have something?”_

_“Oh, I’ve got something, alright,”_ I managed, my grip tightening on the phone, my nerves on fire as I thought of Peter. He didn’t need any more betrayal. And yet, here it was. _“But it’s nothing good, Cap.”_

…

_Clint Barton_
My children were never going outside again.

Peter was fantastic and I loved him to death, but he wasn’t my biological child. If I felt this bad when something happened to him, I couldn’t even consider the feelings of seeing my own child hurt. Hell, I felt nauseous every time their skinned their knees.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, Rhodey and Natasha clanking in the kitchen. No one wanted to take a break long enough to eat, but logically, we knew we had to. When we went to get our boy back, we couldn’t afford to make stupid mistakes because we were hungry.

I fished out my phone and dialed Laura; I hadn’t talked to her in a few days with everything going on, and the new information from Natasha’s conversation with Ross’ guard still had me reeling.

Ross.

I grit my teeth just thinking the name, the blood pumping through my veins igniting every nerve with fiery hatred so strong I’m surprised I didn’t burst into flames.

The bastard was HYDRA.

And as much as I didn’t want to believe it, it made complete and total sense.

“Hey, honey,” Laura said, her voice instantly soothing my nerves a bit. “How are you? I haven’t heard from you in a couple of days.”

After a pause, deliberately ignoring her question, I swallowed thickly. “How are the kids, Laura?”

She noticed, but she didn’t address it right away. “They’re fine, Clint. Lila made an A on her Math test. Cooper misses you playing catch with him, but he’s practicing baseball a lot on his own; he’s getting pretty good. Nathaniel is still a babbling little mess.”

Laura’s descriptions eased my mind a bit, but the gnawing tension at the thought of Peter being alone and afraid in a HYDRA base chased the peace away. “Laura, Peter’s gone.”

Laura paused, silence coming from the other line. “Peter? The boy from Thanksgiving?” Her voice was strained with the worry only a parent can understand.

“Yeah,” I said, my voice cracking despite myself. “You know how much we love that kid, Laura. General Ross…the, the Secretary of Defense, honey…he’s HYDRA. Tony just found out. He’s been HYDRA this whole time, and…and he has Peter.”

Laura inhaled sharply, and I heard a pot clank audibly through the phone as she hurried from the kitchen, presumably to our room. “What do you mean, he has Peter?”

“He took him,” I said, thinking of Ross and his kid—Jason. “His son tricked him into trusting him, and took him to HYDRA. He—oh, God, Laura. He made Peter think we hated him. That we didn’t love him, we never loved him, that we were just using him. And I think Peter believed him. The things he told Peter…” I shuddered, thinking about how Peter must have felt. “Laura, he convinced him that I hated him just because he made me miss Lila’s birthday. Because he was sick and unresponsive. I never got a chance to tell him that she wasn’t too upset. I never told him that I was going to go home later and make it up to her; I let him assume I’d just forgotten her for him, simply because I wanted to get my mission completed.”
“Oh, God, Clint,” she said, the words muffled, like she’d put her hand over her mouth in shock. “Oh, God, baby. I’m so sorry. You’re looking for him, though. Right? You’re going to get him back.”

“Of course we’re going to get him back,” I almost snapped, seething at the thought of leaving him there. “Sorry. But…we’re looking, Laura, but…it’s slow going. They’ve had him for hours, and hours…almost a day now. We have no idea where they are, or what they’re doing to him…”

“He’s going to be okay,” Laura said with such surety, such conviction almost believed her. “He’s going to be fine, Clint.”

“How do you know?” I almost whispered, head bowed, fists clenched.

“Because he took the wrong boy,” she said with the fire in her voice that made me love her even more.

Natasha glided silently into the room, placing a bowl of soup in front of me. Her face was completely closed off, not a single muscle giving away any emotion. She was a spy, not a robot. I knew all her faces.

This was the face she wore before a murder. Not an assassination, not an assignment. A premeditated, vengeful murder.

I hadn’t seen it in years.

“Thank you, love,” I said quietly into the phone, giving Nat a small, weary smile. She didn’t return it, but she placed her hand softly on my shoulder and squeezed in comfort.

“I love you,” Laura said, sounding more composed. “I have to finish dinner for the kids. You call me with every shred of news you get, okay? Bring that kid home.”

I smiled when she said “home.” “I will.”

“I know you will,” she said, her voice filled with love I didn’t deserve. “Get going, Hawkeye.”

I hung up, rubbing my forehead, reaching for the soup. “Did you make this, Nat?”

She nodded, turning away. Her red curls bounced as she made her way to the kitchen.

“Great. Guess I’m getting food poisoning.”

I barely ducked in time to dodge the kitchen knife she threw at me. And if Tony had to buy a new chair when this was all over…stuff happens.

…

**Peter Parker**

They’d cut into me.

I lay on the cold, hard ground, my breath coming in gasps, the tears almost frozen on my face. I held my left arm protectively against my stomach, the puddle of blood growing cold,
soaking into my shirt and jeans. They’d cut a ruthless, straight line down my arm, elbow to wrist. They’d peeled the skin back, pinned it down, and dug around.

Something about my anatomy. Harvesting cells from muscle, bone, tissue, and skin.

It hurt.

I couldn’t feel my fingers.

They’d given me pain medication, but I think it was more so I wouldn’t move around while they were operating on me. It had hurt, but I’d been able to stay mostly still. If I didn’t, someone smacked me.

And then they dropped me in my cell. A little while later, the medication wore off.

And it was agony. It was a fiery, hot, agonizing pain that had no place in such a cold room. The cold was actually welcome, now, easing some of the flames racing through my arm. I whimpered and sobbed as a particularly brutal flare ignited the painful embers once again.

Jason and Ross has been observing the whole thing. Once, they poked too deep, and I screamed. I watched Jason smile.

I didn’t understand. I didn’t understand how he could hate me so much. How he could go from being the only person who gave a shit about whether I lived or died to smiling as I screamed in agony and fear, alone and cold on an operating table, under the invasive stares of a half a dozen scientists who wanted nothing more than to pick me apart.

I couldn’t understand.

Shivering, I curled tighter into myself, the chains dragging against the concrete, the grating sound harsh and ragged against my ears, defiling the silence surrounding me. They’d replaced the chains on my ankles—not that I was going anywhere anyways—but they’d left the chains off of my wrists. I guess because one of them had an open gaping wound and all that.

God, that sounded so wrong.

“Bucky, I m-miss you,” I breathed, a cloud of fog gathering as I exhaled shakily. “C-can you…t-take me home?”

He wasn’t here. I didn’t know why I was talking to him. He wasn’t here.

But somewhere in the most desperate, child-like parts of my mind, I subconsciously imagined his answer.

His small smile and his fond eyes, his warm, solid chest as I leaned into it, the comforting stability of his metal and flesh arms around me as I shook. Of course, kid. Let’s go. They’re all waiting.

I closed my eyes in longing, barely noticing as another tear froze on my cheek.

The door clanked as someone unlocked it from the outside, and I flinched backwards, my heart racing in apprehension. It had to be too soon for another test. Right?. Slowly, I dragged myself to the back corner of the cell. I didn’t like having open space behind me, even though I knew that no one could get in the cell and behind me without my seeing them.
It was stupid and childish, but it made me feel better.

Jason walked in, that stupid smile firmly in place. “Hey, Pete. How’s the arm?”

I glared, choking down a sob. He could see the tears. I didn’t want him to humiliate me anymore than he already had.

“Well,” Jason said, fishing around in his deep pockets, his hand closing around something that he never brought out. “If you’re not feeling talkative, I’ll talk. We’re going to see how long it takes your owie to heal. You’ve got advanced healing, right? We’re going to measure your progress every day. See how the muscle and tissue are faring. Most likely, if your healing isn’t within our expected parameters, you’ll have permanent nerve and muscle damage. Most likely never be able to use it again. But for our plans, we’ll give you a better arm.”

My brows furrowed in confusion, the cold and the pain slowing down my understanding. “Your…p-plans?”

Jason smiled. I hated it. I hated his smile.

His crazed grin was one thing. It was the grin of a madman.

This cold, small smile made me feel so much smaller than I already did. It was the smile of the victor before the race had even begun. And I hated it.

“Our plans. You didn’t think we just needed you for your cells and your knowledge, did you? Speaking of which, if you’re feeling generous, I’ve come to ask for the super soldier serum.” He paused as I shifted, eyes widening. “I figure it should all come full circle, you know? It would be very beneficial to our research. We can see where your parents made improvements. If this is what we think it is, and it’s a completely different serum, can you imagine what would happen if we combined the two?”

Yes. Yes, I could imagine. And it was terrifying.

“God, I can feel the power now,” he said wistfully, staring at a point somewhere over my right shoulder. “I can’t believe you can’t appreciate what you have right now. You’re absolutely unbelievable.”

“I’m unb-believ-able?” I asked, my voice rough from screaming. “You’re a ps-psycopath, J-Jason.”

He met my eyes. He pulled out whatever he’d been fishing around for, and he pressed a button.

Somewhere, lightning flashed, because my vision whitened out and the thunderous roar of my own blood pumping through my veins filled my ears. Pain replaced my nerves. My body convulsed violently, the cold of the floor as my limbs banged into it again and again lost among the fire in my mind.

Was my brain melting? That’s what it felt like. Perhaps brain matter was leaking from my ears right now. Maybe I’d die. That’s what it felt like. Like death. Like the afterlife clawing at me, dragging me down…down…down…

And suddenly, the fire was gone.

My spasming lungs wouldn’t breathe. I gaped like a fish out of water, no air entering, my
chest stuttering in a halted attempt to breathe. My eyes flicked around unfocused, blurred, unable to
distinguish the grey from the black, the light from the shadows. The dank, musty smell of my
dungeon came flooding back, the cold seeping into my now limp body.

Finally I gasped a small breath, choking on the small stream of air, letting out a pathetic
cough that rattled my lungs.

“Hm. Maybe I am a psychopath, because I enjoyed that,” Jason remarked, his voice
blurring in time with a ringing in my ears. “There’s an improved Taser in your ankle chains. Dad’s
idea—genius. You’re not going to insult me again, are you?” Too weak to respond, I simply tried
to breathe. “I thought not.”

My arm was in a whole new kind of pain. I tried to tug it against my side, but I couldn’t
move. Lazily, I rolled my eyes to the side, watching the blood continue to flow.

“Anyways, where was I…parents…serum…ah-ha! Serum. You know it. The formula, at
least. The theory.” He paused, his footsteps echoing as he paced slowly, lethargically. “I’ll get you
some paper and a pen. You can write it down.” Abruptly, he chuckled, and I flinched. The flinch
turned into a spasm. “Guess it’s a good thing you’re right handed.”

Still unable to move, to think clearly, to react, I felt another tear leak out.

Jason laughed.

“God, you’re such an infant. Crying over a bit of electricity? This is nothing. Wait until we
really get started.”

I closed my eyes, pinching them shut, trying to imagine I was somewhere else. Anywhere
else. The half-hearted illusion was broken by Jason’s voice.

“Maybe you’ll need a bit of time to get over it. Man, you wouldn’t last one day in basic
HYDRA training. We’d eat you alive.” I didn’t respond. “You know, the wall could probably give
me a better conversation.”

I moved my lips, trying to respond, but the murmur was too uncoordinated to form
intelligent words.

“I’m sorry? Speak up, kid, I don’t have super hearing yet.”

“Asshole,” I breathed.

I waited. I waited for the pain to consume me again, for the fireworks to ignite in my chest
and in my mind, for my brain to continue melting. Even as I’d uttered the word, I knew it was a
stupid, stupid move.

But God help me, if I was going to die, I was going to die pissing him off.

The pain never came.

“I’ll allow that,” he breathed, and I could hear the restraint in his shaking, angry voice,
“because I cannot wait to see the defiance leave your innocent little brown eyes, Peter. One day,
I’m going to beat it out of you. I’m going to watch as every shred of innocence you have left is
ripped away from you. I’ll spectate as the last straw finally hits, and every frail piece of goodness
and trust you somehow still have it squashed. I’ll watch. And I’ll laugh.
“You know how we’re going to do it, Peter? Hm? Would you like to know how I’m going
to do that?” He paused and my breath hitched, my wide, unmov ing eyes locked on his knees,
able to look up at his cold, cruel face. “We’re going to replicate your powers. We’re going to
study you, and tear you apart, and sew you back together again. We’re going to document every
last ability that you have, and we’re going to steal them. Then our lovely scientists are going to
combine them, and I’m going to become better than you ever had a chance of being.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“Oh, surprised? I’m going to become what I was meant to be, Peter, and you’re going to be
nothing but an obstacle that I tore apart without a second glance. And then once you’ve outlived
your usefulness, we’re going to brainwash you, just like we did to Big Brother Bucky. I was eleven
or twelve, and my dad let me watch one of the Winter Soldier’s memory purging processes. It was
gorgeous, Peter. A work of art. Your Bucky screamed and screamed and screamed. Won’t that just
be a beautiful parallel?”

“You sh-shut up,” I managed, my breath stuttering my chest. I coughed, thick and wet and
rattling, burning in my chest, in my lungs. “D-don’t t-talk about h-him.”

“Oh, did I strike a nerve?” Jason asked as I glared pathetically, my weak form trembling
with anger at his words. “Man. You’ve only seen the strong, suave, rescued soldier Bucky Barnes.
The Winter Soldier would make you hate him.” I opened my mouth to reply, to cut him off and
prove him wrong, but he fingered the button. At my silence, he smiled, and continued on.
“Anyways. You’re going to be just like him. Assassination missions, training, conditioning. And
you’re going to follow every command we issue. And you know what you’re going to do, once
you’re finally ready?”

Jason stalked closer to the bars. I flinched back, away from him, but I couldn’t move. He
stopped at the bars, crouching low. Even as he made himself smaller, he seemed to tower over me
as I lay there, prone and weak and vulnerable.

“You’re going to kill them,” he whispered, his eyes shining, maddeningly giddy in the pale
light, the shadows warping around his body, almost like a cloak. “You’re going to murder every
last one of them. They’d never hurt you, Peter. They won’t fight back. You’ll kill them.”


Everything. The world stopped spinning.

Everything stopped.

“No,” I breathed. “No.”

“Yes,” he said with an authoritative grin. “Yes, Peter.”

“No.”

“Yes. You won’t have a choice. If you don’t regain control over your arm, if it doesn’t heal,
we’re going to chop it off and give you Bucky Barnes’ old one. Don’t you just love the irony?
You’re going to use it to kill the people you love. And when that’s done…” he grinned. “You’re
just going to keep on killing.”

He put the remote back in his pocket, standing from his crouched position, turning to the
door. “Think on that, Pete. Swish it around a little. See how it feels. I’ll be back when it’s time for
your next session.”
And he left.

The door banged shut.

And sucked into an endless reservoir of despair that consumed every fiber of my mind, drowned in a swamp of unyielding dread and guilt, swallowed by an all-encompassing terror that filled my every conscious moment, I sobbed into the darkness, mourning.

Mourning my arm, that they were going to chop off. Mourning my freedom, my memories. My control.

I shut my eyes.

My family.


Please find me.

But no one answered.

And eventually, I slept.

A/N: Ho boy. That was a trip.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!!! Love you guys for keeping up!
Chapter 31

Natasha Romanov

*He seems nice.*

The simple phrase, the three words, rang through my being like a gong shaking every part of me.

*He seems nice.*

Those were the words I’d spoken to Peter, just after hearing him converse with Jason.

*He. Seems. Nice.*

I had never been angrier with myself.

I couldn’t even see through the façade of an obviously twisted young man fifteen feet from me. I should have heard the innuendos in his voice, picked up on his oh-so-subtle hints. I was a failure as an operative.

A failure as a protector.

I breathed out through my nose, audibly, the closest I would allow myself to come to an angry shout. Clint glanced over at me from where he was scanning through some HYDRA files Tony had sent us, his expression neutral. But I could tell he was worried.

Great. At least I could still read him.

Stella, sweet little thing that she was, pounced up onto the chair and rubbed her head against my hand where it rested on the laptop, demanding to be pet. She’d been sulking since Peter had been taken. Slinking around in the shadows, eating less and less. Only Thor seemed to make her happy, and even then, it wasn’t much.

I stroked the spot between her ears and she curled up in my lap, snuffling. The motion was so utterly familiar to what she did with Peter that I almost lost it.

Absent-mindedly continuing to pet her, I turned back to the files in front of me, my gut somersaulting as I read through the state of some of HYDRA’s victims. The corpses were barely human, anymore.

Abruptly, I closed the laptop. Stella started, then settled again.

“You okay?” Clint asked gently, slowly setting the StarkPad down.

I cut a glance at him that spoke volumes. In another day, surrounded by our family, he’d gulp and wave his hands sporadically, and the rest of them would burst out in laughter at his antics. Peter’s eyes would crinkle and his dimples would show, and he’d throw his head back and he’d laugh.

None of this happened.
Instead, Clint returned my steely glare with one of his own, his chin raised, features set. “I’m just checking on you, Nat.”

A moment. For a moment, our eyes stayed locked. For once, I looked away first. “No, Clint, I’m not okay. Nobody’s okay.”

Clint cast his eyes down, nodding slowly. “Yeah. Yeah, I know. But…you’re taking it hard. Not as hard as Bucky, but…harder than the rest of us.”

Standing, I slipped across the room, flowing like water. Stella leapt from my lap and took my previous seat on the armchair, watching with wide eyes. I don’t know when it had happened, but I knew that I’d slipped back into covert operative mode. My steps didn’t make a sound. “Maybe.”

Clint sighed, tapping at his phone. “I’m going to ask for an update from Steve and their team, okay?”

“Okay,” I said expressionlessly, my eyes never moving towards him.

Unsurprisingly, there was no news. They were cooperating with a special team of NYPD officers, those who knew the streets, knew places with heavy information trading. Undercover officers were stationed in casinos notorious for fronting the shadier businesses of the New York underworld, waiting for any information on a kidnapping.

It was a long shot. It would be impossible to think otherwise.

So I bowed my head, and I did the only thing I could.

I hoped.

Sam Wilson

Officer Travis was weird, but he got the job done.

In my experience, cops were good, but it was a job. They cared about the people about as much as a retail employee did.

Scott Travis wasn’t like that, though. He was a good guy, and he obviously cared about getting Peter back and in one piece.

I still couldn’t believe that the homeless kid Peter had rambled about was HYDRA. You know what? No, I could believe that. HYDRA seemed to be everywhere. What I couldn’t believe was that was bastard was Ross’ son.

It pissed me off to absolutely no end knowing that we’d let a good kid like Peter around such an evil person. Because that’s what he was. It wasn’t cruelty, it wasn’t malice.

It was just…evil.

I sighed, forcing my mind back on track, fingering my earpiece. “Anything?”

“Negative,” Steve’s voice crackled to life. “Bucky’s a negative, too. Bruce, anything on your end?”
Bruce was running surveillance in one of NYPD’s vans, helping out the techies. “Nothing so far. Travis and Veromi should be checking in soon. I’ll update you.”

I breathed out, crinkling my newspaper in an attempt to straighten it out. One of the NYPD team’s had heard rumor of a deal going down in Times Square, something to do with formulas for enhanced individuals and their medical needs. They’d flagged it as something HYDRA would be interested in purchasing.

So, here we were.

But it had been hours, and nothing.

Travis’ voice faded to life through the comms. “Eyes on the target,” he said, his voice hushed and frantic. Putting my newspaper down as casually as I could, I stood and started speed-walking towards his location. “Requesting backup. Headed towards Sixth and Fairview. Six-foot, Caucasian male, maybe 200 pounds. Grey shirt, black pants, black tennis shoes, grey baseball cap, dark sunglasses. Potentially armed.”

“This is Wilson, I copy,” I breathed, heading towards the end of the Square. “Coming up by seventh.”

“No, cut him off,” Travis corrected, sounding rushed. “Veromi’s coming from eleventh. Take the alley behind ninth, and it’ll lead right onto Fairview. Cut him off from your direction. Rogers, Barnes, what’s your twenty?”

“Jamison and twelfth,” Bucky breathed, his gruff voice rough with impatience.

“Perfect, cut down Jamison to Trafalger and come up through ninth,” Travis hissed, sounding now like he was jogging. I quickened my pace, cutting through the alley he’d instructed, exiting onto Fairview within seconds. It would have taken me at least two minutes to cut around seventh.

“Copy,” Steve said, sounding like he was jogging, as well. “Almost there.”

Scanning the thick copse of pedestrians, I subconsciously filtered out everyone who didn’t match the descriptions, working my way to Travis’ location. Too short. A woman. Wrong color baseball cap. I quickened my pace.

Finally, I caught sight of a grey baseball cap ducked low, weaving through the crowd like he was in a hurry. White male, about six feet, muscly build that would have put him around two hundred pounds. Grey shirt.

“Target sighted,” I whispered, slowing my pace and moving towards him casually, looking around him, but never at him. “In front of Verizon, passing a ‘Delmar’s’ sandwich shop.”

“He’s almost on you,” Travis said, his voice louder now, speaking above the throng of people surrounding him. “Get him out of the crowd, we can’t have casualties.”

“By doing what?” I hissed, trying to make my way to his direct front. If I didn’t play this right, he’d pass right by me.

“We’re almost there, Sam,” Bucky said, sounding like he was sprinting. “Steve and I are on our way, just corner him.”

“Copy,” I said, the adrenaline filling my veins.
But then the flow of people shifted. Despite my best efforts, I was carried away from him, to the right, while he approached my left. I tried to shove past them, but the flow of the people was incessant.

“Dammit. Guys, I’m losing him,” I said, panicked, as he almost passed me. If I screwed this up, he could disappear completely.

Ten feet. I tried to shove through once more, to no avail.

Six feet. Still nothing.

Four feet.

Two feet…

An old man with dark glasses and white hair, reading a newspaper, came out of the barber shop completely unexpectedly and barreled into the man, knocking him a good three feet in my direction.

“Watch it,” the man hissed, adjusting his cap, pulling it back low over his face.

I couldn’t believe my luck. I literally leapt at the man, grabbing his arm and shoving the muzzle of my gun into his side, concealed in my coat sleeve. “Moving a little fast there, huh?” I asked quietly, tugging him towards the side of the flow as the man swore under his breath, eyes narrowed.

The old man in question gave us a blank look before straightening his newspaper, scoffing. “Kids these days,” he said, his gravelly voice somewhere between disappointed and amused. “Always in a hurry. Stop and smell the roses, sonny!” He melted into the crowd without another word.

There was a shop being renovated a couple doors down, so I tugged the man with me, stopping outside the shop’s door. “Target acquired. Requesting immediate backup in front of—” I glanced at the sign. “—‘Sharon’s Shawarma.’”

“Converging on your location now,” Veromi said, her voice staticky. “Travis en route. Rogers and Barnes two minutes out, en route.”

“I tell you nothing,” the man spat, his heavy German accent stark against the vernacular English of the passerbys. “Hail HYDRA, today and always.”

“I think once you meet our best interrogator,” I said, thinking of Natasha and her training, “you’ll be singing a different tune.”

The man scoffed. “I am loyal. I give nothing.”

At that moment, Travis hustled up, remaining inconspicuous. “Let’s take this inside,” he said with a nod in my direction and a glare in the other man’s.

The man shifted, and I jammed the muzzle harder into his side, drawing a flinch. “Don’t try it, man,” I warned, my finger hovering over the trigger. “We need you alive, but we’re all so livid I wouldn’t be opposed to shooting you now.”

Travis got the door open and led us inside, away from prying eyes. At that moment, Veromi entered. Veromi was a short woman with long dark hair and a stare that could stop you cold. She
reminded me of a more docile Natasha.

“Nice job, Wilson,” she complimented, sizing up our catch.

Bucky and Steve barreled in just behind her, looking around the half-renovated store, their eyes settling on us as I pulled out a pair of handcuffs and slapped them onto the guy’s wrists as I’m fairly sure he cussed me out in German.

Bucky’s eyes narrowed.

“Buck,” Steve said in warning, eyes worried. “He’s a prisoner. We need information.”

“And I’ll get it for you,” Bucky seethed, stalking towards him. The man stood tall, defiant. He pissed me off.

“Down, boy,” Veromi said, cutting a sidelong glance at Bucky, who almost growled at her. “Guess our team did pretty well, eh, Travis?”

She held her hand out, and Travis smiled, knocking his fist against hers. “Guess so. One step closer to getting this kid home.”

“You stay down,” I said, kicking the back of the man’s knees. He grunted and knelt on the cement, my hands firmly on his shoulders. “Bruce, you copy?”

“Yeah,” the man replied, the typing of a keyboard muted in the background. “We’re en route to your location. Should be five minutes.”

“Roger,” Steve said, placing a comforting hand on Bucky’s shoulder. The man was still seething, but he settled for glaring with his arms crossed instead of trying to physically accost him.

Which I wouldn’t be against, but. Ya know. We needed him alive and all that.

Bruce pulled up with the van a couple minutes later, three NYPD officers clearing traffic so we could escort the prisoner to the van. We draped Steve’s jacket over his head so that the multiple recording phones wouldn’t get a glimpse of his face.

If HYDRA knew we’d caught one of their agents, I didn’t even want to think about what they’d do to Peter.

On the ride back, Bruce came to the back, sitting across from me. The prisoner was a bit further up front, his eyes staying mostly on the ground. Every once in a while, though, they’d flicker up to Bucky, who was sitting literally right across from him, staring at him with absolute murder in his eyes, his metal arm groaning as he clenched his fist.

The man swallowed subtly, and I smirked.

Bruce looked up at me, fiddling with his fingers. “Sam, I’ve got a question.”

“Okay,” I said, looking at him, wondering why the man was so nervous.

He took a deep breath and said, “Do you think I should call Bettie?”

I stared at him dumbfounded for a few seconds, not quite knowing how to answer. “You want to rehash your love life with me now?”

“What? No!” He exclaimed, glancing nervously up front. “No, I…not like that. I mean…if…if
Jason is really Ross’ son, then…shouldn’t she know him? At least of him? I just thought she could…I don’t know, give us some clues.”

And suddenly it all came together. I was so stupid for not realizing it earlier, but…we could potentially get some highly classified information if Bettie Ross were willing to cooperate.

“Yes,” I said without hesitation, the idea sounding better and better as I thought about it. “Absolutely one hundred percent yes. She could…God, she could have answers to questions we didn’t even know we had!”

Bruce nodded, like that was the answer he’d been expecting, and looked down. His shoulders sagged.

I suddenly realized that this was going to be a very hard phone call, and mentally clocked myself for sounding so happy about it.

“I mean…I know you guys didn’t leave things on the best of terms,” I started, trying to ease into it. “If—”

“There’s no if about it,” Bruce said, his eyes determined. “I’d call her a hundred times if it meant getting Peter back in one piece. That’s not the issue.”

I nodded, leaning back. “Yeah. Yeah, I know.”

We sat in companionable silence for a moment. I was thinking of how amazing it would be to get a location, but…it would potentially have hundreds, maybe thousands, of trained HYDRA operatives guarding it. Natasha wouldn’t be able to slip inside like normal; she was too well-known by them. They knew all of the Avengers. All of the noticeable ones, at least.

And then I realized.

We needed someone whose face the world didn’t know.

Someone who could slip into places undetected.

Someone small, and easy to overlook.

I knew someone who could help.

“On the subject of phone calls,” I said, digging out my cell from my jacket pocket, “I’ve got to make one.”

I thumbed through to the number I’d never used and listened to it ring.

Finally, he answered.

“Sam! Samuel! Falcone, my man!” Scott Lang said, the other end filled with the high-pitched shrieks of who I assumed was his daughter. “So glad to hear from you! How’s my favorite bird-themed superhero?”

Despite the unavoidable annoyance I felt sweeping through my mind, I smirked a little at what Clint’s reaction would have been. “Cutting to the chase, Lang, we’ve got a situation. And as much as I don’t want to, I’m…asking you to help us out, man.”

“Wait.” He said, stopping completely. “Cassie, hush, peanut,” he said in the background. “Are you saying…” I waited for him to continue, feeling the migraine start. “Are you saying you
need me…for a mission?"

“Yes, Scott,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose, already regretting it. “Yes. Get to the Compound ASAP. You remember where it is, right?”

“Right!” He said, and the excited squealing resumed. “Cassie! Cassie, Daddy’s an Avenger now!”

“In your dreams, Lang,” I said, hanging up.

“What was that about?” Bruce asked, sporting the most confused expression I’ve seen on him in a while.

I huffed a laugh, leaning my head against the wall of the van. “I called in the cavalry.” If the cavalry was a large child in a shrinking suit.

Sure. Cavalry.

Bruce Banner

I called Bettie as soon as we’d transferred the prisoner to the Compound.

We’d made a mutual agreement to not contact each other unless it was a true emergency, but we had each other’s numbers for those times.

I’d never used them, and neither had she.

*Well,* I thought as I pressed *Call* and listened to it ring as I closed the door to Tony’s private lab, *first time for everything*. I felt the stress edge into the careful wall of peace and control I’d created, and vehemently shushed the Other Guy as he roared.

*Quiet,* I hissed within my mind, hearing the Other Guy’s roars only strengthen. *Do you want to find Peter or not?*

The roars slowly quieted, until the Hulk snuffled. *Find mini friend?*

*Yes,* I thought gently, nervously checking the phone to see if she’d picked up. *Find mini friend.*

Hulk snorted, then quieted.

The line clicked on.

“This is Bettie Ross speaking.”

The voice on the phone was so familiar it hurt. Roughened with age, with a bit of a different timbre, but I’d recognize the voice anywhere.

I hadn’t realized I’d stopped breathing until she said, “Hello?”

“Bettie,” I breathed, shaking my head to clear my thoughts, my mind focusing back on Peter. On Peter, trapped and alone with her sadistic brother and her cruel father. “Bettie, it’s
Bruce.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Bruce?”

“Yes,” I said, cutting right to the chase, not wanting to waste time rehashing old memories. “I have…a couple questions.”

“Bruce, these numbers are for emergencies, you know that,” she chided, her voice shaking slightly.

“This is an emergency.”

“Surely not, if you just have questions—”

“Tell me everything you know about Thaddeus Jason Ross the second, Bettie.”

Her breath caught, sounding like something between a gasp and a choke. For a few seconds, she didn’t speak, her breathing heavy. Finally, her voice quiet, she said, “You’re not supposed to know that name.”

“Well, I do,” I said, becoming angrier by the second. For once, though, for once, I didn’t have to worry about the Other Guy taking over and destroying everything, because I could feel his desperation just as palpably as I could feel mine. He was willing to stay away, because he knew that I could find Peter.

Find mini friend.

“I know the name, Bettie, because he and your father took someone important to me, and they’re hurting him. I know they are. And he’s the best person you’ll ever meet. He’s kind and he’s funny and he’s smart, and his heart is so much bigger than any of ours. He’s had a life from absolute hell and yet he’s still…so good, Bettie. And he’s ours. He’s our kid—the Avengers’ kid. And your dad and your brother stole him from us, so Bettie, I was answers.”

Bettie didn’t speak for a moment. Finally, she said, quietly, “You sound angry, Bruce.”

“The Other Guy is staying quiet for a while,” I said as explanation, impatiently, tapping my foot. I saw Nat ease her way in through the doorway, giving me a worried look. I gave her a thumbs up to let her know I was fine, but she didn’t leave, and I didn’t exactly want her to. “He wants to find Peter just as much as I do.”

I heard Bettie sigh heavily, sounding conflicted, sounding angry. Finally, I heard her stand. “Give me a minute to close the door and clear my schedule.”

I did. Nat crossed her arms and leaned against the doorjamb, waiting with me. I took a seat on Tony’s stool, when Bettie’s voice finally filled the speakers again. “What do you need to know, Bruce?”

“We know he goes by Jason,” I said, mentally organizing the information we had on him. “Just…tell me this, Bettie, did you know your father was HYDRA?”

A pause. “I suspected,” she said quietly. “I always hoped it wasn’t true, but…I suspected. He always hinted to something…the ‘family business.’ Always told me I wasn’t cut out for it, and I never wanted to be. But Jason…Jason loved it. He always went with my father on business, and after each trip, he came back a bit…less sane.”
“So he’s crazy?”

“He’s not crazy,” she said, with a certainty that left no doubt. “He’s sadistic. He’s completely lucid, but he is…just sadistic, Bruce. When he was young, he was normal. He would play with toy cars, and build Legos. As he grew older…he would…go to a little wood half a mile from our house, and…he would catch animals. He would cut the legs off so they couldn’t run away and toy with them until they bled to death. He brought one home, once. I had nightmares for weeks.” I breathed through my nose, trying not to be sick at the image. “We don’t share a mother, but watching my father destroy his was bad enough. Then he watched the court cases, and he laughed and laughed at her destruction.” She paused again, her voice choked. “He loves Ross more than anything. Completely idolizes the man. Wants to be just like him, and…I suppose he will be one day.”

“What do you mean by that?” I pressed when she didn’t continue.

“When I was younger, he always talked about Jason taking over the family business. I know now that…that’s HYDRA.”

That was the final piece of information to complete the picture we didn’t even know we needed.

It all made sense.

It made sense why HYDRA had as much information as they did. Why they somehow seemed to infiltrate every edge of the world, why they were everywhere. Ross wasn’t just in HYDRA. He wasn’t even just a prominent figure in HYDRA.

He was HYDRA.

And Jason was his damn little Ky Lo Ren, poised to take over the dynasty.

“Oh, my God,” I whispered, putting a hand to my mouth and closing my eyes, trying to breathe. Nat slipped closer, putting a steadying hand on my shoulder, her eyes glued to the phone. “Bettie, you have to tell me everything you know. Where did they take their business trips, how often did they go, everything you know.”

“I don’t know much,” she said, sounding sincerely apologetic. “I’m sorry. I want to help you find your friend, but I don’t know much. They went…I don’t know, once every couple of months, at least, but they never told me where.”

“Ask her about their luggage,” Nat whispered. It was barely audible to me, so Bettie wouldn’t hear her eavesdropping.

“Bettie, do you remember what they packed? The type of clothes, the necessities?”

“I don’t—” she paused, as if thinking. “Actually, I remember it was…odd. No matter what time of year, they always packed winter clothes. Heavy coats, boots, scarves, insulated gloves. The kind of thing you’d wear somewhere very cold.”

It was a clue. The Hulk roared in happiness, and I roared with him. “So, somewhere cold year-round! Like Antarctica, or—”

“No, not Antarctica,” she said quietly, her voice distracted, as if deep in thought. “They mentioned once stopping in Paris for some business and then continuing further inland by train.”
Nat’s eyes widened, and she breathed, “That narrows it down. We can work with that.” She all but ran from the room, presumably to fill Tony and the others in.

“Thank you, Bettie,” I breathed, my fists clenched. “You have no idea how much you’ve helped us.”

“You’re welcome,” she said timidly, her voice uncertain. “Um…I hope you find your friend, but…Jason, he…” She took a deep breath to steady himself. “He’s evil, and he’s sadistic, but he…didn’t choose this life. He never asked to grow up the way he did. Just…”

I didn’t know what she was asking me to do, but I had a feeling that she didn’t either.

“Goodbye, Bettie,” I whispered, closing my eyes. “Thank you.”

I hung up without another word, and without any regrets.

Peter Parker

They came back once every so often to check out how my arm was healing.

It wasn’t.

In fact, the cut had become infected, and leaked yellow discharge streaked with red. My fingers were perpetually blue and light purple, and while they twitched on their own every so often—a side effect of the nerve damage, they’d said—I couldn’t otherwise move it.

They brought me food twice, the first I’d eaten since they’d taken me. The first time, I couldn’t keep it down, and I vomited in the corner of my cell. The second time, I forced myself to eat slowly. Nausea wracked my body, but I forced myself to keep it down, disgusting as it was.

Jason came back once, asking again for the super soldier serum formula. He’d electrocuted me twice before giving up, his face twisted in absolute disdain as he stomped out the doorway.

I was fairly sure I’d developed pneumonia. Horrible, wet coughs rattled in my chest, wracking my entire body. I regularly spat out clumps of green and yellow mucus, later on lined with tinges of red.

The hope I felt at Bucky and the others finding me was starting to ebb away.

The hope I felt at them finding me alive was almost gone.

The pneumonia and its adverse effects were being exacerbated by the cold, as well as lack of food and water. If things continued at this rate, it would kill me within a couple weeks.

If it didn’t kill me, the infection in my arm would.

I was too weak to do much of anything, now. I spent my waking hours huddled against the wall of my cell, shivering.

I was constantly afraid. Not of Jason, not of Ross, not even of HYDRA. I’d seen a lot of blood and a lot of death, but watching your arm slowly deteriorate and rot right before you was absolutely terrifying. The smell of infected flesh overtook the musty stench of the cold, and the burning pain was constant. The feeling of not being able to use my fingers, of having to use my other arm to lift the limb when I tried to get a bit more comfortable, was horrifying.
The electricity hadn’t helped.

The edges of the ugly wound were rimmed black with burnt flesh. It was barely visible in the pale light, but I could feel it.

They were letting me fall apart.

The door clanked, and I blearily opened my eyes, the slits barely open enough to see the hazy figure who entered. I’d thought they were coming to check my progress again, but it was just Jason.

I felt my heart beat faster, though I couldn’t react any more than that.

“Damn. You’re looking rough, kid.” He said, tossing a plastic water bottle through the bars towards me. It landed, bounced, and rolled, bumping to a stop against my leg. Even with my throat burning with thirst, I made no move to grab it, not wanting to aggravate my arm.

“You need that.” Jason said, raising an eyebrow and watching expectantly.

I closed my eyes, a violent cough wracking my frame, nearly pitching me forward. I’d lost so much weight here that the draft within the cell was sometimes enough to catch me off balance. I weakly spat a glob of mucus to the side, the deep breath I forced myself to take rattling my lungs.

“God, you’re pathetic,” he said with a head shake, opening the cell door and stomping over to me. “We can’t have you dying just yet, Peter.”

He opened the water bottle and tipped my head back forcefully, letting the water flow into my open mouth. Swallowing was agony, but I did, greedily, as the water slipped past my cracked lips.

Too soon, the bottle was empty. Jason cast it away, letting my body thump back onto the cold cement. A muted groan escaped my lips, but nothing more, even though it was agony.

Jason stayed crouched beside me, eyes scanning my body. Without warning, he grasped my left wrist, lifting my arm none-too-gently to inspect the festering wound. A scream tore from my throat, my body writhing.

“Don’t be a baby, Pete,” he said, sounding exasperated as he inspected the wound. “Yep. This is coming off.” He dropped it back onto the cement, a strangled cry escaping me, hot tears a short reprieve against the icy cold.

“I’ll tell the surgeons that it’ll be a couple days, but say bye to the leftie, Pete,” he said, standing, looming over me.

“P-p-plea-s-se,” I breathed, unable to calm my shivering. It wasn’t just from the cold. “P-p-please d-don’t-t-t…”

“Stop that,” Jason said, his features screwing up into those of disgust. “It’s just pitiful.”

I closed my eyes. Never, in my entire life, had I felt more vulnerable. Vulnerable, desperate, pathetic. Alone, and useless, and frightened.

Completely under someone else’s control.

“Oh, I did come to tell you something,” Jason said suddenly, as if he’d just remembered. I
opened my eyes slightly, watching his blurry form exit my cage, the grating of the lock utterly disheartening. “But my dad wanted to be here when I did.”

As if on cue, Ross walked in through the open door. “Sorry I’m late,” he said with a glare in my direction. “There was a snag with one of our ops.”

“What happened?” Jason asked, his stance instantly alert.

“Looks like one of our operatives was caught with some information on enhanced individuals we sent him to acquire,” Ross said, his stance angry. I flinched as he directed his gaze to me. “Caught by a certain rag tag group of ‘heroes.’”

Jason scoffed, rolling his eyes. “That’s unfortunate, Dad, but our operatives are trained well. They know what it means to betray HYDRA.”

Ross sighed, smiling. “You’re right.” He fixed his gaze on me. “We have some information for you, Peter. Something I’m sure you’ve been wondering about.”

I furrowed my eyebrows, wondering what they could mean.

“Our brilliant scientists have finally found out the animal you’ve been crossed with!” Jason said excitedly, spreading his arms wide, grinning madly. “Isn’t that fantastic?”

My eyes widened in understanding, my heart beating faster.

Even though this was an awful situation, and I was terrified about a lot of other things, I’d been wondering what kind of DNA was crawling through me for months.

“Would you like to know?” Ross asked, looking amused. I flicked my eyes to him, hesitantly nodding once.

“And the lucky match is…” Jason shouted, pausing for what I assumed was dramatic effect, “the spider.”

I blinked, wondering if I’d heard him correctly.

My breath caught in my throat.

I hated spiders.

“It’s so poetic. Now when I say I’m going to crush you like a bug, it actually works!”

All this time, for nine years, the very component of what made a spider…well, a spider, had been inside of me.

My chest stuttered as I heaved, throwing up some of the water that Jason had forced me to drink.

“Dammit, kid, we just went over this,” Jason said, his excited form sagging in annoyance.

“I think you broke him,” Ross cut in, amusedly.

I closed my eyes, drawing in rattling, deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart.

“Good,” Jason scoffed, crossing his arms. “Oh, we’re going to have to amputate his arm.” I flinched. “It’s getting worse. Also, we’re gonna have to start him on some antibiotics. Sounds like
he’s got pneumonia, and I really really don’t want him dying just yet.”

Ross nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll send a physician in later to start the process.”

“Well, I hope that was an exciting visit for you, Pete,” Jason said happily. “It was for me! See you later. Potentially one-armed.”

The hope, barely hanging on, dwindled a bit more as the heavy door banged shut.

**Tony Stark**

So to recap, Jason (in Bruce’s words) was Ky Lo Ren, and the HYDRA base we were looking for was in Eastern Europe, somewhere always really cold, Natasha was interrogating our new friend, and the NYPD team was actually very helpful.

Oh, and Scott Lang was coming.

I felt the migraine coming on.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, eyeing Steve as he spoke quietly to Bucky, who was seething outside the interrogation room.

No matter what Bucky and I had been through, no matter the differences between us, I felt for the man. He must have been terrified.

Hell, I was terrified.

My cell phone rang, making me jump, and I excused myself to the hallway. The Caller ID was blocked. That shouldn’t have been possible—FRIDAY automatically hacked blocked calls that came to my phone.

Curiously, I answered. “Tony Stark.”

“Hello, Stark,” a familiar voice said over the line. “I want to make you a business proposition.”

Dumbfounded, I check the screen, just to make sure no one was duping me, and put it back to my ear. “T’Challa?”

“Yes,” he said, sounding amused. “Cutting right to the chase, I understand that you’ve been fervently chasing HYDRA over the last couple of days, yes?”

“Yes,” I said slowly, drawing out the word, instantly defensive.

“You do not have to answer, but I would like to know what sparked the sudden change.”

I hesitated, but I knew T’Challa. He was…a better guy than most. A good king, a great leader, and a great person. He wouldn’t manipulate the information. “They took someone close to us.”

He paused. “I am sorry. I…was unaware of this.”

“It’s fine,” I said, cutting to the chase. “What’s with the sudden call?”
“I was calling to ask for your help, since you were already chasing them, but now that I know your circumstances, I would like to extend mine. Wakanda is also chasing after HYDRA. Would you like to combine forces?”

Slowly, I glanced over at the super soldiers, who had begun listening the moment T’Challa’s voice came over the line, with their super hearing and all that. Steve quirked an eyebrow, and something like hope entered Bucky’s eyes.

“Sure, we’d love to,” I said, knowing their resources and ours would make things a lot faster, “but why are you chasing them?”

“Somehow, they broke past our barrier,” he said angrily, his accented voice frustrated. “They injured many of our people and stole several pounds of Vibranium. When I was alerted that you also were searching for them, I wanted to combine our knowledge to bring HYDRA to justice, finally. But…your matters are more pressing. I will gladly help in any way that I can.”

My shoulders sagged with relief I didn’t know I needed, and an exhausted smile graced my lips for the first time in days. “Thank you. You think you could make the trip to Avengers Compound?”

“Certainly. We will be there shortly.”

“Alright.”

I glanced at Steve, his eyes bright, grinning. “Looks like we’ve got another ally,” he said, clapping Bucky on the shoulder. Bucky knew how much T’Challa’s resources would help us—God knows what they’d done for him.

“I’ll tell the others,” I said, a little more hopeful than I’d been in a long time.

_We’re coming, Pete._

_Hang on just a little longer._

Chapter End Notes

Hope you like some of the different perspectives and new characters! Thanks!
Chapter 32

Scott Lang

Cassie was going to *freak out* when I told her about all the cool stuff that had happened on the way to Avengers Compound.

First of all, *Tony Stark* had paid for my ticket (*so cool!!!*) and I got to sit in first class (*which included FREE SNACKS!*!) and I had my own *chauffer* waiting for me…oh, she was going to be *so* jealous.

“What do you think, Serge?” I asked the ant in my palm, earning a dubious look from the driver. His name was apparently *Happy*, which I thought was a *teensy* bit uncharacteristic, but I was getting a bunch of cool stuff so I wasn’t going to complain. “Think it’s going to be an action-packed mission? Maybe I’ll be infiltration…oh! Maybe I’ll get a chance to save *Captain America!*”

Serge clicked his pincers, making a circle in my hand.

Serge was my latest steed (aka my ant-taxi), short for Serge-Ant. Cassie had thought it was absolutely hilarious, and giggled for ten minutes straight.

Hope had rolled her eyes.

It didn’t matter, though. *I* liked it.

“Hey, so, Happy,” I said, patting the briefcase with Hank’s suit beside me. “Should I suit up before we get there? Is it, like…a *critical* mission?”

“Not unless you want to change back there,” he grumbled, rolling up the dark screen that separated him from the backseat.

I blinked twice, looking down at Serge. “What did I do?”

Serge may have shrugged, though it was a little hard to tell.

We pulled up to the Compound, and through the tinted windows, I could see Sam Wilson waiting in the driveway, hands in his pockets, eyes furrowed in concentration or stress or something similar.

Before the car was even in park, I jumped out of the car, racing towards him, stuttering to a halt just in front of him. The surprised look on his face was worth it. “Falcone, Mr. *Wilson*, it’s so great to see you!”

“Yeah, Lang, you too,” he said noncommittally. Looking past me, he said, “Thanks, Happy. Would you mind bringing his stuff inside?”

Happy gave a grunt and a small salute before lugging my suitcase from the back.

“Oh, hang on!” I said, darting back to the car and grabbing the suit as well as Serge’s small ant farm. Wilson raised an eyebrow at me, then sighed, turning around.
I could tell that something was eating at Sam, because he probably would have smacked me or made fun of me for something like that. I guessed that this must’ve been a pretty hard mission.

Is it bad that that made me even more excited?!

We entered through the front, Sam wordlessly handing me a badge before leading me through multiple hallways to a big living room with lots of couches and a couple armchairs, complete with a huge fireplace and a ginormous flat-screen TV.

“Lang,” Sam said tiredly, sighing. “Scott. You…need to understand what this is about, before we go and catch up with everybody else.”

“Okay, cool, yeah, I got this,” I said, sitting down in the armchair closest to the fireplace, sitting up straight, looking attentive.

Sam’s eyes flashed. “Don’t sit there. Sit on the couch.”

His tone wasn’t…angry. But it was warning. I quickly moved, trying to be casual, though that was a little weird.

“This isn’t a simple mission, Lang,” Sam said, sitting down in front of me. He leaned his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands together in front of him. “It’s—”

“Dude, is it top secret?” I asked, nearly bouncing with excitement. “Is it special covert ops stuff? Do I get a gun? Wait, I can’t use a gun. No, I’ll stick with my suit. But, like, still—”

“Lang—”

“No, but is it some super-secret protection mission? Is it search and rescue? Oh, oh! Do you need me to sneak into some super-secret base and steal a file from a place that’s really hard to access? Cause I can totally do that! I mean—”

“Lang—”

“I’m really good at that stuff, I promise—”

“Scott!”

Whoa. I’d never heard him so angry.

Immediately, he let out a breath, his shoulders almost collapsing, his face dropping.

Something was seriously wrong.

“It’s search and rescue,” he said quietly. “Come with me.”

Wordlessly, shell-shocked from his tone of voice, I did. I put Serge up on my shoulder so I wouldn’t have to keep holding him, and followed him down what looked like a hall of bedrooms. Sam paused momentarily before opening a closed door at the end of the hall.

I didn’t expect it to be so…messy.

There were clothes everywhere, the bed was unmade, and there was a tackboard with pictures above the bed. There were some Star Wars posters, a Han Solo poster taking prominence. An abandoned science textbook lay on the desk, seemingly shoved aside. The closet door was slightly open, revealing some jeans, some t-shirts, and lots of Converse. The bathroom was messy
as well, toiletries scattered over the counter, the shower curtain half open.

It looked…like the room of a teenager.

When I said as much, Sam smiled sadly, fingering one of the pictures of the tackboard before unpinning it and handing it to me. “It is.”

I looked at the photo. Nine of the Avengers—the six originals, plus Bucky Barnes, Sam, and Colonel Rhodes—were all piled up in the living room we’d just come from, fast asleep as the credits to a movie flickered on the screen. Though it looked like they had an extra or two.

Cuddled up against Bucky’s side, his mouth slightly open and his curly brown hair sticking up every which way, was a kid. He couldn’t have been more than fourteen or fifteen. His head was resting on Bucky’s shoulder, his body almost completely hidden by an Avengers-themed blanket. In his lap, a small cat was curled up against him.

“That’s Peter,” Sam said at my questioning glance. “Peter Parker. He’s fifteen. He’s from Queens.”

Carefully, I set the picture down on the desk, listening intently. A lump formed in the pit of my stomach. I didn’t like where this was going.

“This is all sensitive information, Scott,” Sam said in a low voice, eyes hard. “No Hope, no Hank, no Cassie. It could put them in danger.”

“I got it,” I said quietly, my voice serious.

He sighed, continuing. “Peter’s parents worked for HYDRA. They didn’t know about the…dark side, and they rediscovered the super soldier serum. HYDRA killed them for it when Peter was six. When Peter was fourteen, they murdered his aunt and uncle in front of him. His uncle gave him the serum while he was dying. He protected it alone for eight months on the street. He was skin and bones. We took him in for protection.” He smiled sadly. “Stubborn little shit wouldn’t give it to us. And he just…grew on us.” His face twisted. “He was…part of our family, Scott. Thaddeus Ross tricked him away from us, and he and his sick son took him. And we have no idea where he is, or what they’re doing to him.”

That was…a lot to process.

I glanced back at the picture again, at the small kid curled up among the heroes. Thought of him…alone, and scared, in a HYDRA base.

The thought of any child had my gut roiling, but…I imagined, unwittingly, what it would be like if—if Cassie—

“Oh, God,” I whispered under my breath, rubbing my stubbled jaw. “Oh, Christ.”

“Yeah.”

I swallowed thickly, Serge clicking in my ear, and straightened. “God, I’m…I’m so sorry, Sam. I’ll do everything I can to help you get him back, I promise.”

Sam looked up, his eyes shining, and his throat bobbed. “Thank you.”

No more jokes. No more wisecracks. This was…this was serious, and a kid was in danger.
Scott Lang wasn’t coming on this mission. Ant-Man was.

I tried not to think about the insults Hope would have to refute that.

T’Challa, Son of T’Chaka

Avengers Compound was not as I remembered it. Structurally, everything was the same. However, last time I had been here, it had been in the spirit of celebration to a job well done, and laughter rang throughout the festive halls.

Now, shadows of gloom and tension overtook the somber rooms. Colonel Rhodes led us through the winding halls, Shuri at my side, sipping her latte. Even my rambunctious younger sister could sense the distress in the building, and artfully chose to remain quiet. Okoye and Nakia trailed behind us, watchful eyes scanning the halls.

“Can you tell me a bit about this boy, Colonel Rhodes?” I asked quietly, trying to be respectful. “Mr. Stark filled me in on his past. It’s…disheartening, to say the least, but…I’d like to know more about him.”

“You can call me Rhodey, your Highness,” Rhodes said casually, though his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Only on the condition that you call me T’Challa,” I replied with a smile of my own.

“I’ll take it.” He sighed then, his shoulders falling. “Peter’s…too good. He has every right to be twisted and cruel and just…bad, but…he’s so good. His heart is made of gold. He’s so selfless, and he doesn’t deserve any of this.”

I nodded, eyes flickering over to Shuri. If anything happened to her…

She seemed to sense my thoughts, and met my worried gaze, giving me a whipped-cream-filled grin that only Shuri could master, and squeezed my hand. I smiled fondly, though my heart ached for these heroes whose own loved one was at risk.

“I will help in any way that I can, Rhodey,” I said, my voice reassuring.

Rhodey gave me a smile. “Thank you.”

We entered one of the combat rooms, where almost all of the heroes were assembled, plus some others.


“It is my pleasure,” I said, gripping his hand tightly before gesturing to the women behind me. “This is Shuri, my younger sister. She has brought several of her latest inventions to help us infiltrate the base, once we are ready. Additionally, this is Okoye, head of the Dora Milaje and one of Wakanda’s most impressive warriors. Finally, this is Nakia.”

Nakia cocked her head, giving me a look and twirling her spear. “What, no grand introduction for me?”
I grinned at her, fully aware of the smirk on her lips. “You don’t need one, uhlobo.” *(A/N: *Darling in Xhosa, the language used in Wakanda.)*

She smirked, hiding a smile.

“Ugh, you children need to get a room,” Shuri insisted, wrinkling her nose. “Mr. Stark, it’s an honor to meet you. Your tech was challenging for a while! I enjoyed improving it.”

I almost choked at Shuri’s rudeness. “Shuri—”

Tony Stark held up a hand, blinking dumbly. “I’m sorry, *what*?”

“Your technology,” Shuri affirmed, as though speaking to a child. “When I was twelve or thirteen, it was all I could talk about. It presented a bit of a challenge, a hobby, if you will, from my projects. I enjoyed it! That’s a compliment, Mr. Stark, you can stop staring now.”

“*Intlanzi intombazana, bonisa intlonipho!*” Okoye said, whacking Shuri lightly on the back of her head. *(Stupid girl, show some respect)*

“Ayaaaaa,” Shuri said, offended, as I rubbed my forehead, Nakia laughing quietly.

“I am terribly sorry for her,” I said, eyeing the dumbstruck heroes before me, almost cringing at Mr. Stark’s frozen form. “I don’t know why I take her anywhere.” I cut a glance to her at those words, and she grinned bashfully.

Hawkeye, dressed in his combat gear, gave me a small smile, clapping a frozen Tony Stark on the shoulder. “It’s fine. You’d think he’d be used to it, by now. Peter—” he paused, blinking before continuing, a bit more solemnly, “Peter one-upped him on everything. Even improved the Iron Man suit. He’ll get over it eventually.”

“Still, my sincerest apologies,” I continued.

“It’s alright,” Bruce Banner cut in, glancing at the screen. “For now, maybe we should focus on the task at hand? Nat’s interrogating the HYDRA agent we picked up, and Thor’s trying to contact Asgard to see if his friend with the glowy eyes can track Peter. T’Challa and company, this is Officer Travis and Officer Veromi.” A man and woman standing to the side nodded in my direction, though the man seemed a bit starstruck, mouth slightly ajar, eyes wide. “They’re heading the NYPD team that’s helping us track Peter. And this is Scott Lang.”

“Hey, your Highness, sir,” Scott Lang said uncomfortably, eyes flicking between us. “Uh, we met in Germany, but like not actually met. We kind of just fought each other.”

I blinked, trying and failing to place him. “Forgive me, I do not remember you.”

“I’m sorry, it’s hard to remember all these people,” he said, then looked horrorstruck, waving his hands and correcting himself, “I mean, your highness-ness! Your, uh…majesty? Panther-ness…?”

“I’M T’Challa is fine,” I cut in, trying to ignore Shuri and Nakia’s poorly hidden giggles, as well as trying to spare the man from any further embarrassment.

“Young, uh, I was the one who got super tall.” He continued, trying to straighten himself. The Falcon, Sam Wilson, standing next to him, pinched the bridge of his nose in utter disappointment.

I knew how the man felt.
“Ah, now I remember,” I said, trying for a polite smile. “Pleasure to meet you, formally.”

“My tech…was…a challenge…?” Mr. Stark mumbled suddenly, still frozen.

Before anyone could respond to that, the White Wolf came running into the room, his eyes wild. I could immediately tell that the man was in absolute distress. In Wakanda, he had been polite, docile, heavy with grief and regret. Now, he was worried, terrified, and beyond angry.

I could see the murder in his eyes, as well as the absolute terror of losing this child.

“T’Challa,” he almost heaved, his posture sinking for a moment. “Thank you so much for coming.” He turned to the rest of us, almost pleading, his eyes distraught, yet hopeful. “Nat’s getting somewhere, guys. She’s almost there.”

Peter Parker

Bucky sat in the corner of my cell, watching me.

I’d cried out for him, begged him to take me away. When he’d first appeared, I’d screamed myself hoarse trying to capture his attention, but it got me nowhere. In a rare moment of clarity, I realized that he must be a hallucination, a product of my addled mind, trying to give comfort where there was none.

He shifted, eyes sad as they watched me. Sometimes, he opened his mouth to speak, but I never heard any sound.

They’d started me on antibiotics. Someone had come in earlier and stuck a needle in my thigh none-too-gently, examining my arm at the same time. The antibiotics obviously hadn’t started working yet, because I still felt like I was going to die at any second. In fact, I felt like I was worsening.

Each breath rattled in my chest, now. I felt like my lungs were swimming in fluid—maybe because they probably were. I coughed roughly almost every couple minutes, thick, green and yellow globs of stuff coming up in clumps as big as quarters, sometimes. It sent fire through my chest and throat, my wheezing echoing in the silent cell.

The pain was nothing compared to my arm.

The flesh was black, now, and green. I’d only read about gangrene. I never thought I’d see it. And I never imagined it would be on my own body.

I could feel the cut pulse with every beat of my heart.

Everything else—every untouched nerve—was completely numb.

I sobbed in terror, tearing my eyes away from my mangled arm to stare through the bars with double vision. Jason hadn’t come back yet, but I had no doubt he would. They’d given my nothing since he’d force-fed me the water, and I could feel my body shaking at the lack of energy, of nutrients.

Bucky shifted again in the corner, his warm eyes studying me, his forehead crinkled in worry.
Deliriously, I stretched my good arm out to him. He looked like he wanted to reach back, but didn’t.

I closed my eyes and cried quietly.

The door clanged open, and I sobbed.

“How’re we doing, Pete?” Jason asked happily, hands shoved in his pockets. I watched him warily, acutely aware of what must have been in his pocket. He glanced at my arm and wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Ew. That’s…well, that’s just revolting. Good thing it’s coming off today, hm?”

I coughed and spat a glob of mucus to the side, his words wracking my thin frame with shivers.

“Mm. Well. I’ll give you an out. You can keep the arm and let it kill you, if you’d like. All you need to do is give me the super soldier serum.”

Weakly, I shook my head. In my delirious state, all I could understand was that giving him that formula would be bad. I didn’t want to do anything bad.

Bucky watched me softly, his eyes murderous as they shifted to Jason.

“N-no,” I breathed quietly.

His eyes furrowed, and even my addled brain knew he was trying to force himself to remain calm. “It’s an easy out, kid. I’d take it.”

“W-wanna…g-g-go h-hom-me…”

“Well, you’re not going home. Not until you go on your killing spree. So save yourself some pain and give me the damn formula.”

“B-B-Bucky,” I cried softly, glancing to the corner of my cell, where he watched me sadly, unable to help me.

Jason flicked his eyes over to where Bucky sat, glaring at him, and then focused back to me, his eyebrow arched. “Are you stupid? It's a wall.”

“P-please,” I begged, not even knowing what I was begging for anymore.

The familiar, ungodly pain consumed me again, and my body spasmed and shook. I wanted to scream, I wanted to cry and beg and plead, but my vocal cords seized up in time with the rest of my frame, and I couldn’t. The thunderous roar of my beating heart pounded inside my mind, blocking out everything else.

Finally, finally, it was over.

But…it wasn’t.

The pain was gone, but for a moment, my mind stayed gone, too. My body continued to shake. Not like…aftershocks, like normal after the electrocution, but in almost…a seizure.

I was seizing.

The fireworks behind my eyes went off again and again, and I wondered why it was so cold
in July. It wasn’t like the electrocution, but it was. My body was still rigid, but instead of shaking, it was…jerking.

This continued for a moment, and then my body went limp, fire racing through my nerves as I heaved a relieved sob that turned into a vicious cough.

“Damn. That was new.” Jason’s voice filtered through the watery film covering me. My blurry vision settled on Bucky’s enraged features directed at Jason. I flicked my eyes over to him, his face puzzled. “Hm. Maybe I went a bit overboard. I may have screwed your brain up a teensy bit.” He shrugged. “Ah, well. They’ll do a lot worse than that once they start the process.”

I didn’t respond, settling for closing my eyes and sucking in as much air as my spasming lungs could hold.

“Peter. This isn’t fun if you don’t react,” he whined. “C’mon. You’re only my toy for so much longer. After that I won’t get to play with you anymore.”

Bucky growled. I couldn’t hear it, but I saw it out of the corner of my eye.

“Not-t…y-your t-t-toy,” I breathed, annoyance seeping through the thick fog.

“Yeah. You kind of are. And I’m trying to squeeze in as much revenge as I can while you can still, like…react. ‘Cause you won’t after they liquify your brain, and then it’ll just be boring.” He grinned, lazily pacing. “C’mon, gimme some of that spunk I hate so much.”

I kept my mouth shut and closed my eyes, weakly shaking my head. I coughed.

“Still won’t do as you’re told?”

Silence.

“You obviously need a lesson in obedience, hm? They’re not due to start for a while, but…I doubt anyone would mind if I took some initiative. Whad’ya think?”

“N-not…y-y-yours,” I bit out, shaking fingers on my good arm curling into a fist. “Th-theirs. N-n-never ob-obey…y-you.”

I peeled my eyes open. Bucky watched me quietly. His rigid frame, though tight with worry and anger, sported proud eyes.

“Yes, you will,” he said, staking forward, unlocking the door to my cell. His eyes were dark, and cold, and merciless. His jaw was tight. His expression was cool. His fists were clenched, his body taut with anger. He stalked over to stand above me, my blurring eyes focused on his boots, unable to turn my head to look up at him. “You don’t know it yet, but you will.”

His boot connected with my side, drawing a strangled cry from my lips. Drawing in a halted breath, I squeezed my eyes shut as he planted his boot on my chest, leaning forward. His weight fell on my abused lungs. Weakly scrabbling with my right hand, tugging at his boot, I wheezed, staring up at his blurry frame.

“I’m going to be your handler. My father gave me that position almost immediately. Bucky Barnes will always be the Winter Solider, so I get to name you. What do you think, Peter? What should I name you?” He leaned more heavily on my frame, and I squirmed sluggishly, unable to breathe. Black spots danced within my vision, a hazy white veil settling over my sight. “Once I name you, that’s it. You’re mine. There’s so much power in a name, Peter. I’m going to strip you
of everything that makes you Peter Parker, and rename you as HYDRA’s weapon. So? Any thoughts?”

A violent burst of clarity washed over me. Sputtering through the pain and the fear and the dizziness, I sharpened my gaze, cutting into him with all the anger I could dig up. “Medea.”

“What?” He asked, his eyes furrowing, his arms crossed. “Have you lost your mind? What language is that?”

“I-if y-you name m-m-me…n-name me…Medea.”

He cocked his head, familiarity dancing over his cool features. “That’s…I’ve heard that.”

It was another moment before understanding finally washed across his features, and his cool confusion morphed into absolute hatred, eyes cold and hard, boring a hole through me. I coughed weakly, what little energy I’d had fading. “So. You’re a scholar.”

I didn’t respond, turning my head away, trying to suck in another breath.

He took his foot away from my chest, allowing me to gasp and cough viciously, only to rear back for a kick that snapped my head back so hard I felt my neck pop. My nose snapped, blood gushing from both nostrils, and my upper lip tore. I groaned, screwing my eyes shut as the bones in my face pounded and pulsed.

“You’re going to regret that,” he said, his tone flat and rigid.

He knelt beside me as I heaved a sob of pain, my arm and chest and face flaring, and cut my shirt away, tossing it aside.

“I’m not going to name you Medea. Frankly, I don’t know what I’ll call you yet. But the fact that you have the nerve to even consider that you’ll be my undoing is going to be crushed, right here.”

He shoved me flat onto my back, and I whined thinly, pain igniting in my body.

“You are HYDRA’s, Peter. You will never be anything else.” A pause. “I’m going to make sure you never, never forget that.”

And he cut.

And I screamed.

He cut, and cut. Sixteen ruthless lines across my stomach and chest, deep cuts that wept for hours. I squirmed and writhed, but every time I tried to thrash the pain of my injuries almost swept me into unconsciousness.

It took at least three or four minutes of constant fire. Finally, he sat back, wiping the bloody pocketknife with the torn remains of my shirt. There was no trace of the insanity. No trace of the cruel grin.

There was nothing but a cold, dark stare that promised a lot more blood than this.

“Do you know what I just carved into you?” He asked, his voice quiet as my eyelids fluttered, the pain starting to overtake my ability to stay conscious. “Do you know what I just carved across your chest? It’s going to scar, Peter. It’s going to be with you for the rest of your
Sluggishly lifting my pounding head, I got a glimpse of my bloody, mangled chest.

My breath hitched, prompting a cough. My head thunked back against the concrete. I gazed at Bucky, whose face was warped in absolute fury as he stared at Jason.

HYDRA.

He’d cut the word into me.

Tears fell from my burning eyes, mixing with the blood still flowing from my nose and mouth. Unconsciousness gently tightened its hold on me.

“You’re ours now,” his quiet voice coaxed as he slowly shut the cell door. “Whether you like it or not.”

And finally unconsciousness took pity on me and dragged me down.

Bucky watched sadly from the corner, a tear falling from his eye.

Thor Odinson

In the millennium of my life, I had felt this kind of agony very few times.

It was overwhelming in a torturous sort of way. The feeling of helplessness was far too real to me, and far too strong.

Heimdall had sadly informed me that he was not able to uncover young Peter’s location.

“There could be many reasons,” he’d said sadly, his golden eyes glowing apologetically. “It could be that he is being shielded from me by dark magic. It could even be that he is simply somewhere I cannot currently see.” He paused, turning away, and I feared the worst. “Or, my friend, it could be that his life force is so weak…I simply cannot locate him based on that alone.”

The memory heaved a sigh from my lungs.

I felt useless.

Stella, small as she was, was resting against my chest, curled in my palm. The poor thing had been distraught ever since young Peter was taken. I cannot say that I blamed her, or did not share her distress.

My finger curled up to stroke her ear, and she snuffled slightly in her sleep, burrowing deeper towards me.

Despite it all, a small smile found its way onto my face.

Last night, I had dreamt of young Peter screaming out for me. I had dreamt that he was just beyond my fingertips, and he slipped into an icy abyss with hope still flickering in his eyes that I would reach him, save him.

But I could not.
The others were working, or sleeping. I could not burden their already fragile dispositions with my problems.

So, I made Peter’s hot chocolate.

And, as a warrior must at some points in a prolonged battle, I cried over the steaming mug, weeping for what could have been.

I did not understand technology like the others. I could not interrogate like Lady Natasha. Heimdall could not help us, though he wanted to. With Mjolnir, I might have searched for him flying to every point in the world. I would have searched every corner of the Earth. But alas, I could not.

So I could only sit, and ask Odin for strength to guide me.

I could not help locate young Peter. But when it came time to rescue him from HYDRA’s clutches, I would show the world what happened when they crossed the god of thunder.

**Bucky Barnes**

Too slow.

We were going far too slow.

It had been *days*. Days, with nothing. We were getting close, yeah, but…not close enough.

Natasha rarely rested. She interrogated our prisoner for hours on end. She never let him rest. That meant, though, that she never rested, either. She didn’t seem to mind.

I paced outside the interrogation room, listening the agent’s cries, and wondering how many times Peter had screamed in that hellhole. A shiver wracked my body.

Were they keeping him warm? If was somewhere cold year-round, how cold must he have been? Were they at least keeping him somewhere with controlled air temperatures? Or was freezing to death in the basement of some shack in the mountains?

Had they fed him? Given him water? Or was he starving, like he was back on the streets?

Was he restrained? Did they chain him up like an animal? Did he at least have the freedom to walk around, to move?

Had they injured to the point where that wasn’t even an option?

The thought almost made me throw up.

“Bucky,” Steve said gently. I flinched. I hadn’t heard him come up. “You need to rest, man.”

“Not until he’s safe,” I said, my tone firm.

“We don’t know when that’ll be,” Steve reasoned gently. “You know how much I want to get him back, Buck, but even I’ve rested. You won’t be able to save him if you’re running on fumes.”
“I’m fine, Steve,” I snapped, shooting him a glare. The HYDRA agent gave a cry.

Something like hurt flickered over Steve’s features, and he held up his hands, bowing his head a bit. “Fine. Have it your way.”

He walked away. Angrily, I shook my head, cursing myself.

I ruined it all.

The Avengers. The Accords, Tony and Steve’s friendship. Everything around me.

Peter.

Taken by the people who’d held me for so long.

I should have protected him.

I should have—

“SIBERIA!”

A shout from within the interrogation room snapped my head up.

“Say again?” Natasha growled, drawing a strangled shout from the agent.

“Base in northern Siberia,” the agent heaved, sounding absolutely drained.

I couldn’t breathe.

“Where?” Natasha prodded, sounding almost as hopeful as I felt.

“Near Ayan,” he said softly, groaning. “I give you location. Please…”

“Thank you,” she said, growling. “You’ve been most helpful.”

She stalked out of the doors, light in her eyes as she gazed at me with all the hope in the world. I grabbed her shoulders, a hint of a smile on my face. “Ayan, Siberia. Nat, please tell me that’s a location.”

“It’s a location,” she grinned, already running towards the others. I was right on her heels. “Let’s get our boy back, Bucky.”

I’m coming, Peter.

I’m coming for you, I swear.

And I’m never letting you go, ever again.

Peter Parker

When I woke, it was to being jostled roughly, then settling again. After the jostle, though, I was still moving.

With consciousness came the pain, and it came in crashing waves that ebbed and flowed in time with my beating heart. I furrowed my eyebrows at the sensation, but pain flared through my
broken nose as soon as I did that.

Blearily I blinked my eyes open, fluorescent lights smothering me. I blinked rapidly, clearing the spots from my vision.

“Oh, he’s awake,” a voice said to my left. I rolled my head in that direction to see Jason walking beside me, grinning. “Have a nice nap?”

I looked around, my heart leaping into my throat.

I was on a gurney. They were wheeling me through those horrible double-doors, towards the room where they cut me open. My left arm lay useless at my side, the mottled flesh unmoving and painful. My right arm was secured with a leather strap, as were my ankles.

I rolled my head weakly, feeling the panic begin to flare to life.

“Hope you and the leftie have said your goodbyes, because it’s definitely coming off now.”

I tugged weakly at the restraints, rolling my head from side to side, trying anything. “No, J-Jason, p-please—”

He patted my chest roughly, aggravating the barely sealed cuts. I arched off the gurney, crying out in pain, a rattling cough forcing its way through my lips.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll pass out once the saw reaches your muscle, at least. Though that’d be fun to watch.” He snapped his fingers and his eyes widened in remembrance. “Oh! My dad wanted to be here, but he had some business to take care of. He said to wish you luck.”

I began to feel sick.

My stomach rolled, and my chest heaved with every breath. They pushed the gurney through the double doors. I looked around frantically, the familiar stale smell of the antiseptic and the metallic splashes against the white backdrop making my heart beat even faster.

Despite still being absolutely freezing, sweat beaded on my temples, and I didn’t even notice when it mixed with the tears trailing steadily from my eyes.

In one fluid motion, they transferred me from the gurney to the cold steel table, strapping me down, tightening the restraints harshly and quickly. The one around my neck was too constricting, and I wheezed for breath, the urge to cough stifled by the pressure.

“N-no,” I rasped quietly, watching as the doctors prepared something in the corner. The sound of a saw whirring to life met my ears.

The fear was so intense I thought I’d die right there. My heart beat so loudly I was surprised I could hear anything else. Sweat seeped from every pore, my ragged breathing stuttered and halted. My eyes flicked around wildly, searching for something, anything to help me.

Bucky’s form was gone. Maybe he hadn’t left the cell. Or, more likely, the fear was bringing everything into sharp focus, and the hallucination disappeared.

I would’ve appreciated the comfort of his face.

“It’ll be over soon,” Jason’s voice whispered, almost soothingly. “You’ll be our new soldier, and you won’t ever have to think again.”
I pinched my eyes shut and heaved a sobbing breath, the heavy whimpers and pleas doing absolutely nothing.

The saw whirred to life once more. I kept my eyes tightly shut, sobbing, screaming, now, thrashing even as someone held me down, even as they tightened the restraints.

“Begin amputation,” someone’s voice said on my left.

The noise became louder as the saw approached my body. I screamed. And I screamed and screamed.

And then everything went to hell.

The world went white, and my body went limp. Perplexed, the scientists halted the saw’s ghastly descent. They looked at each other.

I seized.

It wasn’t like before. It wasn’t a small seizure, just an aftereffect of the electrocution.

This was violent, and horrible, and painful.

My body convulsed.

One restraint snapped. Then another. My body jerked in on itself, contorting so tightly, my muscles and tendons and sinew so taut and rigid, somewhere in the addled state of my mind, I was sure I would break my bones.

“Push the sedative—”

“—seizing uncontrollably—”

“—can’t operate like this—”

“—him under control, you worthless idiots—”

The third restraint. My limbs were free. Another couple seconds, and the one at my waist snapped, as well.

The one around my neck was too tight.

Even as I continued to viciously jerk and spasm, the strap digging into my neck prevented any shred of oxygen from entering my lungs. I distantly felt my face flush deep red.

“—asphyxiating, get rid of—”

Frantic hands unlatched the restraint at my neck, and in time with the continuous seizing, I took a gasping breath.

The pain was excruciating. Every fiber of my being was on absolute fire. I was no doctor, but I knew that seizures weren’t supposed to be like this. The victim was usually…near unconsciousness. But I could comprehend almost everything around me, including a lot of pain and terror.

Hands, dozens and dozens of hands, fought to hold me down, but none of them could. The jerking was too feral, too powerful, for any of them to hold down with just their own strength. A
particularly violent spasm sent me crashing to the ground, where I landed without so much as a grunt.

A few minutes more, and then, I lay still.

I heard the heavy breathing of the scientists in almost startling clarity, every sound amplified tenfold. The smell of sterilized sheets and tangy, metallic instruments, once annoying, was now almost overwhelming. I opened my eyes and the lights pierced right through them. I made a sound of pain in the back of my throat, the vibration of my vocal cords grating my nerves.

After a moment, I forced myself to push off the ground, all my weight on my shaking right arm, my ribs groaning in protest, my chest pulling and tugging where all the cuts were carved.

The scientists watched me warily, Jason staring with wide, unblinking eyes. Shakily, I grabbed for the steel table, attempting to use it for support to stand.

In my hand, it crumpled like tin foil.

“That’s…impossible,” Jason breathed, stumbling back into the wall, looking like he wanted to be angry, but remaining too surprised to make the switch. “They’re dormant. The power…you can’t—”

The power.

My powers.

I glanced at Jason again, glancing again at my hand. With a trembling disposition and steadily beating heart, I glanced at my left arm.

It was still gruesome and horrible and open and infected and rotting.

But the gangrene was…much less prominent. Even as I watched, my…now, I supposed enhanced, vision…could faintly see the fading of the green. It was a slow process.

But it was healing.

I looked up, carefully using the remains of the table to stand, facing Jason and the scientists surrounding me.

My good hand curled into a fist at my side. I wobbled trying to stand without support, but it didn’t matter.

If I had to fight every last one of them, I would. But I was getting out of here.

Now.

Chapter End Notes

Hehehehe Scott's so funny
Hope you're enjoying! Thanks!
Chapter 33

Steve Rogers

The Quinjet was packed.

Usually, it was just the nine of us who used it—even our biggest one—and even then, we usually all didn’t go on missions, unless it was critical.

Now it was the nine of us, T’Challa, Okoye, Scott Lang, and a cat. Shuri and Nakia, after explaining Shuri’s new technology, which would help us with the stealth and attack portion of the rescue, had stayed at the Compound at T’Challa’s insistence.

The young girl’s reaction had been comical.

I spared a glance at the snowy landscape before a phantom shiver worked its way through my body and I had to turn away, the memory of the iciness becoming a bit too real.

Instead, I gazed over the motley crew with something like nervous amusement fluttering in my chest, sighing with a small smile and turning back to the helm, checking to make sure we were still on course.

Our ETA was 46 minutes.

The small smile bled from my face as I remembered Peter.

An ironic, bitter chuckle forced its way up my throat as I remembered the first time I’d had a conversation with him. The kid had been ninety pounds soaking wet, sitting curled up on the bed, staring at me with eyes that screamed both vulnerability and defiance. I’d tried to reason with him, and he’d effectively told me that I may as well quit asking.

I smiled at the memory. He’d come so far.

And now, HYDRA was ruining it all.

“Dammit,” I breathed, running a hand through my hair.

“Watch your mouth, punk,” a raspy voice said behind me, the joking quality shrouded in worry and exhaustion.

My shoulders slumped, both in annoyance and relief, and I turned to face Bucky. He was standing behind my seat, arms crossed, looking through the window, down at the snowy mountains.

“Only if you watch yours.”

Wordlessly, he took a seat beside me in the unoccupied copilot’s seat.

We sat in companionable silence for a few moments, though I could feel the intensity coming off of him in waves. He finally spoke, causing me to start.
“I’m sorry, Stevie.”

“For what?” I asked, turning to him with a raised eyebrow, feigning ignorance. Of course I knew what he was sorry for, though he had no reason to be.

He sighed, dragging his flesh hand down his face. “For… snapping at you.” There it was. “For how I’ve been lately.” Yeah, that too. “For… for ruining you and Stark’s friendship.” That I hadn’t been expecting.

I’d thought we passed that, a long time ago.

“Buck, you didn’t—”

“I did,” he said shortly, and I stopped, willing to hear him out before I denied it again. “I don’t care if you think everything’s okay now, it’s not. I don’t miss the way he looks at me. He’s polite, and he’s generous, but we’re not friends. We’ll protect each other, because we’re part of the team, but we’re not friends.” He paused, looking away as my heart twisted. “I can’t expect anything more. I know that. I just…the stories you tell me, of how you used to be…” He paused again, closing his eyes. “I’m sorry. I screwed that up for you, and… it’ll probably never be the same.”

“You’re right.” A new voice chimed in behind us.

Swiveling around, I watched Tony Stark, in all his narcissistic glory, swagger up the steps to the pilot and copilot seats. As always when he was angry, or sad, or emotional in general, his face was blank. “It’s not ever gonna be the same, Robo-cop, but if it eases your monster of a guilt complex, I’m not sure I want it to be.”

I had to raise an eyebrow at that. Bucky turned as well, not hiding his surprise very well. My God, the man was emotionally drained. “Come again, Tin Man?”

Tony smirked, though his eyes were tired. Hell, we were all tired. “You’re a pain in the ass. And you’re a general asshole. And I kind of hate you. But who found the kid?”

And instantly, I realized where Tony was going, a hint of a smile forming on my lips.

Bucky had. Bucky had found Peter’s whereabouts. Or, rather, he had found the whereabouts of a couple of rogue HYDRA agents who’d popped up on our radar. When we’d found them, they’d been beating the kid senseless.

Bucky had found Peter.

“I guess… I did?” Bucky said, his exhausted frame slumping a bit at the mention of Peter.

“You guess,” Tony condescended. “Yeah. Ya did. And I don’t like you. And if we’re ever friends, it’s going to take a hell of a while.” Tony looked away, staring out at the white wasteland, much like Bucky had done a few minutes prior. “But… you found him, and now we’ve all got a whole-ass kid to take care of. You love that kid. I love that kid. So… I’ll put up with you with… a little less… assholey-ness from now on.”

Bucky blinked. That was… probably one of the nicest things Tony had ever said to him.

“Thank you,” Bucky said quietly, not meeting his eyes.

“My pleasure,” Stark said, all business, his bloodshot eyes glancing to me, waiting for my unavoidable interjection, as he once told me.
In an attempt to lighten the mood, I said, “Aren’t you going to kiss and make up?”

Tony gave half a smile. Bucky glanced my way, trying to react, but his eyes dimmed again.

I sighed. It was a lousy attempt, anyways.

“Now that the custody war is over,” Clint said cheekily, sidling up to the three of us, “what’s our ETA?”

While Stark choked at the thought of that situation, I relayed the time. “39 minutes until touchdown, then a half-mile hike through the mountains to the base; it’s the closest we can land the Quinjet safely. Start suiting up."

Clint nodded, pausing, before clapping Bucky on the shoulder. “We’re gonna get our kid back, Bucky. Don’t worry.”

Bucky hummed in acknowledgment, but said nothing, staring out at the snow as it was swept aside by the speed of our jet. We were close to the ground to avoid any unwanted attention, so every detail was visible. Clint glanced at me and shrugged helplessly, and I nodded in thanks of his attempt.

The only thing that could help Bucky now would be getting Peter back. That was really the only thing that would help any of us.

So by God, we’d get him back, if we had to burn the entire base down.

Peter Parker

Exhaustion ate at me from every angle. My bones, my tendons, my muscles and limbs and joints all screamed and ached with utter fatigue.

But I kept going.

Getting out of the operating room—a shiver ran through me at the memory of the whirring saw, descending, coming to, to cut, to cut it off—

I choked in a breath. Bucky’s voice, be it real or imaginary, whispered, Breathe, Peter. You have to keep going. Breathe with me.

I stopped, leaning against a pale wall, clutching my arm to my chest, heaving in heavy breaths. And though I wanted nothing more than to slide down the wall and collapse in a bloody heap and close my eyes, I pushed off and kept moving.

Getting through all of the doctors and scientists had been…I didn’t want to say easy, but…not as difficult as it should have been.

One push, and they went flying. That’s what it had taken for most of them. Just a push.

I shivered at what that entailed.

Jason had been…much less willing.
He’d screamed absolute bloody murder and come at me with every shred of his training. I was too slow to dodge most of his hits. My body was battered and bruising from his fists, his boots, his elbows…

But in a desperate attempt to defend myself, in a moment of the animalistic need to get away, I’d brought my right arm around towards him with all my strength, with a desperate yell that had echoed off the walls. It crashed into his head, stunning him to the point of unconsciousness. He sprawled out at me feet and I swayed as I stood over his unconscious form.

I could’ve done it.

I could’ve killed him.

He was unconscious, completely helpless and vulnerable, in front of me, just like I’d been.

Dazedly, frighteningly calm, I’d glanced over at the electric saw that had been so close to me, so close to cutting my arm off.

I’d reached for it, but I hadn’t grabbed it.

I didn’t want anyone else to die. Not even Jason, and definitely not by my hand. I’d seen so much of it, and I didn’t want to invite it back into my life. The Avengers would take care of him, and he’d probably go to an asylum for the rest of his life.

I can’t say I was unhappy with that prospect.

I stumbled suddenly as a wave of dizziness washed over me, my shoulder slamming into the wall as I tried to right myself. As I did so, an alarm started wailing.

The sound was too loud.

Whimpering, closing my eyes against the harsh, pulsing lights now warping the world around me, I leaned further against the wall, feeling my knees shake.

Keep going, Bucky’s voice pleaded, more desperate now.

“Can’t,” I breathed, my bare chest heaving with each breath. The cuts on my chest bled now. While my arm wasn’t as…rotten…as it had been, it was still very, very close to dying flesh. My lungs rattled with every exhausted breath I took, phlegm and blood and mucus crawling its way up my throat with every cough. My broken nose and cut lip and bruised cheek throbbed in time with my pulsing heart. My legs shook underneath me, my emaciated frame barely functioning. My vision was blurred, my senses were going haywire, and the strength I’d used to escape that awful room had been more than I had to begin with.

I was…on the edge. I had very little left to give.

I stumbled again, falling to my knees and slouching against the pale wall. Voices filtered through the hallways, coming closer, closer, closer.

Peter, Bucky’s voice, again. I closed my eyes and leaned my feverish head against the cool wall, though I shivered violently. Peter, come on, kid, please. Get up.

I couldn’t.

The voices were coming closer. Heavy boots echoed against the steel walls.
I felt myself slipping away. Blearily I blinked my eyes open as the voices neared me, just around the corner. They’d catch me. They’d catch me, and they’d hurt me, and they’d—they’d cut—it off—

A sob choked its way up my throat.

And then I saw salvation.

A door, just a couple feet across the hallway.

Not a permanent solution, but a place to hide, and regather my thoughts and a bit of strength.

With the last of my strength, I pushed myself up and stumbled blindly to the door, tears pooling in my eyes, and threw it open. I crashed through and closed it just in time to hear the voices thunder around the corner.

I collapsed on my side, the voices blurring past.

I barely had time to register a mop, some bleach, and a stack of cleaning supplies—things that meant I was in a cleaning closet, probably—before I registered that I was safe, for a moment, and drifted away.

Bucky Barnes

“Moving in,” I breathed into the com, my heart hammering in my chest. Natasha moved silently beside me, her handgun steady in her palm, his Widow Bites ready. I clutched the gun in my hands just a little tighter, determination flowing through my veins, pumping in time with my heart.

“We’re right behind you,” Sam said over the radio, his voice crackling.

The hike had been brutal, but quick. The coldness had seeped past our thermal gear, biting cold eerily like the kind I’d felt just before—

Ignore it, a voice said as I felt HYDRA’s phantom hands on me again. I did.

Nat patted my shoulder. She didn’t smile. She wouldn’t smile until Peter was safe with us. But her presence was comforting.

I nodded to her, and we wrenched the door open and moved in, shutting it against the brutal wind, barely catching the flicker of an alarm sounding and flashing lights bouncing around.

Immediately, the lights went out.

I smirked. Scott Lang had been good for something after all.

He’d snuck in through on of the heating vents earlier on his “steed” and made it to the main control room, where he’d told us he was ready to go normal-size anytime and cut the power. We’d surrounded the base at all the entrance and exit points (in pairs, of course, because Steve “Safety First” Rogers was our fearless leader) and given Scott the signal.
And now, here we were.

Shouting filled our ears as HYDRA agents started barking orders throughout the base, our night vision catching sight of people coming out of rooms and blindly feeling along the walls. Various expletives, both Russian and German, filled the halls.

Our plan was to stay undetected for as long as possible, so we filtered through the panicking agents like sand through a child’s fingers, slipping past them and on to the next hallway.

Scott had scoped out the base a bit on his way to the control room. While he didn’t have the entire thing mapped out, and while he hadn’t been able to find Peter, he’d zeroed in on a couple important spots to check out. There was a basement, which we thought may have been a converted dungeon or holding cell, an infirmary, and solitary confinement chambers along the outside of the base.

My blood boiled at the thought of Peter being in any one of those, but those were our best bets.

“Shit,” Stark said over the com, the sound of firing repulsors blasting over the com. “I’ve been made.”

“I won,” Clint said dryly. “Rhodes, you owe me twenty bucks.”

“Hm?” Sam asked even as he helped Stark fight off his attackers. “Why wasn’t I in on this bet? What was it?”

“That Tony would be the first one noticed,” Rhodey said dejectedly, my visor—courtesy of T’Challa’s sister—showing Rhodey’s respective dot moving across the blueprint of the base, headed to Tony’s and Sam’s location to help them. “I’d thought he could slip through, but nooooo. Guess your head was just too big to fit through these hallways.”

Stark choked indignantly even as I heard another thump. “Rhodey, how could you—”

“Chatter, people,” Steve snapped, then sighed, another thump coming across the com, followed by a strangled yell. “Dammit, guys, come on. Now I’ve been made.”

“On my way to your position, Capitan,” T’Challa sighed, changing course on the blueprint.

Okoye’s voice came from where she manned the Quinjet, grumbling, “It is truly a wonder how you are so successful as a team.”

“It’s…a work in progress,” Bruce added quietly, sounding absolutely mortified from his place next to her. We’d only call the Hulk if we needed him.

Thor bellowed laughed over the com, a significant crackle indicating he’d used some lightning on someone. “Does this bet involve alcohol?”

“It sure can,” Lang said with a grin.

I ignored the chatter, Natasha and I slipping quietly through the throng of disoriented agents, finally making it to an empty hallway. I didn’t blame the others for their banter. We were all stressed to our limit, and a little bit of familiar back and forth was probably easing their stress a bit.

Nat and I couldn’t join, though. We just…couldn’t be distracted.
“Bucky,” Nat breathed, stopping before a set of ominous double doors. I stopped with her, my night vision zeroing in on the entrance. I clicked my visor, getting rid of the blueprint, and waited as Nat got into position. When she nodded, I kicked the door in, and she swept her gun through the dark room as I followed close behind.

“Clear,” she said, slowly lowering her firearm.

It was some kind of infirmary. Beds lined the walls, unoccupied. Medical machines sat beside each one.

I was more focused on the looming doors at the back of the room.

We repeated the process of sweeping the room. Only this time, it wasn’t empty.

A dozen scientists lay sprawled around the room in varying states of consciousness. Several machines lay sparking and broken by their prone forms, lighting up the walls with each surge of power. A gurney lay forgotten on its side against the wall, specks of blood staining the white sheets.

I saw the table in the middle of the room and almost fell.

A metal slab with broken restraints sat innocently, blood staining the left side and the floor beneath it. Nat sucked in a breath next to me.

As calmly as I could, I approached the table, hesitantly feeling the blood.

It was starting to get tacky, but it was still fresh.

“It looks…like he escaped,” I said, allowing a sliver of hope to enter my voice. “Like he got away. The blood’s still fresh, Nat.”

Nat gave me a jerky nod. “He may have left a blood trail. We’ll see if we can follow it.”

I nodded. In a burst of fury and rage and hopelessness and terror, I flipped the table over with a yell, the crash of steel on the linoleum floors too loud for a stealth op, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t care. Nat didn’t say anything, only waited patiently for me to calm down a bit.

They’d made him bleed. I couldn’t deny that anymore. They’d hurt him, they’d kept him in pain, and they’d made him bleed on a cold table in a white room.

So I’d make them bleed.

I’d bleed them dry.

Clint Barton

As I shot off another arrow, the emergency generator kicked on.

“Lang,” I hissed into the radio, whipping my bow across the face of an approaching HYDRA agent. She dropped with a thud, but was replaced by six more. “Get the lights! The lights!”
“I’m trying!” He shouted, obviously locked in his own battle. “They’re everywhere!”

“Can’t you call your ant friends and have them do it?” Stark sniped over the com.

“There’s no ants in Siberia!” Lang defended, sounding miffed. “It’s freezing!”

“Well, that’s great,” Rhody griped.

I sighed, finally clearing my path of the agents and darting to the nearest vent. I hoisted myself up and in, sliding through the tunneling system with practiced ease. “Okoye, can you switch my visor map to the vent system?”

“Done,” her accented voice said, and the blueprint for the vent system popped up on my visor, a big red X over the control room access, a moving blue dot in my position.

“Thanks,” I breathed, swinging around the corner.

A few moments of crawling through the vents had me freezing, but I kept going, trying to up my pace to help my friends. I was livid, everybody was livid, and we were all so scared for Peter I think our only group coping mechanism was to slip back into our familiar banter, to pretend like it was just another mission.

I was halfway to the control room when everything went to hell.

“Uh, guys?” Bruce’s voice came hesitantly over the radio, even as Okoye shouted a Wakandan curse that would’ve probably made Steve cry. “We’ve got company. Like…a lot of company.”

“How much is a lot?” Tony bit out, seemingly preparing to fly back and help.

“Like…at least three dozen agents…and maybe three or four bazookas?”

“Wha—did you just say bazooka?” Sam asked indignantly.

“Those are still things that exist?” Scott huffed.

“Guys, they’re…um…charging up,” Bruce said, then took a deep breath. “Big Guy’s coming out, okay?”

“Bruce, I’m nowhere near you,” Nat bit over the com, sounding worried. “I won’t be able —”

“It’ll be fine, Nat,” Bruce said, sounding surprisingly calm. “The Other Guy and I are on the same page for right now. We won’t do anything to endanger Peter.”

Nat didn’t respond. Neither did anyone else.

The Hulk’s roar sounded across the valleys, so loud I could hear it both over Okoye’s com and in my own ears as it rattled through the vents.

“Hey, Big Guy,” Stark said with a grin. “Wanna have some fun?”

The Hulk roared again, and I couldn’t suppress a grin.

I finally dropped into the control room, my feet landing perfectly on one unfortunate HYDRA agent’s shoulders, sending him crashing to the ground where his head thunked. Scott
“grinned. “Finally pulling your weight around here, Eagle-Eye?”

“I’m sorry, you’re officially expelled,” I said, sending three arrows into the agents surrounding him. “First of all, you’re on probation, Bug Man. Secondly, you ever call me an eagle again, I’ll castrate you.”

“Geez,” Sam breathed over the com at my words. “Scott, I told you not to insult him.”

Scott gulped even as another agent went down. “Noted.”

Lunging for the generator’s control, my hand closed around the lever to shut it down. Just before I could, a thunderous boom shook the building. I faltered, falling against the control panel. Scott landed on his ass, and the agents around us still standing fell into each other, against the walls, looking just as confused as we did.

A yell tore over the com.

“Down,” a voice wheezed. With a jolt, I realized it was Sam. “I’m d-down…”

“I’m coming, Sam, hang on,” Steve yelled, sounding like he was sprinting. “Guys, there was an explosion! What set it off?”

“I don’t know!” I yelled back, trying to turn the cameras back on to see what was happening. “I’m in the control room, no one touched anything—”

One of the agents laughed. I whipped around to face him. Scott had taken care of the others. They were all on the ground, either unconscious or injured, but this one was propped up against the wall, holding his ribs and laughing.

“What’s so funny, asshat?” I growled, grabbing his vest and hauling him up, slamming his against the wall. He spat blood to the side, his bloody teeth bared in a grin.


I threw him down, touching the com at my ear frantically. “Guys, we have to find Peter and get out. It’s some kind of self-destruct protocol; the base is probably gonna come down any minute!”

“Copy,” Nat’s cool voice came over the line. “You evacuate. Bucky and I have a lead on Peter. Get Sam and get out, and we’ll meet you outside.”

Before any of us could protest, our coms went dead.

“Steve?” I shouted into the static. “Nat? Sam?”

“It’s no use,” Scott shouted over the rumbling of the base as it creaked ominously. “We’ve gotta get outside!”

“We can’t,” I shouted, typing furiously, trying to get something back online to see the damage. “The others—”

“—will find the kid,” he said, putting a hand on my shoulder. I turned to face him. He’d taken his helmet off, and his expression was determined. “I’ve got a daughter, Clint, and I know you have kids.”
I jerked at his words, both of us frozen, staring at each other even as the room shook.

“We’ve gotta get out.” He put his helmet on and pushed the button on his suit that shrunk him, and I saw a little spec fall onto his flying ant friend and up into the vent I’d come from. “Come on.”

I glanced back at the computers, tightening my fists.

Lila, Cooper, Nathaniel. *Laura*.

I closed my eyes.

Hoisting myself up into the vents, I did the only thing I could, and trusted Bucky and Nat to find him.

**Peter Parker**

I awoke to the room trembling.

It shook around me, the walls groaning, the cleaning supplies around me rattling and falling off the shelves, almost like an earthquake.

With a grunt of pain, I pushed myself up, slumping against the wall as I tried to breathe. Apprehensively, I glanced at my arm.

It was looking…better. Still horrible, but a little better. Most of the black had faded, though it was still charred on the edges, and some of the green gangrene was still visible. I sighed, clenching my teeth as a stab of pain went through me. The cuts burned on my chest as I coughed, spitting to the side. Blood streaked the mucus.

I shivered as my body sagged. I knew I had to keep moving. I had to get out.

But I was terrified of what I’d find.

I knew I was anywhere near society, and I couldn’t bring myself to drag my frame through miles and miles of wilderness, or snow, or desert, or…

*Don’t think like that,* Bucky’s voice soothed quietly. I closed my eyes and let the words wash over me, crying silently, my thin shoulders shaking. *Focus on getting out. Then you can figure out how to get away. For now, just get out.*

Just get out.

I could do that.

I had powers now, a way to defend myself. I could get out.

I stood shakily, the metal supplies rack bending under my feeble grip, and slowly got to my feet. My knees buckled and I fell against the wall, jarring my arm. A scream tore from my throat, hot tears sliding down my face.

But I didn’t fall, because I had to get out.

I opened the door and slipped into the empty hallway. The alarms had stopped, and faint
lights flickered overhead as the base continued to shake. What had happened while I’d been unconscious?

Leaning against the wall, I dragged myself through the dim hallway, turning the corner, heaving another unsteady breath.

I didn’t know where I was. As long as I took some left turns as well as right, I could probably find the edge of the base and work my way around from there until I found an exit, or a garage or something. If I could get to a car or something, I could—

A roar shook the building even more, and I stopped, listening intently. The sound was too loud and hurt my ears. I winced, wondering what the hell could’ve made a sound like that.

I rounded another corner. I pushed myself off the wall unsteadily, my left arm tucked against my bloody chest, and prepared to turn left, to start my way around the base. I turned—

Something cold and hard slammed into the side of my head, forcing my already unsteady body to collapse. I groaned weekly, fire flaring over my injuries, my head pounding. Blood slithered from my temple, down my neck, into my ear, dripping onto the cold floor.

I tried to use my right hand to push myself up, but a boot hit my chest. I yelled hoarsely, coughing twice before collapsing, curling up as much as I could.

With double vision, I looked up at my attacker.

Jason stood there, seething, a pistol in his hands.

My breath hitched, and I slowly lowered my head to the ground, exhaustion, defeat, terror paralyzing me. Jason shoved his boot at my shoulder, and with a grunt I rolled onto my back, my limbs shaking next to me as I tried desperately to summon the strength to fight back.

Jason’s hateful expression was somewhat warped by the swollen side of his face. He swayed unsteadily, indicating a concussion. But he stood over me again, and somewhere in the deepest, most hateful parts of myself, I regretted not killing him.

He pointed the gun at me. “You,” he seethed, his hand shaking as he clutched the gun in a white-knuckled grip, “never stop, do you?”

I lay shivering on the ground, unable to respond.

“I wanted to use you,” he said slowly, a crazed grin spreading over his features, his wide eyes reflecting the pale lights, horrifically painting him with shadows and lies. “I wanted to use you until you were a husk. Nothing. But here we are. I guess, if I can’t use you,” he cocked the gun, grinning even wider, “I can at least kill you.”

I couldn’t fight back anymore.

“I’m so sorry,” I thought as I sobbed once, thinking of my family, and what this would do to them. I’m so sorry. I tried. I held on. But I can’t anymore.

“m…s-so…s-s-sorry…” I breathed, closing my eyes as tightly as I could, waiting for the world to flicker out. Waiting for death to come for me this time. Waiting for it to take me.

Heavy footsteps slid around the corner. “No!”
I jerked. I knew that voice. I knew that voice.

Hesitantly, I opened my eyes, but my double vision blurred.

“Buc—”

A single shot rang through the hall.

My eyes slipped closed.

Chapter End Notes

Hehehehe I did a thing lol
Chapter 34

Bucky Barnes

Nat and I followed the blood trail, silently. The flickering lights in the hallways were enough to get us through, so we’d ditched our night vision gear. A small smear of blood stained the bottom of a wall to my right.

Beyond that, a bloody handprint stained a door.

“Nat,” I breathed, quickening my pace towards the door, Natasha hot on my heels, silent as ever.

I nodded to her once before throwing open the door, sweeping my gun around the dim closet once before lowering the weapon. A small puddle of blood stained the floor, smeared against the wall and the tiles like someone had been lying there.

“He escaped,” Nat breathed, looking hopefully down the hallway. “He got away from them. He could still be wandering the base; it’s fresh.”

I’d barely waited for her to finish before I was up and moving down the hall, gun at the ready. We followed the blood smears that seemed to be everywhere—the thought made my stomach turn—and as they started growing fresher, we stopped dead in our tracks.

A thump and an unmistakable cry of pain reached my ears, and I was running.

A voice drifted through the hall, angry and loud, and slurred, like they were drunk or concussed. One more turn, and finally, I reached the voice.

Peter.

Peter was there. And alive.

And on the floor with that bastard Jason standing over him, pistol ready.

He shot me a look and grinned.

“No!” I shouted, surging forward, gun up and ready to spray a stream of bullets—

Bang.

I heard a single shot. I whipped around to see Natasha standing, her gun up and still in position, her eyes absolutely merciless.

I turned back to Jason, who was staring down at his chest. “Oh,” he said feebly, pawing at the growing bloodstain over his heart. The gun slipped from his fingers and he stumbled forward two steps, before finally his eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed forward.

On top of Peter.
“Shit,” I breathed, sprinting to his side and heaving the dying psychopath off of Peter, whose eyes were closed.

My heart dropped.

The kid was an absolute wreck. His chest was bloody and mutilated, and he had a nasty headwound still pouring blood. Dried blood crusted his nostrils and his lips, and the open wound on his arm would have made me gag if I hadn’t been so hardened to gore.

Fumbling for his jawline, I checked his pulse. It was weak and fluttering, but it was even. “He’s okay for now,” I said to Natasha, who was keeping a lookout with her gun raised, gentle, worried eyes on Peter’s face.

“Let’s get him out of here,” she said quietly, not quite looking at me.

As gently as I could, I slipped my left hand under the back of his neck, lifting his torso up to lean against me, and slid my other hand under his knees. Mentally counting to three, I hefted him up.

I stumbled back, overestimating his weight. The nausea increased when I thought of how much weight he’d lost, and how much of the missing weight was blood loss.

Peter’s eyes fluttered.

“Peter?” I said quietly, following Natasha as she led us back towards the others. The building gave a particularly violent shiver, and I tightened my grip on him. “Kid, come on; open your eyes for me, okay?”

Slowly, his eyes opened.

“Buc-cky?” He stuttered, suddenly shivering. I subconsciously knew that my metal arm probably wasn’t helping any, but I didn’t want to stop and waste time giving him my jacket.

I smiled, relief slumping my shoulders for the first time since Thaddeus effing Ross had shown up. “Hey, kid. I’ve gotcha. You’re okay.”

His eyebrows furrowed. His tired, half-lidded eyes searched my face, then tried to roam around, but it seems like he was too tired to even move his head. “N-never…t-t-talked be-before…”

“Hm?” I asked, skidding around a turn as Natasha whipped around to avoid falling debris from the ceiling. I tried to maintain a calm façade for Peter’s sake, but the building was coming down fast. We had to get out. Nat and I locked eyes, and she nodded, eyes lingering on Peter’s face for just a second before she started leading us down a detour to avoid the damaged areas of the building.

Nat pulled up a map of the Compound on her visor, quickly scouting an entrance manageable for us. She radioed the others and found out that it was tunneled and caved in, but that they’d work on getting it cleared while we made our way there. I heard Steve’s sigh of relief and hasty affirmative over the line, but my attention whipped back to Peter at the sound of his feeble voice.

“Wh-when y-you…were w-with m-m-m-e…y-you di-didn’t t-talk…” he stammered, his eyes drooping with exhaustion. “N-not…real…”

I almost stopped dead in my tracks, but muscle memory kept me going.

He’d hallucinated at some point. He’d hallucinated me.
God, I hoped it wasn’t bad. I prayed to God I hadn’t hurt him. I’d had those hallucinations, those nightmares, and they were horrible. Of people you loved and cared about and trusted to protect you hurting you—

Not now. Not now.

“I’m real,” I reassured, but my voice was shaking. “I’m real, Peter, I promise. I’m holding you. I’m talking to you. These are my hands, grounding you to right now. Remember the first time I said that?” I asked, thinking bringing up a memory we shared would help him. “Remember? I’m with you, kid.”

Understanding slowly flickered through his eyes. He stared at me for a few moments, even as I carted him through the halls behind an ever-quickening Natasha, and finally, his eyes welled up.

“You f-found me,” he said, his voice so broken, and so quiet, and so tired. His good arm slowly came up to latch onto my shirt, his shaking fist clenching the material as tightly as he could, which wasn’t all that tight.

I smiled down at him, forcing down the lump in my throat as I swung around another corner, Natasha knocking out two stray HYDRA agents before I’d even completed the turn. “Of course I did. I’ll always find you, Peter.”

He stared at me for one more second before his shoulders slumped and his eyes slipped closed. His hand remained fisted in my shirt. I felt a traitorous tear roll down my cheek, but I didn’t have the hands to wipe it away.

So it stayed, and was joined by more.

I’d never been so relieved in my entire life. The only feeling that came close was when Wakanda had finally managed to get those damn words out of my head. This feeling completely overwhelmed that one.

“Stop, Bucky,” Natasha’s steel voice cut straight through me, and I skidded to a halt, my arms instinctively tightening around Peter.

In front of us, the wall was completely caved in, debris and sparking electrical parts littering the hall, the roof caved in and the walls slumped to one side. It seemed like we’d found the site of the explosion—the steel beams that held the structural support for the base were spiderwebbed and shivering, threatening to collapse at literally any second.

But that’s not what interested me.

What interested me—and I’m sure Nat—was the Secretary of Defense Thaddeus Ross kneeling by the pile, an arm around his torso, blood at his temple, looking too injured to do much of anything.

After a tense second of silence, Natasha stalked forward, looming over the wheezing man with nothing short of fury screaming from her entire posture.

I knew better than to interfere, no matter how much the site of the man made my blood boil.

Ross looked up slowly, eyes flicking to me, then to Peter, and finally, up to Natasha.

I’d never seen a man look quite so afraid.
Steve Rogers

Clint, Scott, Okoye, Sam, and I were on the Quinjet, waiting anxiously for any news. Stella paced around the jet, occasionally nuzzling Clint’s hand. I hadn’t wanted to bring the cat, but Thor looked so lost when I tried to tell him no that I’d given in almost immediately.

I’d more or less forbidden Scott or Clint from going back to the base. They had families that didn’t sign up for this. No way was I letting that happen.

Sam was trying to stitch himself up while I held him down, but it wasn’t going very well. He’d been flying just beside the explosion site when it’d happened, and had been knocked clean through a steel wall. He had a broken collarbone, a radial head fracture in his elbow, and a gash in his side that was looking like it would need a couple dozen stitches.

Having Bruce to stitch him up would’ve been nice, but he was currently playing baseball with Iron Man. The ball happened to be whatever unfortunate HYDRA agent was closest.

Sam grunted in pain as the needle slipped from his bloody fingers. “Sorry, C-Cap,” he wheezed, closing his eyes and thunking back against the cot. “I can d-do it on other people, but n-not on myself…”

“Why don’t you just use Shuri’s superglue?” Okoye suggested, sauntering up, spear in hand. She’d been instrumental in keeping us all on track during the mission, walking us through Wakanda’s tech and running interference. She’d also managed to save the Quinjet from several bazookas.

“Superglue?” I asked questioningly, squeezing Sam’s shoulder in reassurance as the man took labored breaths.

“It’s medical, and completely safe, I assure you,” she said, smirking. She rummaged through one of Shuri’s “Man Down” kits, as she’d called them.

*I wanted to call them Broken White Boy kits, she’d huffed, glancing at T’Challa, who’d pinched the bridge of his nose in absolute mortification. But brother informed me that that was not politically correct.*

I’d had to give a laugh at that.

Okoye finally fished out the bottle of milky white gelatin, handing it to me. Stella leapt into her arms, having immediately taken to the warrior, and Okoye to her. Stella rested on her shoulders and meowed, nuzzling Okoye’s shaved head.

“There, darling,” she soothed, scratching the cat’s ears. Turning back to me, she said, “It’s designed to seal large wounds and prevent infection. It is a type of gelatin that partially hardens to keep the wound from moving, but will become gelatinous and easily removable with the solvent, which Shuri also equipped me with. It is also infused with a pain reliever, so it will not be painful to apply or remove.”

At this, Sam raised his heavy head, raising a skeptical eyebrow and panting, “You’re g-gonna…fix me with medical Jell-O?”

“You bet your ass we are,” Clint said with a tired smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Language,” I said reflexively, giving Sam a tepid glare when he smirked my way.
I applied the Jell-O to Sam’s wound, skeptical but willing to try pretty much anything at this point, and watched in amazement as the substance hardened gently as it came into contact with the flesh. Sam’s pinched face relaxed and his eyes slipped closed, his shoulders sagging in relief.

“I love this Jell-O,” Sam breathed before falling completely unconscious.

I let my head hang low and gave a relieved chuckle, glad that Sam was stable for now. I ran a hand through my hair and pressed a finger to my ear. “Iron Man, status.”

“Currently in a tender loving relationship,” he replied sarcastically, a thunk echoing over the line as the Hulk hit what sounded like a home run.

Exasperation flickered across my thoughts, but I shoved it down. “My fault. Should’ve known better. Rhodes, status.”

“Looking good,” Rhodey answered, grunting in exertion. “HYDRA agents are almost down. I think the Big Guy’s having too much fun, but that’s purely my own conjecture. Is Sam okay?”

“He’s okay,” I said with a smile towards Okoye, who nodded with a light smirk. “You can thank Wakanda for that.”

“Thank you, Wakanda,” Tony said, and I heard T’Challa sigh over the line.

I was about to chastise him when Nat’s voice crackled over the comm, detached and rushed. “We’ve got Peter.”

Chatter instantly died. Clint shot to his feet, Scott’s head snapping up expectantly. “Is he okay?” I asked, not knowing if I wanted the answer.

“He’s in bad shape,” Natasha admitted, sounding preoccupied. “We’ve got him, though, and he’ll be okay until we can get him help. Our side of the building is caved in; I need you to clear a path for us by the Quinjet. I’m sending you the specs now.”

No sooner had the words left her lips than the base’s diagram popped up on my visor, a tiny section of the wall highlighted in red. “Copy,” I said, springing to my feet. “En route now. Scott, Clint, Okoye, take care of Sam, okay?”

Clint nodded tersely while Scott’s head bobbed, and Okoye watched passively, comforting Stella.

“Thor, Rhodes, Tony, T’Challa, I’m sending you Nat’s specs now. Meet me as soon as you can. ASAP, people, double time it; we’re getting our kid home.”

There was no more chatter, no more banter. I leapt from the Quinjet and took off sprinting to Nat’s location, willing to tear down every brick in my way to get that kid back with us.

I just prayed we weren’t too late.

Natasha Romanov

The gun was steady in my hand as I stood in front of the pathetic, kneeling man, blood dripping from his body. My unforgiving eyes stared straight into his. He stared back, and though
his body was unflinching, his eyes were scared.

Because they knew that I would not show mercy.

Behind me, Bucky held Pyotr securely in his arms, his small, thin, bloody frame shivering, his sallow cheeks bright with fever. One arm—the arm with the infected, oozing, gruesome wound—hung limp behind Bucky, the other weakly clutching the material of the man’s shirt. Bucky adjusted him gently, the man’s eyes terrified, latched on to Pyotr like he would disappear any second. Pyotr’s head rested against his collarbone, his breath coming in short gasps.

Fury boiled inside of me, setting every nerve, every tendon, every bone on absolute fire. Never in my life had I felt such anger.

The building shook, as if personifying my rage. Soon, it would come down around us.

But this was something that needed to be done.

I tightened my grip on the hilt of the gun, aiming it between his eyes. My face expressionless, my muscles relaxed, my body ready. I remembered Laura Barton’s words and parroted them, because they were quite true. “You took the wrong boy, General.”

General Ross scoffed, though it came as more like a wheeze. “It appears so.” The man leaned forward, groaning, and straightened himself, though he couldn’t stand. “I must say, I didn’t expect you to be my ultimate killer, though I should have. I always knew you loved murder too much to retire.”

Though his words were meant to draw a reaction, I didn’t flinch. Not a single fiber of my being wavered. “Then you should have been more careful. Do you have any last words?”

The General glanced behind me at Pyotr’s shivering form, his eyes flicking back to mine. A smile crept onto his face. “He’ll never be the same. You’ve saved nothing but a broken body.”

I gave him a cold half-smile. “You let us worry about that, Ross. You have bigger problems.”

My finger tightened around the trigger.

But a feeble voice made me hesitate.

“Do…don’t, T-Tash-sha…”

My body went rigid. My gun never wavered, but my eyes did. They locked onto Pyotr’s little body, so small against Bucky’s, and his half-lidded, pain-filled eyes, concentrated on mine.

Bucky’s arms tightened. “Peter, save your strength, okay?”

And though it must have caused him agony, he shook his head, looking steadily at me. “N-no… mo-more death…not—not be-because of m-m-me…”

“Not because of you, Pyotr,” I soothed, my eyes hardening as they landed back on the pathetic creature kneeling in front of me. “For me. For us. For the Avengers.”

And I prepared to pull the trigger, but the sweet, stupid boy kept talking.

“I’m al…alive,” Pyotr breathed, pain clouding his features, determination prominent in every nerve. “Not…nothing t-to avenge.”
And dammit. *Dammit.*

So young. So innocent. So damn *good.*

I turned to the man I had dreamed of killing for so many days. Looked into his eyes. Saw the evil, saw the fear. Saw the humanity.

Saw what Pyotr saw, for just a split second.

Nothing more than a man afraid of dying.

And though it shred me apart, shred every part of me, went against every single instinct ingrained into my body, slowly, surely, I lowered my gun.

Because *Pyotr* knew. *Pyotr* knew that I was an assassin at heart, and it was addicting, and I had been clean for so, *so many years.* I had put this cold, calculated, cruel type of killing behind me, traded it for the heat of battle, fighting for survival.

*Pyotr* knew that once I started, once I did it one more time, I wouldn’t stop.

Or perhaps it was me that knew it.

The want, the animalistic *need* for blood, for power, were side effects of the Red Room training, and I had worked so hard to put them behind me. And it was so difficult. But I had done it. For Clint, for Laura and the kids, for myself, for the Avengers. Now, for *Pyotr.*

I couldn’t let him watch me slip back into the cold-hearted killer I used to be.

And if that meant letting the bastard General live, then murder be damned.

I tucked the gun into the holster on my belt, my hand so tight it shook. I turned to *Pyotr,* who was giving me a small, tired, proud smile. Despite his pain, his exhaustion, he was proud that I hadn’t killed the evil man in front of me.

And while a part of me was screaming, crying, begging to see the red drip from his forehead, another part of me was proud, too.

But *Pyotr’s* forgiveness was not mine.

I glared at the man in front of me, who was staring at *Pyotr* in absolute shock. Anger boiled in me to see his eyes on *Pyotr’s* vulnerable frame. “Eyes on me, bitch,” I bit out, bloodlust leaking into my words. “I may not kill you, but I am *not* finished with you.”

Ross’ eyes slid to me, apprehensive.

“I’m going to drag your pitiful body before the whole of America and show them what kind of a General you are. I’m going to expose every secret you have. Every single crime you’ve ever committed. I don’t care how long it takes me. I will ruin you. I will lock you away in some ungodly hole and I will come and show you what the people think of you. I will show you your crumbling empire if I have to tear it down one brick at a time.” My cold eyes, merciless, deadly, locked onto his cowering features. “That will be my revenge.” I glanced at *Pyotr,* a smile on my lips. *Because a certain teenager has me wrapped around his finger.*

Stalking towards him, I grabbed the General’s arm, yanking him up. He hissed in pain, stumbling, and I nodded to Bucky. I put vibranium cuffs on the Ross’s wrists, securing them behind him. As
the building began to shake, *Pyotr* lost consciousness in Bucky’s arms, his breathing labored, his body quivering.

Bucky and I took Ross and our boy to the Quinjet, winding through the crumbling halls as quickly as we could. When we reached a tunneled entrance near the direction of the Quinjet, we saw that the others had cleared it enough for us to climb through, as per my request.

Bruce, who had shrunk back to his human form—he’d told me before that he and the Big Guy had come to something of a truce for Peter’s sake, but I couldn’t believe it had actually worked—was wearing Avengers sweatpants and a white t-shirt and waiting with a backboard. Bucky settled *Pyotr* gently on it, strapping him down, whispering soothingly to the boy when he whimpered, and carted him quickly aboveground to the Quinjet.

For my part, I shoved Ross at a startled Steve, who took his arm and glanced at me questioningly.

I raised an eyebrow, daring him to challenge me. “He’s an official prisoner of SHIELD, and I’m his handler. He’s going to go in front of a judge and jury on international television and every single one of his crimes is going to be uncovered and exposed for every eye in the world. And then he’ll go rot in a hole for the rest of his miserable little life.” I crossed my arms. “Any complaints, Captain?”

Steve swallowed. “No, ma’am.”

I smirked, settling my eyes on the man in front of me, whose eyes were locked on the rubble at his feet. “I thought not.”

“What about the other one?” Tony asked, looking at Ross with absolute disdain. Ross’ eyes shot up at the mention of his son.

I looked from Tony to Ross, staring him in the eyes. “I shot him in the chest and left him to bleed out in a crumbling HYDRA base alone.”

Ross seemed to have expected the words, but his grief still showed. He bowed his head, his expression contorted.

I stalked right up to him and throat-punched him hard enough to send him gasping to his knees, a surprised Steve letting him fall.

“You do not get to feel grief,” I seethed, crouching in front of him as he gasped and coughed, barely maintaining his balance. “You do not get to feel sadness or regret for what your actions have done. That young man was a monster that you warped and twisted to your own needs. He was a lunatic. A deluded, sadistic, unfeeling madman.” I leaned in close, my lips almost brushing his ear. “Just. Like. You.”

Ross flinched.

“Trust me, Secretary Ross,” I said sarcastically, spitting his name like a curse. “I am not finished with you.”

I stood, standing over him for just a moment, before nodding towards Steve.

I was not finished with the good General by a long shot.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much! Hope you liked the reunion! Plus badass Natasha XD
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Peter Parker

I floated.

I drifted somewhere in between waking and unconsciousness. Sounds of an airship and frantic voices. Some clanging metal? Touch, too. Feelings. Jostling. Straps around my waist and thighs and shoulders, not biting like the chains, but tight, too tight—too tight, to cut it off—

And then a soothing voice that spread warmth and comfort through my agonized body, a gentle hand on my forehead. Familiar voices ensconcing me.

And then a sharp pain in my elbow, an unpleasant rush of cold into my being—

Wait—the pain was…going away?

Relief.

The first relief I’d felt in days. Maybe in weeks.

The first time in so, so long I hadn’t been in pain or afraid or both.

A soothing hand trailed over my sweat-matted hair, gentle, senseless whispers easing me back into the safety of unconsciousness. For some reason, as I slept, I dreamt of the story of Medea.

Bucky Barnes

Chaos.

That’s what it felt like. It felt like I’d been sucked into a vacuum of absolute chaos. The Quinjet was packed with bodies, moving around frantically. Natasha and Clint were at the helm, flying us back to the Compound as fast as the jet would go, but with so much extra weight, it wasn’t much faster than the normal. Scott was with them, glancing back anxiously every few seconds, but giving us space to work.

We’d put Peter on the bench, still strapped to the backboard. It made me sick to keep him strapped down. I saw the bruises on his wrists and ankles, around his waist and his neck. He’d been strapped down to that damn table. But it was unavoidable.

Sam was passed out on the other side of the jet, T’Challa and Okoye tending to his injury quietly. Thor, Scott, Steve, and Rhodey were packed against the walls like sardines, looking a little lost, watching anxiously as Tony and Bruce rushed around each other, trying to stabilize Peter’s vitals.

As soon as we’d gotten Peter on the jet, Stella had leapt to his side, hair raised and spine arched, ready to attack any strangers she detected. The flurry of movement must have confused her,
but she didn’t leave his side, curling up beside his right arm and meowing pitifully, sometimes pawing at his arm, becoming more insistent the longer he remained unconscious.

And I sat at Peter’s head, as out of the way as I could be, providing all the comfort I could. His head would toss sometimes, his face would bunch up in fear or pain or both, and I would resume my rhythmic ministrations, quietly whispering to him until he quieted again. He flinched sometimes, in pain or alarm I didn’t know, but the sight was enough to make me want to murder Jason Ross all over again, myself this time.

I couldn’t even touch the thought of Thaddeus Ross in the prisoner’s compartment below the jet. If I did, I’d kill him.

“He needs a blood transfusion,” Bruce said, hastily trying to irrigate the infected wound on his arm. With each flush of water, green, yellow, and black discharge drained from the wound, the mottled skin sickening. It splattered onto the metallic floor of the jet, forgotten. “He’s lost at least three pints, and from the looks of it, I doubt they fed him enough for him to get any of it back.”

“What’s his blood type?” Scott asked, taking a few tentative steps back into the body of the ship. “There’s a bunch of us here, someone has to be a match.”

“It’s not that simple,” Tony said, cleaning the wounds on his chest with practiced hands. He wiped the blood away rhythmically. Peter’s entire chest was covered, obscuring the cuts. Tony had to clean them before he decided if any of them needed stitches. “Thor, Steve, Bucky, T’Challa, and Bruce can’t even give blood; the mutations would cause too many unknown variables. And we don’t even know if Peter can receive normal blood, with the mutations he already has.”

“What about saline?” Bruce asked Tony, examining Peter’s arm. His eyes flashed emerald for a split second, but he calmed as soon as it had come. “It’s neutral. Maybe it would work on him.”

“Can’t hurt to try,” Tony muttered, concentrating on the cuts with a frown. His hands slowed until they stopped completely, hovering uncertainly over Peter’s hitching chest.

I didn’t know Tony very well, all things considered, but I knew that frown couldn’t mean anything good.

“What is it?” Rhodey asked, sensing his friend’s unease.

“It’s…they’re letters,” Tony said quietly, his eyes wide as he stared at Peter’s mutilated chest.

My eyes whipped back to Peter’s torso, zoning in on the part Tony had just finished cleaning, small patches of diluted red the only thing marring the cuts.

He was right. A crude A, and maybe a D, had been carved into his chest.

My stomach turned. I turned away from the others, putting a hand over my mouth until I was sure I wouldn’t be sick. I forced myself to look back, my insides burning.

They had carved a word into his skin. Into his flesh.

I couldn’t imagine the terror and pain that must have gone through his mind.

“What does it say?” Natasha’s steely voice cut through the silent Quinjet, the only other sounds the hum of the engine as it carried us home. She didn’t turn around. Sparing her a quick
glance, her rigid form stared out over the waters, every muscle coiled unbearably tight.

“I—I have to finish cleaning it,” Tony stammered, resuming his task, seeming a little shell-shocked. “I can’t—I can’t tell yet.”

Agonizing minutes went by. I kept my eyes glued to Peter’s face. If I ignored the blood and the bruises marring his features, I could almost pretend he was just sleeping on the couch in the living room after a long day. While Tony cleaned, and the others held their breath to see the message, I grabbed a spare rag and started gently cleaning the blood from his nose and mouth, desperate for something productive to do. His face scrunched up a bit as I brushed his nose, which must have been broken. Though he couldn’t hear me, I whispered a quiet apology until he relaxed, continuing to wipe the blood away.

Absently, Steve squeezed my shoulder once. I couldn’t respond, but he knew I appreciated it.

I had just started wiping the blood from his chin when Tony’s voice confirmed my worst fears.

“‘HYDRA.’”

Silence.

“It…it says ‘HYDRA.’”

I hung my head. I fisted my hand around the damp rag, pink, reddish drops sliding through my fingers. My metal fist groaned. I clenched it hard enough that a bolt snapped. My pinkie no longer worked, the rag slipping from my fingers. I couldn’t find the presence of mind to care all that much.

If I hadn’t been so worried about Peter, I would have forced Natasha to turn the jet around. I would have flown back to that damn Siberian base and murdered every single one of the agents left inside. I would have torn them apart with my hands. I would have looked every one of them in the eyes, so they knew exactly why I killed them.

As it was, that wasn’t an option.

So all I could do was gently touch my forehead to Peter’s and close my eyes, convincing myself that he was here. That he was alive.

For what it was worth, he was alive.

**Peter Parker**

A warmth against my right arm, my good arm, hairy and soft. An animal?

Pain flitted through the recesses of my consciousness, but not acutely enough to wake me up. I stayed in my warm cocoon of sleep, dreaming of a Greek woman and a hero named Jason.

Something about that didn’t seem quite right to me, but I couldn’t really remember what.

I remembered the woman’s general story—her name was Medea. She was Jason’s lover, and they were that couple so stupidly in love it’s sickening. But also sweet, and everlasting, and
unbreakable. She did everything for him.

Not too unbreakable, it turned out, because he loved another woman and left her and their kids in the dust.

The thoughts contorted, then, unconsciousness slowly dragging me back under the waves of blissful sleep. The next story was lost among the scattered thoughts.

T'Challa, Son of T'Chaka

The boy was small.

I suppose I expected him to be taller, perhaps more fit. But then I had to remind myself that he had been under HYDRA’s thumb for a considerable time. The sunken cheeks and caved in stomach indicated malnutrition, which was expected. However, it seemed as though the child was small of stature in general, a bit smaller than Ms. Romanov, and slight of build.

He reminded me of Shuri.

A wave of protectiveness and fury crashed over me as I unwillingly imagined my younger sister in the same vulnerable position, and my hands shuddered over Mr. Wilson’s wound before steadying again.

“Are you alright, my king?” Okoye whispered in Wakandan, her sharp eyes inevitably catching the tremor.

Giving her a slight, sad smile, I nodded. “I sympathize with them. I…well, if it was Shuri or Nakia, or even you…”

Okoye’s eyes became soft in understanding, and she placed a strong hand on my shoulder. “We will always support you. And in turn, we know you will always support us. You have nothing to fear.”

“I know,” I replied, smiling again before turning back to Mr. Wilson’s wound.

The man was deeply unconscious, Shuri’s gelatin providing a small anesthetic to keep him comfortable as I worked. The wound was deep, but not life-threatening. The debris had bruised his spleen, but it would heal.

I was beginning to stitch the wound when certain words from the conversation across the jet startled me.

“It…it says ‘HYDRA.’”

My hands froze, Okoye going rigid beside me. I dimly recalled the beginning of the conversation.

This organization had taken it upon themselves to carve their name into the body of a child. Of an innocent child who only wanted to live.

I glanced at Okoye, a rare, passionate anger alighting each nerve. I felt the spirit of the Panther, of Baast herself, roar within me, the panther in my soul demanding retribution.

But as I glanced at the group of broken, angry heroes at my back, I shook my head slightly,
Peter Parker

It picked up right where it left off, when my mind could form thoughts—or, dreams, I guess—again.

Jason left her. Abandoned her. And boy, did she get him back.

She killed his lover and two of their kids. I personally always thought it was a bit overkill (pun intended) but she got her point across. Jason didn’t die, but he suffered for the rest of his life, because his kids and his love were dead.

Medea didn’t have a very happy ending, either, but she made sure Jason sure as hell didn’t.

Jason. The name sent instinctual fear coursing through me, though I couldn’t remember why.

And why was this story so important, anyways? Why wasn’t I hallucinating purple marshmallow men dancing on a deserted island in togas?

Oh, geez. Maybe I was hallucinating.

When unconsciousness gently tugged again, I let it whisk me away.

Steve Rogers

As soon as we touched down at the Compound, Tony and Bruce whisked Peter away to the Medical Wing, Bucky hot on their heels and Stella glued to Peter’s side. Breathing hard, I forced myself not to follow, no matter how badly I wanted to. They’d be crowded enough as it was.

T’Challa and Okoye, after the king nodded in my direction, followed quickly after them with Sam. He wasn’t critical by any means, but apparently the Jell-O had a time limit.

A grunt and a thud followed by the sound of crunching brick had me whirling around and to the left. Thor had slammed his fist through the brick wall, clouds of dust rising from the debris at his feet.

“How—” He growled, every muscle in his body quivering in absolute fury. I’d never seen him like this. Glancing at Natasha, I saw she was just as wary as I. The others stood back with us, watching cautiously.

“How—how is this world...so evil?” He rasped, his stormy eyes darker than I’d ever seen. Electricity arched over his form, warping around him. Storm clouds gathered above us, thunder sending a shudder through my body as the air shook around me. Fat drops of rain hit my uncovered face and suit, running down my shield, soaking into my hair.

“How—why—why would that mortal carve—”

He stopped, then, and roared at the sky with all the power of a god. The sky responded in
kind, thunder as loud as an explosion almost knocking me off my feet. I saw the others waver and right themselves. I saw Lang hit the ground hard, staring at Thor in nothing short of terrified awe.

“That innocent child,” Thor panted, heaved, screamed as he pointed at the Compound from our place on the landing pad, “is suffering in agony because your world is so—is so—”

“Our world is fine,” a tight voice to my right said. I whirled, eyeing Clint with nothing short of astonishment. He stood, soaking wet beside Natasha and Rhodey, his arms crossed over his chest, his jaw set. Thor’s electric eyes snapped to his, his heaving form rigid as the wind convulsed around him. “It’s just some of the inhabitants that are shit.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong.

“It sucks. It does. Our world is great. Some of the people in it are just…” Clint shrugged helplessly, his arms falling to his sides, his face sagging. “…messed up. In a lot of ways.”

Thor’s heaving shoulders and sparking eyes were still terrifying, but the horrendous thunder died slowly to a steady rumble.

Clint inched forward, hands loose and empty by his sides. “Peter’s going to be okay. Bruce and Tony are going to make sure of it. Natasha shot Jason. We have Ross 1.0. We have files and files of HYDRA officials. We’re going to take them down, one by one, until HYDRA is absolutely decimated.” He turned back to us, his soaked form tall, steadfast, resolute. “Right?”

Matching his determination, I straightened, gripping my shield a little tighter. “Right.”

Similar answers came from the others. Lang had since stood and was nodding fervently, eyes wide. Rhodey had his arms crossed over his chest, watching warily, and Natasha stood slightly on the balls of her feet, expression neutral, ready to react.

But they all answered affirmatively.

The clouds, dark and angry, slowly smoothed over, forming a rainless, off-white covering. The soft blue eyes gently calmed until the lightning fizzled out, and Thor’s shoulders slumped. He stumbled back against the wall, his huge form sagged. “Young Peter…he just…”

“I know, Big Guy,” Clint said sadly, putting a hand on Thor’s broad shoulder.

I released a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding, glad that situation was taken care of. I don’t know what would’ve happened if Thor had gone ballistic on us.

I turned to the others as Clint whispered quietly to the god, ushering him inside. “Rhodey, can you show Lang the guest room? I think we all need a bit of time to dry off before we crowd the medical wing.”

Rhodey nodded and took Lang inside. I didn’t miss the way Lang’s footsteps faltered.

“Do you need any help with Ross?” I asked, the name bitter in my mouth. I glanced at the Quinjet, where Ross was still tucked away in the prisoner’s compartment.

“Sure,” she said, eyeing the jet coolly. “The more, the merrier.”

I gave a humorless chuckle, not envying the fallen general in the slightest.
Peter Parker

Everything hurt.

I tossed my head, my breath hitching when my limbs wouldn’t move from where they were secured. Familiar voices bounced around me, but I couldn’t place them. Panicking, I thrashed against the restraints, crying out as pain lanced through my injuries.

I thought someone might have been telling me to calm down, but I couldn’t be sure. Was it the doctors? I couldn’t hear or see clearly, but my surroundings were the same—some kind of medical room. Oh, God, was I back there?

I thrashed again, snapping the restraint over my torso with little difficulty. My left arm hung useless at my side as I sat up blindly, tearing at the strap over my thighs and over my shins. They were soft material, not cutting or biting or painful, but they were holding me down and I needed them gone—

“Peter!”

Were they using my name now? I couldn’t tell. Shapes, human forms moved around me frantically, trying to calm me down, maybe? One person rushed out of the room.

I fell off of the surface to the floor gracelessly, agony slamming into me as I landed hard on my shoulder and left side. I grunted, then started to push myself up, desperate to get out.

Strong hands grabbed my shoulders gently but firmly. One of them was unbearably hot, the other unbearably cold. I jerked weakly, on the verge of hysteria, desperate to get away, to get away.

“You’re safe, Peter,” a voice said, but that wasn’t right because I wasn’t safe, I wasn’t safe, they were feeding me lies to calm me down so they could cut it off and take my memories and my power and my free will and my choices and my family and my name—

I coughed raggedly, collapsing onto my front, the force of the cough doubling me over and sucking what little strength I had away.

“P-please…” I begged, acutely aware of the pathetic break in my voice, completely indifferent to the mortification I should have been feeling. In my feverish, panicked reality, I knew nothing but terror. “P-please…”

A prick in my arm had the world spinning almost immediately. I felt my body go slack even as I tried to get away, the gentle, yet firm grip on my shoulders never leaving.

A voice whispered, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you, kid. I’m not leaving.”

With a final, muddled thought of escape, I faded again.

Chapter End Notes

Some abstract writing and an explanation on Medea, which I hope you found interesting. Thanks so much for reading!
Chapter 36

Officer Scott Travis

“Damn, that storm came out of nowhere,” Veromi said, glancing out the window of the Avengers Compound living area. I glanced over to see her leaning against the glass, arms folded, eyes narrowed.

I could only nod in agreement. It had been clear skies one minute, and the next, it was the thunderstorm of the year rolling in right on top of us.

“It’s probably their lightning god,” Shuri, the young Wakandan princess sprawled out on the couch, commented. She lay relaxed, reading something on a sophisticated looking tablet. “He must have been angry.”

“That means they’re back,” her guard, Nakia, threw in. She stood, twirling that terrifying spear once or twice. “Or they’re close. I’m going to the landing pad to greet them. Shuri, would you come with me?”

The princess rolled her eyes but complied, following the warrior through the doors.

“Is it just me, or does it bother you to see the princess of one of the most industrially powerful nations in the world…acts like that?”

Veromi’s eyes danced with sarcasm. “What, should she have been wearing a floor-length dress and sipping tea?”

I blushed, but didn’t respond. Veromi scoffed, dropping into the armchair by the fire. It was quiet for a moment, before she softly asked, “Do you think they found him?”

I looked out at the rain and nodded thoughtfully. “If the rain means they’re back, they found him. They wouldn’t have left without him.” I hesitated. “I’m just…afraid of how he is.”

Another moment of silence, and then she spoke again. “He reminds you of Matthew, doesn’t he?”

I went rigid. I didn’t respond.

She sighed. “Scott—”

“Don’t, Claire.”

Claire didn’t.

War Machine—Colonel Rhodes, I guess—and Scott Lang, Ant-Man, entered the room sopping wet. I stood to greet them. “Did you find him? Is he alright?”

Rhodes gave a smile somewhere between relieved and grim. “We did. He’s alive, but…he’s in, uh…bad shape. Bruce and Tony are working on him in the Med-Bay now. I’ll let you know when I know more.”
I deflated in relief, sharing a smile with Veromi.

It hadn’t been for nothing after all. As long as that kid was here and safe, he stood a chance.

“Are you guys okay?” Veromi asked, eyebrow arched. “You look like a couple of drowned sewer rats.”

Unfortunately, I was used to Veromi’s brusque attitude, and not at all surprised. I sent Rhodes an apologetic look, but he just smiled, looking amused. “We’ve been better.”

Lang shifted from foot to foot, shivering. Veromi looked him up and down, entirely unimpressed. “I bet.”

Colonel Rhodes snorted a laugh, and Lang blushed a little, zeroing in on the fire. He trudged over and plopped down in front of it, a few feet from Veromi’s chair. “Rhodes, leave me. I’m never moving again,” he mumbled.

Veromi stared at him for a few seconds, then shook her head. “Earth’s Mightiest Heroes, indeed.”

Colonel Rhodes shrugged helplessly, still dripping onto the hardwoods. “He’s more of a mascot.”

“Hey,” Lang argued weakly, but his voice was already thick with sleep.

Colonel Rhodes shook his head. “I’m gonna change and dry off some, then head to the Med Bay to wait for more news. FRIDAY can give you directions if you want to wait in the Medical lobby with the others; they’ll probably have more information.” He paused. “They should be there soon. We…didn’t want to crowd them while they worked.”

I nodded in understanding. I’d seen first-hand how hard it got for doctors, having panicked family and friends swarming the place.

Veromi stood, her long, dark hair falling like a curtain. “Guess that means it’s time for dinner, hm? We can go after we eat.”

“If you’re offering, I want some,” Lang mumbled from his comatose state on the floor.

“Of course you do.”

“Colonel Rhodes, do you want some?” I asked, getting set to follow Veromi to the kitchen.

He smiled wanly. “Just Rhody. And…tempting, but…I think I’ll pass. I’m not much up for food right now.”

I gave him a nod and a smile. He smiled in thanks and disappeared around the corner.

“Hey.” Lang drawled from the living room, calling after us as we entered the attached kitchen and started pillaging the cabinets. “Heeeeeeey. I’m partial to Thai. You like Thai?”

“Good to know, Lang.” Veromi shouted, pulling out some garlic and boxed pasta. “I’m Italian, so suck it up.”

Lang whined, but said nothing.

So Veromi and I made pasta in the Avengers Compound kitchen. I tried desperately to
pretend there wasn’t a teenage boy dying rooms away.

**Tony Stark**

Bruce, Bucky, and I stared dumbfounded, unsure of what to do.

Peter had broken every restraint without breaking a sweat.

He’d snapped them with his bare hands. Delirious and weak, confused, he’d *snapped them.*

“Guys?” Bucky asked, his hands on Peter’s frail shoulders, unsure of how to proceed. “He just…”

“His powers have manifested,” Bruce said, voicing everyone’s thoughts. After shaking his head, he rushed across the room and started tearing through a clipboard, flipping through page after page. “It shouldn’t be possible…”

I dropped to my knees beside him next to Bucky, turning him gently onto his back. “Bucky, take his shoulders,” I ordered, slipping my hands under his back and knees. “Help me lift him onto the table without stretching his chest.”

Bucky nodded, and we gently settled Peter back onto the table. Bruce cursed suddenly, dropping the clipboard and rushing to Peter’s side, eyes scanning his body. It clattered to the floor, papers floating down to rest in a messy pile.

“What are you looking for?” I asked, grabbing two bags of saline from a cabinet blood bank on the wall, hooking one up to his IV.

“That,” he said, his eyes settling on Peter’s feet. Peter’s torn, dirty jeans had ridden up at some point, exposing his raw, burned ankles.

I cursed colorfully, in every language I knew, because *shit* that was bad.

The flesh was charred black in some places, shiny, blistering red in others. Some of the blisters had become infected and leaked blood-streaked pus.

“They’re severe electrical burns,” Bruce murmured, hands fisted as he stalked away, retuning with some gauze.

“*God,*” Bucky choked, leaning heavily on the table, white as a sheet. “Is there any part of him they *didn’t* hurt?”

Bruce didn’t answer. Neither did I.

It wouldn’t be what he wanted to hear, anyways.

Suddenly, Peter’s vitals spiked, and he went rigid on the table, convulsing spasmodically.

“He’s seizing!” Bruce shouted, trying to grab hold of his calves to keep his legs still. “Bucky, hold his head! Tony, push two milligrams of Carbamazepine!”

“Double it,” Bucky said jerkily, his teeth grit as he tried to keep Peter’s head steady. “His metabolism.”
“Double it!” Bruce echoed, fighting to keep Peter controlled. “He—agh!”

I whirled around to see Bruce hit the wall hard. He slid down, dazed, and leaned against the wall. His eyes flashed green, and his veins bulged.

“Ohhhhh boy,” I muttered, pushing the Carbamazepine. “Bucky, keep Peter from hurting himself. FRIDAY, get Natasha in here, now!”

“She is on her way, boss,” FRIDAY said.

“Big Guy, you gotta calm down,” I said, hands held up in a placating gesture as Bruce panted, growing slowly. “If you change here, you’ll hurt Peter.”

“Protect,” he growled, Bruce’s eye’s glowing. “Protect mini friend.”

I turned slightly. Peter’s convulsions had died down thanks to the medicine, but he was shivering badly. Bucky was trying to finish sterilizing the wounds on his chest, which had begun bleeding again thanks to his seizure, grabbing the suture kit from the cabinet and giving me a tight nod.

“Bruce, you need to calm down, buddy,” I said as calmly as I could manage. “I know you’re upset—”

A streak of red and black blurred past me, and I froze.

“Hey, Big Guy.”

Natasha crouched in front of him. Bruce was rigid, trying desperately to keep the Hulk contained, but Natasha was calm and collected as ever. “Time for a lullaby, hm?”

“No lullaby,” Hulk rumbled, growing a bit more.

“Mm? I thought you liked my lullabies.” Her voice swayed, the undulations calming. I crossed back to Peter, watching as Bucky carefully sutured the deepest of the cuts, blood pooling on the table. I rounded the table to inspect the infected arm, which was already healing.

“No,” Hulk growled, clutching his head. “No Banner!”

“Banner has to help Peter,” she said softly. “He needs help and Banner can help him. You helped save him, remember? You got him away from the bad people who hurt him. Now Banner has to fix the hurt.”

Hulk glanced over at us, watching Bucky and I try to patch up our broken kid. He turned back to Nat. “Fix?”

“Fix,” she said gently, holding out her palm, face up.

Slowly, slowly, he took he hand.

Bruce shrunk back to his original form, his shirt torn. He panted, rubbing his eyes, sagging to the side. Tasha lashed out and steadied him before he could fall. Propping him up against the wall and giving him a small smile. “What happened here?”

Bruce took a deep, shaking breath, and blew it out, wiping his eyes once again. “Peter’s powers are…well, he has them now. They’re not dormant anymore. He accidentally kicked me across the room, and I guess that Other Guy got kind of freaked out.”
Nat’s eyes flashed, and she stood, stalking towards us. I had moved to his ankles and was cleaning them as gently as I could, but Peter continued to twitch, his expression scrunched up in pain. She stared at his bruised face for a moment before gently brushing his sweat plastered hair back from his forehead.

The display of affection was brief, though. “You need to call Helen, Tony.”

“I know,” I sighed. “I’m going to. I don’t know if she’s fixed the Cradle—”

“Doesn’t matter. She can help you. None of you are doctors.”

I sighed through my nose, barely refraining from rolling my arms. “I forget how pushy you are when you’re cranky,” I muttered, flinching when she turned steely eyes on me. “Yeesh. FRIDAY, send an urgent message to Helen Cho. Fly her in from wherever she is. Tell her it’s an emergency.”

“Message delivered,” FRIDAY responded.

Bucky cursed suddenly, and I turned to face him. “Do we have pain medication that works on him long-term?”

I didn’t move for a second. Nat went rigid. Bruce sighed and shakily stood, leaning against the counter before getting his legs working again. “No. We didn’t—no. We were sure his powers wouldn’t evolve until he’d finished growing, which isn’t for roughly another ten years. The regular pain meds still worked on him if we gave it to him more often. His metabolism is probably even faster now that they’ve fully manifested.”

“Can you use mine?” Bucky pled, glancing at Peter’s face. “Or Steve’s? He’s in pain. He keeps flinching.”

Bruce and I shared a look. “I—we can try,” I said hesitantly. “The risks—”

“We can give him half a dose,” Bruce conceded, struggling over to the pharmaceutical area of the Med Bay and rummaging through one of the drawers containing pain relievers. Based on the team’s skillset and physicality, we’d branded special pain relief for each member. “See how he reacts to it. Helen can help us find a permanent solution when she gets here.”

“Which will be in approximately twelve hours, as she is still in South Korea,” FRIDAY interjected. “She is additionally requesting extra compensation, as she is abandoning a ground-breaking project that was supposed to be tested tonight.”

I let out a breath through my nose as Robo Cop sagged. “It’s gonna be a long night.”

Peter Parker

I was in a bed.

That was the first thing I realized. I wasn’t on the ground, or—or, on that table—

*Don’t go there.*

Oh, no. Had they succeeded? Had they cut my arm off, and then stuck me in a room somewhere to recover until they brainwashed me? Oh God oh God, I couldn’t feel anything, what
if my arm were gone and I just didn’t realize it, what if they’d already started, what—

“Peter, calm down,” someone said to my right, and I jerked violently, pain flaring at my injuries, and I recognized the voice—and, there was a sound? Like an animal—

“Bucky?” I sobbed, drawing a cough from my abused lungs. Despite my exhaustion, I forced my eyes open, reaching out blindly with my right arm, feeling him take it firmly. Blurry, ragged, and exhausted though he was, he was there. “St-Stella?”

“Hey,” he said gently, pushing some hair out of my eyes. He smiled gently, his eyes shimmering in relief. “Hey. I’ve got you. I’m right here.”

Stella was in my lap, meowing frantically, gazing at me with nothing short of desperation. When my eyes settled on her, she bounded up my chest and burrowed into my neck. She didn’t weight more than a few pounds, but agony flared over my chest. I hissed, the stinging pain reminding me of—of the knife, and of—

Stop.

I looked around frantically—I was in the same bed I’d been in after Alexander had hurt me, and I’d slipped into a coma. The familiarity was somewhat comforting, but it still looked too much —too much like—

Don’t. STOP.

My eyes went immediately to my left arm.

It was dead weight, wrapped in several layers of white bandages.

But it was there.

I started crying.

“Peter?” Bucky asked, sounding worried. He shifted forward and sat down on the bed, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Peter, what’s wrong? Are you in pain?”

“You found me,” I said, and though the words felt familiar, I couldn’t remember where from. “You found me, you stopped them—you—”

“Kid, breathe,” he said, looking concerned. The heart monitor I distantly registered starting wailing, beeping hard and fast. “Peter. Calm down, alright? Do you not remember seeing me in the base? You woke up, you talked to me. Do you remember that?”

Despite my shaking limbs, I tried to sit up, my face pinched in pain and confusion. Bucky helped me, settling me back against a few pillows. My ribs protested, but I ignored it as best I could, on the verge of hysteria. Stella pounced to my side again, refusing to move from my line of sight. “I—no—no, I remember that—J-Jason came and t-took me to that—that room—”

And the dam broke. The hysteria that had been settled firmly on the cliff said ‘eff it’ and jumped, taking my sanity for the ride, and I started panting and heaving huge breaths, clutching at Bucky like he was about to be ripped away just like everyone else—

“Peter.” Bucky said, but his tone was different from before. It was stern, and strong. I looked at him and he stared back with hard eyes, taking my shoulders. “Listen to me. You are not there. You’re in Avengers Medical. Every Avenger is here. We’re all here, plus some others that
helped us get you out. Jason is dead.” I jerked at the words, staring at him with wide, unfocused eyes. “He is. Nat shot him; I saw it myself. We have General Ross in custody, in a holding cell three hundred feet underground with no exit but one we know of. You are safe. You are protected. I’m not going to let anything happen else to you.”

I sat for a moment, panting, staring at his earnest eyes and his strong, sure posture. The beeping of the heart monitor quieted slowly, and I fell forward into him without a word, shivering. He wrapped his arms around me and held my head against his shoulder where it had landed, buried there, even as I cried. It reminded me to that first time I’d passed out, that time I’d finally broken down and accepted that they cared about me, and accepted their love and protection.

“Thank you,” I sobbed, clutching at his back with my right arm, my left still useless beside me. “Thank you. I was—so scared—”

I jerked back, breaking into a coughing fit so violent it doubled me over. Bucky flinched, startled, but quickly shifted so that he was supporting my torso, rubbing soothing circles on my back. “You’re okay,” he whispered gently, and I saw him press the call button between coughs. “You’re alright. Breathe, Peter.”

Once the coughing stopped, I panted, listing to the side against Bucky’s chest, completely drained. I closed my eyes.

“You’re gonna be okay, Peter,” Bucky said softly, his voice just barely shaking. “You’re gonna be just fine.”

Leaning against him, pushing away the terror still lingering in my mind’s shadows, I drifted off. Stella curled up in my lap, warm, real, there. Just like Bucky. Despite the fear of leaving myself vulnerable, of letting myself sleep, Bucky was there. So it was okay to sleep.

At least, as I slipped away, that’s what I told myself.

**Bucky Barnes**

Sixty years of my life just packed its bags and up and bolted.

This kid was gonna send me to an early grave.

When he drifted off against me and I tried leaning him gently back against the pillows, I saw tears well behind his closed eyes and fall, and he made a small noise of fear.

I sighed, despite the horror of seeing him so worked up, and smiled wanly. I shifted my position on the bed, scooting up along his right side and leaning back against the headboard, then leaning his back against the left half of my chest, supporting his head on my shoulder, curling my left arm around his chest. I hadn’t realized how tense he was, even in sleep, until he relaxed into me, breathing softly through parted lips, his broken nose swollen.

A lot of what he’d said had been gibberish, panicked ramblings, but I understood enough to make my blood boil. The hand not wrapped around him curled into a fist, and I leaned my head back against the wall above his bed, closing my eyes.

“What happened?” Bruce asked as he skidded to a halt beside the bed after swinging around the doorway like something straight out of an obstacle course.
I cracked an eye to look at him and sat up, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Nothing. He woke up for a minute and had a coughing fit, but it passed.”

Bruce’s eyes shot up, and he started checking every damn monitor in the place. “He woke up? Is he…is he okay?”

I shook my head. “No.” No, he wasn’t effing okay.

Bruce stilled, looking at Peter’s lax face for a moment. “Do you think he will be?” He asked quietly.

Looking down at the shaggy mop of curly hair resting against my chest, my gut turned. I tightened my arm around him, emotions stirring and heaving and bleeding into each other. Anger and hatred and terror and grief and relief and love and protectiveness and bitterness all warring for dominance in my chest, tight knots of stress beating each other for priority. I didn’t know if he’d ever be okay again.

Peter was not…easy to terrify.

Frighten, maybe. Scare a little. He was scared of a lot of things, for good reason.

But few things terrified him. And when he’d awoken for those brief few minutes, he had been utterly panicked.

He’d said You stopped them. I couldn’t even begin to imagine the context for that statement, and I didn’t want to.

And I told Bruce the truth.

“I don’t know.”

Bruce stared for a moment and sighed. “I…guess I kind of expected that.” He put his hands in his pockets, looking at me with concern. “You don’t look so good yourself, buddy. Do you need anything?”

I gave him a half-smile. “No, thanks. When’s your doctor friend getting here?”

“Should be within two hours,” Bruce said, glancing back at Peter and then fiddling with his IV. “Was he in pain when he woke up?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied honestly. “He was too frantic for me to get a straight answer.”

The thought of Peter being as worked up as he had been must have unsettled Bruce as much as it had me, because he flinched at the words, but didn’t reply.

“Is Sam okay?” I asked suddenly, feeling like a complete jackass for not asking sooner.

Bruce smiled knowingly. “He’s fine. Already up and being a complete terror. Steve’s trying his best to keep him in bed, but he’s insisting to see Peter. I had to knock him out before he tore his stitches.”

I scoffed. Sounded like Sam. “Damn idiot. Too many feathers in his brain.”

“I’ll tell him you said that. Call me if you need anything,” he said with a small, sad smile, and wandered out of the room, lightly shutting the door.
The next visitor was that officer from the NYPD. The guy. Not the woman who acted like she’d kill you with a stiletto.

She and Nat needed to start a club.

He came in hesitantly, shyly, and I cracked an eye in his direction, still leaning my head against the wall, trying to rest. Peter hadn’t moved a muscle, so I hadn’t, either.

“Hey,” he said quietly, glancing at Peter, staring at his bruised face and bandaged arm for just a second too long. He was probably thrown by the injuries. “How is he?”

“Alright,” I said noncommittally. I was grateful to him, and he’d helped us find Peter much faster than we could have alone, but I didn’t trust him quiet yet. “Can I do anything for you?” My tone wasn’t dismissive, per se, but it didn’t extend any invitations.

He shook his head awkwardly, coming in to glance at the monitors. “Uh, no. Just wanted to check up on him; Colonel—Rhodey said it was okay.” I gave him a light smirk. Rhodey was never one for titles. “Veromi and I cooked a little. Pasta. Do you want anything?”

I glanced at Peter. I was hungry, but I didn’t want to move. I was afraid I’d wake him. “I’m okay. Thanks for the offer.”

I was reasonably certain that was a fairly clear conversation ender, but he just nodded and stuck around, trying very hard to not look as awkward as I’m sure he felt. It hurt to watch, honestly.

“I wanted to apologize,” he blurted.

I raised an eyebrow, turning my head in his direction, making sure I didn’t jostle Peter. Stella snuffled softly, but stayed curled up in Peter’s lap. “What for?”

He shifted from foot to foot once, then raised his head and looked me in the eye. “For not bringing Peter in the second I saw him. Maybe…if I had, he wouldn’t have been caught by those guys.”

For a second, I stared, incredulous. I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. “What brought this on?”

“In the precinct,” he said with a sigh. “You said I shouldn’t have let him walk away, and you were right.”

Oh, I thought. The memory resurfaced hazily, lack of sleep blurring it around the edges. I had said that, hadn’t I?

“It’s alright,” I said with a tight, diplomatic smile. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, it was true,” he conceded. “It’s in my job description to do the opposite of that.”

I hummed but said nothing. He was right, but I shouldn’t have said it like I did. I’d been angry and worried about Peter. When I told Travis as much, he shook his head. “Not your fault. It was completely understandable.”

Another conversation ender, yet no exit.

I sighed, and was honestly about to ignore him and doze off again, when he spoke, softly.
“He’s a good kid, isn’t he?”

For a moment, I didn’t respond. Then I smiled. “The best.”

He nodded, and the Winter Soldier’s training allowed me to notice the way his Adam’s Apple bobbed ever so slightly, and the way his eyes misted just the tiniest bit.

“I’ll leave you to it,” he said with a small smile. “I’ll probably be around for another day or so, just to make sure he’s okay, but I’ve taken too much time off work, and I haven’t seen my family. I need to get back.”

I nodded, biting the bullet. “Thank you for all your help.”

He smiled. “I’m just glad he’s safe.”

As he exited, I couldn’t help but think, Me, too.

I took stock of the motionless kid in my arms and breathed a sigh, pressing my lips to his hair.

“You’re gonna be okay,” I whispered sternly. “You are.”

He couldn’t hear me. I knew that. But I convinced myself he could, just so I wouldn’t be reassuring myself.

**Officer Scott Travis**

I exhaled shakily as I exited the room, pressing the heels of my hands to my eyes.

“Beautiful,” Veromi’s sarcastic voice drawled from where she leaned against the doorway. “Simply moving.” But we’d worked together long enough for me to know that she was concerned.

I sat heavily in one of the waiting room chairs, staring at the immaculate white tile. “You were right.”

“Yes, I was,” she said, sitting next to me. “I often am. You’ll have to be more specific.”


Veromi didn’t say anything, just placed a hand on my shoulder. “It’s never easy,” she said quietly. “Losing a child.”

I knew Veromi understood. She’d miscarried two years into her marriage. In the end, they divorced amicably, but she never really was the same.

She’d lost her baby, but I’d lost my boy. My sixteen-year-old, blue-eyed, tall, athletic, amazing boy.

I would remember every word of that night for the rest of my life.

He and two of his friends had been walking home from soccer practice one evening. Two gang members—a Combat 18 member and a Folk Nation member—started going at it, beating each other senseless. One had pulled a pistol, fired, and missed.
Matthew was dead before he hit the ground.

I was on-duty. I remember Veromi and I pulling up to the scene. Some of my colleagues were already there, speaking in hushed voices, glancing at me as I got out of the car.

I saw the body on the ground, and I knew.

I couldn’t see him. He was covered with a sheet. His belongings were nowhere in sight. There was no indication that it was Matthew.

But I felt it.

A part of me died that day. After six long years of recovering, I still knew I’d never be whole.

I buried my face in my hands and breathed. “No,” I whispered. “It’s not.”

“You saved these people, Scott,” she said softly, her hand firm against my back. “You spared them that kind of pain. That kid in there is alive because you were reckless enough to suggest to the high and mighty Avengers that they partner with us lowly street cops, and we found the prick who gave us the location.”

I smiled into my hands. Veromi had such a mouth.

“None of this is your fault. You’re the reason he’s here.”

“You helped,” I muttered, the crushing despair lifting slightly at our friendly banter.

She scoffed. “Oh, how gracious of you. I thought I was going to have to beat that out of you.”

I smiled slightly, lifting my head to stare at the door to Peter’s room, feeling my shoulders ease just slightly.

God, Matthew, I thought. I hope you’re alright. I hope you’re up there, in heaven. I know you are. I hope...I hope you’re proud of your old man.

And I couldn’t be sure—I could never be sure—but a tiny voice may have just ghosted, Always.

Chapter End Notes

Aw. Some backstory on the cops. Hope you liked it :) thanks for reading!
Helen Cho

Brushing the hair from my eyes as I descended down the steps of the plane, I couldn’t stop the flaire of annoyance at Tony Stark’s impeccable appearance, complete with sunglasses in the darkness of the early morning.

“You’re looking lovely as ever, Doctor Cho,” he said with a smirk, though something about his whole stance was tight.

“Well, that’s a nice compliment considering I’ve been awake for almost thirty-six hours and on a plane for the last twelve,” I remarked, my carry-on taken from my shoulder by strong hands.

I turned to see Captain America giving me a wan smile as he shouldered the bag himself. “We appreciate it more than you know, Helen.”

Returning the smile, albeit warily, I turned back to Stark. “What’s broken now?”

He cleared his throat, turning and walking towards the Compound. I followed, Steve trailing behind. “I’m going to take this to your room, if that’s alright?” He whispered, phrasing it like a question.

“Yes, that’s fine,” I dismissed, catching up to Stark as he took a turn. I was unfamiliar with the sprawling network of hallways, but Stark was walking awfully fast. “Hey. What’s broken?”

He sniffed like he does when he’s stressed, or reluctant to answer. “Not what.”

“Oh,” I said, understanding. “Who’s been injured?”

“Well, Sam’s a little worse for wear, but he’s alright,” he said, beating around the bush a bit too much for my liking. “He…his name’s Peter.”

“Alright,” I said, filing the information away. “Why did you call me out here?”

“He’s…enhanced,” Stark said slowly, finally taking off the sunglasses and tucking them into his pocket. I finally got a glimpse at his waxen, pale face, paired with the purple shadows under his eyes, and I had to suppress a gasp. “But not…not like Steve. It’s…do you know about cross-species genetics?”

I scoffed, feeling a little insulted. “I’m a geneticist, Tony.”

“Right, right. Well, he’s…enhanced because his DNA has been crossed with some sort of animal’s.”

“What?” I exclaimed, barely keeping myself in check. This was…absolutely groundbreaking. “Tony, that’s—that’s impossible. If it’s real, that’s incredible. There are next to no known successful attempts to cross animals, let alone a human and an animal! What animal?”

“We don’t know,” he said stiffly. “It’s not incredible, Cho. It’s horrible.”
We slowed to a stop just outside the Med Bay, and I didn’t understand why he thought something so incredibly amazing could be anything but. “What? This is the next step to genetic medicine! If we can find out how it works, if we can replicate it—”

“You’re not doing that,” he seethed, his muscles coiled. “You’re not—dammit, Helen, this is…this isn’t amazing.” He suddenly deflated, looking so tired, and older than I’d ever seen him. “Peter was…tortured, and…experimented on and threatened and mutilated and a dozen other things I don’t want to say,” he admitted.

Taken aback with the confession, I could only tense a bit. That was…not amazing. That was horrible. I knew Tony’s reaction to my excitement must have been because this man had gone through hell at the hands of people like me, with less self-restraint.

“There’s more,” I said quietly.

Stark gave a humorless chuckle. “Yeah, there’s—yeah.” He tapped the glass beside him, which cleared immediately, giving me full view of the figure on the bed, pale and limp and still. There was a man next to him, whispering quietly as the figure tossed and turned in his sleep. The man had a metal arm and long brown hair, and I recognized him as Bucky Barnes—The Winter Soldier—who’d been plastered all over the news for a while. And on the bed—

I froze, eyes widening slightly.

Not a man.

Definitely not a man. Just a boy.

“He’s name’s Peter Parker,” Stark said quietly. “He’s fifteen. HYDRA—HYDRA took him and…well, you can see the rest.”

A hundred emotions flowed through me. A thousand. Nuanced little feelings I couldn’t possibly name.

I could feel the top few, though, and they were anything but positive.

“What do you need?” I asked, my eyes never leaving the pale child.

“His arm is…well, mutilated.” Stark supplied hesitantly, rubbing a hand down his face. “And he…can you just read the chart?” He asked after hesitating. “Our biggest problem is that we don’t have working pain medication for him.”

I whirled on him, fury immediately bubbling to the surface. “You don’t have pain medication? Nothing?”

“Okay, Cho, I’m sorry!” Tony shouted, looking close to his wit’s end. “I’m sorry. It’s a long story, but it wasn’t supposed to be an issue for another decade.”

I crossed my arms in front of my chest, planting my feet and squaring my shoulders. “If you want my help—which I am completely willing to give—then I’m going to need every shred of information you have on this kid, and I’m going to need it now.”

And Tony Stark did what he did best, and started talking.

Peter Parker
I couldn’t tell if I was dreaming or delirious most of the time.

A lot of the time, I was in a painful haze, my injuries burning, my arm pulsing, my ankles searing. The ankles were new—I’d just begun to notice the pain there. Must have been from the burns. The cold of the chains had probably numbed them in the cell.

I was cognizant enough to recognize that I was safe. Relief settled over my limbs like a sedative, relaxing me somewhat. I distantly remembered Bucky talking to me, then drifting back off. In my clearer moments, I could feel his hand in my hair, or on my shoulder or my arm.

I distantly remembered him telling me that Natasha had shot Jason.

I felt so relieved and so happy at the fact that it kind of scared me.

I woke up a couple times, but I slipped back under pretty quickly. Most of the time I noticed Stella at my side, too, curled up next to me. Sometimes, the others stopped in. I distantly remembered Bruce running a hand over my hair and whispering softly, Tony patting my knee, Steve standing next to Bucky like a guard dog. At one point, Thor gently ruffled my hair, taking Stella when he left. She needed to be fed. I was never coherent enough to speak to any of them, but their presence made me feel better.

I distantly registered Bucky shaking my shoulder gently, and rolled my head across the pillow towards him.

“There you are,” he said with a half-smile. He looked horrible. Dark purple shadows outlined his eyes, smudging the skin. They stuck out even more because his face was drawn and pale, his lips pressed into a thin line that didn’t help his image very much. His hair was pulled back from his face in a messy bun at the back of his head, mussed and tangled from what was probably days without a shower. His shoulders were slumped in, making him look smaller, weaker.

“Hey,” I breathed quietly, willing my eyes to focus on his face. Even if there were two of them. I twitched a smile. “N-nice man-bun.”

Bucky chuckled quietly, a small grin making him look a thousand times better. “Cheeky little brat, aren’t you?”

I sighed quietly, but couldn’t find the strength to reply. A headache throbbed behind my eyes, and my face pinched, my broken nose flaring in pain. Bucky’s face drew in concern. “You okay?”

“Hurts,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

I heard him sigh, his thumb gently trailing my hairline, careful of the throbbing head wound on my forehead covered in gauze. “I know. I know, but we’re gonna fix it.” I hummed in response, unable to do more.

Suddenly, the weight of guilt that had been buried under the uncertainty and paralyzing terror of my situation came back full force, slamming into me. My breath hitched in my chest, and my entire body locked up.

I’d abandoned them.

They’d come for me, they’d saved me, I was safe, and yet…

“Bucky,” I whispered, my voice shaking with pain that had nothing to do with my injuries.
“What?” He asked, pulling back, his expression worried. “Peter? What’s wrong?”

I couldn’t find the words. My mouth opened and closed, my eyes filling with tears at the utter devastation I felt at what that letter must have done to him. And then I thought of the letter I’d written for Bucky, and my heart dropped.

The monitor went crazy, a manifestation of my guilt.

“Peter, you need to calm down,” he said firmly, and how could he be so worried about me when I’d done that to him?

How could I have ever, ever doubted him?

“I’m so s-sorry,” I breathed, shutting my eyes in the face of his earnest expression. “I…I…"

“Hey, nothing to be sorry for, just calm down, okay?” His voice was tinged with panic, now. “I’m gonna call the doctor, okay?”

The words didn’t register. “I…I w-was just s-so m-mad a-a-and I…I l-left you all, and I…those letters…”

Understanding crossed Bucky’s face, and his expression softened. “Peter, no. No, kid, you…no. You have nothing to be sorry for. We know what happened; Ross’ guard told us everything. He manipulated you, kiddo.”

“B-but I—” I began, trembling, fully intent on arguing my point, but Bucky beat me too it.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he said gently, no trace of anything but love and concern on his face. “When everybody’s here. But know that I don’t blame you, I’m not angry at you, I’m not upset with you. This isn’t your fault. Okay?”

I…didn’t believe him. Not fully, anyway. But my heart had calmed down, and my body was exhausted, so I simply nodded.

He smiled. “Good.”

I let my eyes slip closed, but I knew I wouldn’t be sleeping anytime soon. I was still too keyed up. After a few moments of relative silence, I heard a rustle of clothing and shoes clicking against the sterile floor, but I didn’t react, content to lie there.

“Can you open your eyes for a minute, Peter? I want you to meet someone,” he said quietly. A woman with dark hair and a petite frame stepped through the door at that exact moment, coming to stand at the foot of the bed. She gave me a small, non-threatening smile, but I still heard the monitor speed up in time with the thumping of my heart.

“Hey, it’s alright,” Bucky said quietly, his fingertips gently trailing through my hair. I made no movement except to lean more into his hand, not taking my eyes off the woman I didn’t know. “This is a friend of the Avengers. You remember Tony and Steve and everybody telling you about Ultron?” I gave the barest nod, still feeling my shoulders tense at her presence. “She helped them take him down. She’s on our side.”

I allowed my eyes to shift to Bucky, drinking in his earnest expression and relaxing slightly. I knew he wouldn’t let her hurt me, and he wouldn’t let her in the Compound, let alone the room, if he didn’t trust her.
I looked back to her, waiting, and she smiled again. “Hi, Peter. I’m Doctor Helen Cho. I’m a geneticist from South Korea.” I struggled to keep up with her, my slow mind staggering under all the new information.

She seemed to notice, and smiled patiently. “It’s alright. I know this is a lot.” After a second, I nodded for her to continue, drawing strength from Bucky’s hand still resting on my head. “Tony called me in. I’m here to help them make something to help with the pain, and to help fix you up.”

I tensed again. I didn’t want anyone but Bruce and Tony working on me. I didn’t know her, and I didn’t want her to—to hurt—

“Peter, calm down,” Bucky whispered, lowering his face to beside my head. His metal hand closed around mine, and I squeezed it back as hard as I could, anchoring myself. “I would never let her hurt you. She wouldn’t even be in this room if I hadn’t allowed it. Do you trust me?”

“Yeah,” I breathed, unable to stop the gathered tears from leaking out. “Y-Yeah.”

“Okay,” he whispered softly. “It’s gonna be okay. I’m not gonna leave. Anything you don’t like, anything you’re not comfortable with, just let me know, okay?”

“Okay,” I croaked.

Bucky pulled away, smiling, and nodded at Doctor Cho to continue.

She had been waiting patiently, and I had to dimly admire her professionalism, because she carried on like she’d never paused. “If it’s alright, I’m going to do some bloodwork to figure out exactly how pain medication is going to react with your body. Tony told me about your injuries, and if it’s alright with you, I’d like to look at them?”

She phrased it as a question, but I knew that it was probably one of those questions people asked when they’d already decided your answer.

“How’s it sound, buddy?” Bucky asked, looking at me intently. “It’s up to you.”

I swallowed thickly, closing my eyes briefly at the pain. “N-not…” I breathed deeply, my ribs and chest aching. “N-not my chest…”

Bucky nodded, his eyes flickering to my chest briefly. His eyes were sad. “Not your chest. Tony took care of that. It’s already healing.”

I nodded, a tear trailing down from the corner of my eye. I felt it trace a line down my face, along my jaw. “I th-think…everything else i-is okay…”

“Okay,” he said, turning to Doctor Cho. “Everything but his chest. Do you mind starting with his arm?”

She nodded, smiling at him reassuringly. “Is now okay?”

The monitor sped up again, but I nodded.

“Okay,” she said, walking deliberately to my left side. I tracked her with wary eyes, and she smiled once again, her hands hovering over his bandaged arm. “Can you look at Bucky for me?”

I glanced at my arm again. I tried to twitch my fingers, but agony flared over it and I shut
my eyes tightly, whimpering. My heart was still beating a hundred miles an hour, the wound throbbing in time. I couldn’t move it, couldn’t defend it. I didn’t know if I could do this. I didn’t know if I could have someone else in a lab coat standing over me, manhandling my arm, able to do anything they wanted—even to cut it off—

Bucky’s metal hand was a cold shock against the left side of my face. Eyes opening automatically, I saw Bucky as he gently turned my face towards him, my watering eyes settling on his face. I was barely aware of how humiliating this was, but it was swallowed by fear.

“I’m here,” he said, his eyes open and earnest. “I’m here. She’s just going to look. We’re not going to do anything without your permission.” My chest hitched in fear, aggravating the cuts, and he leaned in further, his face barely a foot from mine. “Eyes on me, kiddo. Not going anywhere.”

He nodded subtly at Doctor Cho, and I distantly felt her start peeling the layers of bandages away. I shut my eyes as tightly as I could, inhaling sharply, a sob escaping despite myself.

“Did I ever tell you about what Steve and I did in the summer of ’33?” Bucky asked, his eyes not even flickering to what Doctor Cho was doing. “It was hot as hell that year. Did Steve tell you about it?”

“No,” I said, still worked up, still in pain, but comforted by his presence and his touch.

He smirked, his eyes tired, but alive. “We got into all kinds of trouble. I’d just turned seventeen, but Steve was still just fifteen. We found this really great speakeasy…” And he went on and on about a summer fraught with all kinds of debauchery, even making me laugh once or twice. Well, debauchery on his part, and righteous indignation on Steve’s.

I lost myself in his even tone, listening to his stories, forgetting about the trauma and about Jason and about that damn cell, burying it away, just for a little while.

When he had finished a particularly hilarious story, Cho stepped around the bed, into my line of sight. My eyes darted to her, and Bucky looked at her as well. She looked…not flustered, but…unsettled. “Well, those were some interesting stories, Mr. Barnes,” she said with a smirk.

Bucky had the decency to look bashful, and I managed a small grin, though it pulled at my split lip. “What do you think?”

“Well,” Doctor Cho said, not coming any closer, probably sensing my discomfort. Not that it was very well hidden. “It’s definitely very badly infected. Peter, if it’s not too much for you, can you tell me about how you got the wound?”

I stiffened, my tired bones protesting, and looked at Bucky.

“You don’t have to,” he said, no question in his voice. “Nobody’s making you.”

That was probably the only thing he could’ve said that would convince me that talking about it would be okay.

I took a shaky breath, glancing back at her. “They…w-wanted to see…h-how I healed. S-so th-they…cut it.” I suddenly stuttered to a halt, unaware of how much they knew. I wasn’t going to hide anything from them—well, at least not Bucky and the others—but I didn’t know if I had the stamina to relive everything that I’d discovered in my time in HYDRA. “I…Bucky?”

“Yeah?” He asked immediately, angling his body towards me.
“I…uh…” I licked my lips, cringing as a wave of pain came and went. “I…” I stopped, frustrated. I didn’t know how to say everything I wanted to with the strength I had.

“Take your time,” he reassured, leaning forward a bit more. “Deep breaths.”

I took in a deep breath like he instructed, releasing it shakily. “M-my arm…” I said quietly. “It was…d-dying…”

“What do you mean by that, Peter?” Doctor Cho cut in, looking concerned.

“Gan…gangrene…” I breathed, unable to bring myself to look at it, though I knew she’d probably put the bandages back on. “Every d-day…it was w-worse. It…rotted.” I breathed, shuddering at the memory of the sagging black flesh and the agony radiating constantly from the enflamed wound. “I was…s-so scared…”

“You’re okay,” Bucky said quickly, glancing back at Doctor Cho. “Helen?”

“Well, it’s not gangrene,” she said certainly. I breathed a sigh of relief, leaning further into Bucky’s hand, utterly exhausted. “Apparently, it’s healed quite a bit.”

“Peter.” Bucky said gently, and I opened my eyes, focused on him. “I know you’re tired, but you deserve to…to know…” He took a deep breath. “Your powers have manifested, kid. That’s…that’s why we’re having trouble coming up with a medication to work for you. You’re healing a lot faster, and…your metabolism keeps burning through the medication we give you.” At my blank look, Bucky looked confused, and then concerned. “Peter? Do you understand?”

“I knew.” I said quietly, secretly relieved that I wouldn’t have to be the one to tell them. “I kn-know. They c-came out when—” I stopped, not wanting to touch that memory.

“When what?” Bucky prodded gently, obviously pushing down his surprise.

I shut my eyes tightly, my chest hitching again. “I c-can’t—”

“Sh, no, it’s okay,” he said gently, obviously realizing his mistake too late. “It’s okay. I’m sorry. You don’t have to talk about it, Peter. It’s okay.”

I sagged against the bed, my body relaxing against my will, my exhaustion completely taking over. I tightened my grip on Bucky’s hand, and he squeezed back gently. Then he did something very un-Bucky like, leaning forward and softly kissing my forehead, smoothing the hair back from my face as he did so.

My eyes flickered shut, content knowing that he was there. “I’m gonna protect you,” Bucky whispered, so softly I barely heard the words muffled into my hair. “I’m gonna protect you no matter what, from everything. There’s no getting past me.” I sighed in safety, feeling myself drift off under his calming hands. “You’re stuck with me, little brother.”

With these words that provided more comfort and safety and security than almost anything else could, I fell into a peaceful sleep, knowing that Bucky would be there to chase the nightmares away.

Bruce Banner

“You’re saying his arm repaired itself from being decaying flesh?” I asked incredulously as Cho recounted what she’d learned from Peter.
Tony stood next to me, tablet in hand, looking distinctly unperturbed. That’s how I knew he was really feeling the strain of everything.

“I suppose,” she said, looking worried. “I’ve never heard of anything like this before. His body can do things on the level of The Cradle, and…I’ve never come across a group of genes able to do that. Not even theoretically.”

She made her way back to the microscope, peering through the lenses to the mass of blood cells on the dish. “His arm was in bad shape, but if you had told me it had been gangrene just a few days ago, I would’ve thought you were crazy.”

“So what happened?” Tony asked, flicking the chart from his screen up onto a holographic screen for us all to see. It was a line graph tracking the rate of Peter’s healing. “His healing has decreased…exponentially. There’s no explanation. If he healed himself so quickly, why’d it stop?”

I didn’t respond. I didn’t have an answer.

Cho looked up from the microscope, glancing at the graph and closing his eyes. “I think I might have a theory on that,” she said slowly, grabbing a vial of naproxen sodium and taking it to the centrifuge. “Natural human cells have the ability to knit themselves back together. It’s how we heal. The bonds between damaged cells are still attracted.” She stopped, measuring out a small amount into one of our trial anesthetics and setting the centrifuge for eight minutes. “Peter’s cells are different, and his situation was different. I don’t think his healing is…healing. I think his cells are regenerating.”

Tony stopped what he was doing and looked up, stunned. “You’re not serious.” He narrowed his eyes, studying her. “Are you?”

“I am,” she said, eyes on the whirring machine. “It makes sense. Instead of healing, repairing the damage, the dead cells in his arm actually revived. If he only had enhanced healing, maybe the original incision would’ve healed with time, but the decayed flesh wouldn’t have healed. It wouldn’t have spread, but…it wouldn’t have healed.”

Throttled by the new information, I sat down on the nearest stool. This was…unheard of. Healing and regeneration were two completely different things.

“Cool, so I caught the tail end of that, and I’m confused,” Rhodey’s voice startled me from the doorway, where he leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “Can you explain it for the commoner?”

“Um…take this coffee mug,” Cho said, snatching up Tony’s coffee mug and holding it out for Rhodey to see. Tony made a sound of indignance, but she ignored him. “If I were to drop it, it would break, right?”

“Don’t you dare break that mug,” Tony said, leaping up and snatching it back from her. I glanced at it and saw it had #1 Boss printed on the side. “Present from Happy. Priceless.”

Anyways,” she continued, looking annoyed. “I could glue the pieces back together, and if I did a good enough job, it would be usable. That’s like normal healing. But sometimes, it leaves scars. You’d always see the cracks where it was broken. In Peter’s case—at least partially, in cases of life-threatening injuries—I think he regenerates rather than heals. That would be like…turning back time before I broke the mug. It would be as if it had never been broken.”

Rhodey nodded along with her, a pensive look on his face. “Okay, I…I get what you’re
saying, but he has scars, just like any kid. He showed me one from where he’d cut his hand on some glass as a kid. Is that just because his powers just now came up?"

“I don’t think so,” Cho said, looking thoughtfully at the graph. “I think his body knows. Some animals—lizards, for instance—can regenerate lost limbs, but they still have scars, so the regeneration isn’t absolute. I think life-threatening injuries can be fixed with his body’s regenerative capabilities, but only to the extent that they become superficial.” Her eyebrows drew together. “Now, the wound on his arm is…much more than superficial, and without treatment, it would be life-threatening. But the gangrene would have killed him fairly quickly.”

I shuddered at that, feeling my muscles coil in tension. I gripped the counter and ground out, “Could we not talk about him dying, please?”

Cho looked over, flustered. “Right, sorry…um…”

I waved a hand, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I’m okay. Just…keep going.”

She nodded hesitantly, glancing the bridge of my nose. “I’m okay. Just…keep going.”

“Now, the wound on his arm is…much more than superficial, and without treatment, it would be life-threatening. But the gangrene would have killed him fairly quickly.”

“But why did it stop?” Tony asked, still staring at the graph. I saw his lips turned down in an obvious look of displeasure, the one he got when he couldn’t quite solve an equation. “It doesn’t make sense for it to just…evaporate, you know?”

Cho nodded slowly, removing the diluted chemicals from the centrifuge. “I know. Do you know how much he was fed while he was in captivity?”

Tony and I looked at each other, and I had the absurd urge to laugh. “Damn, Tony. A couple of geniuses we are.”

Cho gave half a smirk before shaking the contents of the vial in her hand, studying it carefully. “You’re both exhausted. Don’t sell yourselves short.”

“Hi, still stupid,” Rhodey said, his hand raised.

“Aw, you’re not stupid, Honey-Bear,” Tony said with a tired grin. “His healing stopped because his body ran out of fuel. He just needs to eat and get some more energy so that his body can burn the carbohydrates and get all his functions up and running.”

Rhodey blinked. “Oh.”

“Hey, whatever happened to those officers?” I asked, the thought suddenly popping into my head as I glanced at Peter’s chart.

“They left a couple hours ago. Said to give them a call if anything changed with Peter,” Rhodey replied. “They said to call if we needed anything, too.”

I nodded, satisfied with the information. They’d been good assets, and good people.

Cho added half a milliliter of liquified diluted cadmium to the solution and swished it once, a look of intense concentration on her face. Curious, I wandered over to her station, watching her
suck a small amount of the stuff into the dropper.

“Helen?” Tony asked, coming over as well, having noticed her concentration.

“I think…” she said, almost to herself, squeezing no more than half a drop into the mass of blood cells in the dish. “I might…”

She cut herself off, placing the vial down carefully and inspecting the microscope. I was just about to ask what it was when she gasped, jumping back and jotting something down on a clipboard.

“What?” Tony and I asked simultaneously, watching her rush around the lab, gathering chemicals. She didn’t respond, too immersed in her immediate task. Rhodey watched the entire scene with a distinct look of confused apprehension, arms loose at his sides, unsure of what to do.

Before Tony could control-freak his way into commandeering the microscope, I took my glasses off and focused the lenses on the dish.

“Cho!” I shouted, watching the blood cells mesh together, writhing until they finally calmed. “Cho, you—”

“I did it,” she muttered, scribbling furiously. “I found it.”

Tony looked for himself, then, reacting much the same as I had. “You incredible woman.”

“I’m not going to tell Pepper you said that,” Rhodey said, obviously confused, “but I’ll change my mind if someone doesn’t explain.”

We all three looked at him, grins lighting up our faces like it was Christmas morning. “She found a working anesthetic. It works almost identically to normal brands on normal humans.” I turned to her, still grinning like a madman. “Cho—Helen, thank you.”

She smiled, flinging a stray piece of hair back from her face. “Well, I am a genius. You’re welcome.”

I sagged, falling against the table in relief. There were still a lot of hurdles to jump, still a lot of questions to answer…

…but this was one step closer to getting our kid healed.

I smiled. I’d take everything I could get.

Chapter End Notes

Heleeeeen! What a boss!
Thanks for reading! Leave a comment if you want!
Peter Parker

Bruce and Tony walked in. Bruce was holding a syringe.

Before then, I’d been staring at the wall, counting my breaths, trying to ignore the burning pain seemingly increasing with every second. Bucky was asleep in the recliner next to me. I didn’t want to wake him. He was stretched too thin as it was.

When the scientists walked in, and I saw what Bruce was holding, my heart rate shot up. Tony noticed first. “Geez, Banner, have some tact,” he said lightly, grabbing the (capped) syringe from his hand and placing it out of sight on the table.

My heart rate slowly diminished.

“Hey, Pete,” Tony said quietly, sitting down on the bed and putting a hand softly on my knee. “How’re we feeling today?”

I blinked up at him, still measuring my breaths, trying to keep the pain out of my voice. “Okay.”

Bruce, who’d looked properly chagrinned after Tony’s scolding, checked the monitors with a frown. “No offense, Peter, but you don’t look like you’re feeling very okay.”

I would have shrugged, but the cuts on my chest burned, reminding me that that was probably a bad idea. I settled for lowering my eyes, and they had their answer.

Tony sighed, patting my knee. “Pete, you don’t need to suffer in silence, kid. We’re all here for you. You’re safe; you don’t have to be strong right now.”

Yes, I did. I always did.

I always needed to be strong, every waking minute, every waking second, because if I weren’t, if I let my walls down for even one fraction of a second, I’d fall apart.

“Hey,” Tony said gently, and my eyes flicked to his, my chest stinging with each breath, my arm throbbing, my ankles pulsing. My head spinning, my nose aching. My body screaming.

“Wanna hear a story about an idiot?”

My brows furrowed in confusion, but I gave the smallest nod.

“This big shot guy thought he was above everybody else. Super egotistical, you know? Also incredibly good-looking.” He gave me a wink. Mostly to humor him, I gave him a half-smile. “Anyways. He goes over to Afghanistan. He’s a general ass, you know, thinking he’s invincible. Long story short? He’s not. He’s really, really not.” Tony blinked once, but remained otherwise impassive. Bruce angled his body slightly away, giving the illusion of privacy. “He comes back, and guess what? He’s still an asshole, just for a different reason. He doesn’t want to talk about what happened, even though he really should, so he pushes everyone away, so they can’t ask him
about it. It doesn’t work out so well for him at first.”

I blinked heavily, barely following his story, but understanding the fundamental points.

“Eventually, his friends kick his ass over it, and he opens up. He talks about it. And he’s doing okay, now.” He gives me a half-smile. “Getting my point, short stack?”

I blinked again, narrowing my eyes at him. “Are you…calling me…an asshole?”

Bruce snorted a laugh into his hand, his shoulders shaking as he tried to contain his laughter. Tony blinked, totally unprepared for that, and reared back. “Geez, no. That’s not—are you serious right now?”

I half-smiled just to let him know I was joking. I flinched, grunting and pinching my eyes shut as a particularly violent wave of pain rolled over me.

“Pete?” Tony asked, his voice strained. My right hand fist the bedsheat, and Bruce put a worried hand on my shoulder. “Peter, what’s wrong? Talk to me, kid.”

I took a deep breath—or, I tried. A coughing fit took hold, and I coughed so hard my back came off the bed. I collapsed back against it, gasping thinly as the hacking continued, because it wouldn’t stop.

I heard frantic talking, a new voice mixing into the madness. My chest pulled, the cuts flaring and stinging and **burning**, my body crying out from every angle at the rough, spastic treatment.

Finally, the coughing subsided, and I gulped in a breath, my starved lungs greedily sucking in air. I closed my eyes and breathed, simply enjoying having the ability to do so.

“Peter?”

I went rigid. I didn’t know that voice.

“Pete, it’s alright. It’s just Helen.”

Tony’s voice. I remembered—Helen Cho. The geneticist from South Korea.

Slowly, I opened my eyes.

She stood at the foot of the bed, a few feet removed from the situation, her hands open placatingly. Bucky was awake and at my side, his hand on my shoulder, and Bruce stood just behind him, his hand presumably on the syringe out of reach. Tony was on my other side, the side with my bad arm.

“Peter, how do you feel?” Tony asked, letting me see his hand moving towards me, warning me before he touched it to my forehead.

“Bad,” I breathed.

“Does your chest hurt?” Bruce asked, checking a clipboard and the readings from the oxygen clip on my finger.

I wheezed thinly, my lungs pulsing. “Uh…y-yeah, but…I dunno if it’s the…th-the coughing or…”
I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

Pathetic. Can’t even bring yourself to acknowledge that you’re disfigured.

It sounded like Jason’s voice.

I shut that down as quickly as I could, pushing the voice to the very back of my mind, drowning it out with the world around me, with the sounds I could hear and the things I could touch and see and smell.

It still persisted, shouting and jeering, penetrating the flimsy cage like paper.

I shivered.

Tony’s brow furrowed, and he locked eyes with Doctor Cho. “He’s sick. He’s got a fever. I thought it was from the infection in his arm, but the cough sounds like something in his lungs.”

Doctor Cho came around the side of the bed. My heart rate picked up, but not as much as it had the first time. She smiled. “Peter, I’m working on finding some pain medication that works for you. It’ll help you feel better. I’m also going to start some work on antibiotics for you, so we can get rid of that cough. Sound good?” She nodded to Bruce, who still stood behind Bucky. Bucky gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “For now, I’ve developed an anesthetic. It’s going to help you sleep.”

She paused, her eyes flicking to the monitor as my heart rate sped up.

“Only if you want it, Peter,” Bucky said softly, his tired voice making me feel guilty as hell. “It’ll help you get some sleep while we try to figure this out, and it won’t hurt anymore.”

I looked at him, uncertainty clear in my eyes. I looked at Bruce and Tony, and at their earnest expressions and their open, debilitating concern. I trusted them. I did. So why was I so uncomfortable with the thought of being unconscious?

An elegant way to tear down a whole world. Doubt. My favorite.

I jerked. Jason’s words haunted me with a sickening impression of his voice. Even from the grave, he still—

“Do it,” I said through clenched teeth. “Just—stay. One of you—s-stay.”

They seemed surprised at my quick turnaround, but I would have given anything to get some sleep without simply existing in the in between, layered with pain and fear and dread and guilt and Jason’s sadistic words.

“Okay,” Bruce said, fingering the syringe and bringing it towards my IV. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said before I could convince myself otherwise.

“I’ll stay right here,” Bucky said, palming my clammy forehead, his thumb tracing gentle circles there. “And if it’s not me, it’ll be one of the others. Sound okay?”

I started to nod, but my eyelids fell heavy with exhaustion, and I felt my limbs relaxing into the soft mattress against my will. The feeling of not being able to control my body rekindled the fear I’d tried to keep away, but it was soon washed away by the utter relief I felt as the pain drained from my body. My arm numbed, my chest evened out and the burning pain subsided.
My eyelids fluttered shut completely, a soft exhale falling from my lips as my mind shut down, the fear and pain constantly plaguing me since that damn tape slipping away.

For the first time in days—maybe in weeks—I was at peace.

**Sam Wilson**

“I swear to high heaven, Banner, if you don’t let me out of this damn bed, I’m going on a hunger strike,” I grit out, staring at the ceiling tiles with simmering rage.

Bruce gave me a half smile, but his eyes were tired. “I’ll let you out when you can sit up for more than thirty seconds at a time.”

I grunted in frustration, fisting the sheets in my hand. This freaking sucked.

The gash in my side wasn’t exactly good. The wall I’d been knocked through had tons of rebar reinforcement and unsanitary mold and mildew from where the ice on the outside had melted from the heating inside the base. The water had rusted the components inside the wall, so according to Steve and Bruce, I’d been borderline septic by the time King T’Challa and Okoye had gotten me stabilized.

My arm was casted, and it would be for three or four weeks, which sucked. A lot. But they had me on the good meds for a while, so that was nice.

Now that I was off them, I was hurting, bored, and pissed as hell.

“Come on, man,” I said, pleading with the doctor’s empathetic side. “I’m going stir crazy, here. I gotta do something.” I paused, my voice lowering a bit, the tightness in my chest thickening as I thought of Peter, who must be just in another room of this wing. “I gotta see the squirt. I need to know he’s okay.”

Bruce looked up from where he was scanning my chart, his expression conflicted. “Sam, you’re really not strong enough—”

“I’m the only one who hasn’t seen him!” I finally shouted. Bruce clamped his mouth shut, realization dawning in his eyes. I kept going, days and days of anger and stress finally bubbling to the surface. They’d told me about his powers, about what they knew about his time in the HYDRA base, but I didn’t know anything about his injuries, or about how he was doing, mentally, and it was tearing me apart. “I haven’t laid eyes on him since he left the living room for that damn meeting with Ross. Every single one of you has seen him since then, even if you haven’t talked to him, and I need—I need to see him, Bruce. I—I’m going crazy not knowing how he is, if he’s hurt, if he’s—”

“Oh, okay,” the doctor said quickly, putting the chart down and putting a gentle hand on my shoulder, looking concerned. “Okay. Maybe if you calm down, alright? You’re too weak to be this worked up. Deep breaths.”

Despite being annoyed as hell that he was treating me like a four-year-old, I followed his instructions, the racing of the heart monitor quieting gradually. Finally I let me eyes drift shut and took a deep breath, regaining my composure. “I—please, Bruce. I just—he—”

“Okay,” Bruce said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Okay. You can see him. If!” He added hastily, noticing the way I tried to sit up almost immediately. “If you promise to stay in bed
for the next two or three days, just to make sure you’re exhibiting any side effects from the infection.”

“Days?” I shouted indignantly, my side twinging in protest. “Bruce—”

“Do we have a deal?” He asked, crossing his arms and looking down over the bridge of his spectacles, giving me the distinct impression that I was a naughty kid being disciplined at a preppy boarding school.

“Dammit, fine,” I huffed, bracing my good arm on the railing of the hospital bed, my core muscles shaking as I tried to lift myself up. “Now get outta my way.”

“Whoa, hey, no,” Bruce said firmly, all but shoving me back down onto the bed. “I’ll call Steve to take you. Park it and stay there.”

“Freaking warden,” I muttered, suddenly very understanding of why Peter had been so angry when we’d confined him to bed after the HYDRA agent had killed himself in front of him.

“You’re not a great prisoner,” Bruce shot back, the wrinkles on his forehead even more pronounced as he texted Steve.

I felt somewhat bad to antagonizing the man. I knew he had a lot on his plate with trying to help Tony and Helen Cho come up with a way to help Peter, but I could only take so much mothering.

Geez, was this what my siblings felt like when I took care of them as kids? Because I was a hot mess whenever they were sick. I ran around like a chicken with my head cut off, trying to make sure every single aspect of their entire existence was up to par.

I should probably thank them for not killing me.

Steve walked through the doors a second later, his eyes landing on me. “How’re you feeling, Sam?”

“Bored and antsy and pissed as hell,” I said flatly, grabbing the railing again, preparing myself to move.

“You don’t hold back, do you?”

“I’m a therapist. I don’t bottle up my emotions like some idiots I know.”

He shook his head, but there was a small smile on his face. “Bruce said you want to see Peter.”

“Yeah, and I’m gonna see Peter if I have to drag myself to his room with one functioning arm, but your help would otherwise be appreciated.”

Steve got me situated into the wheelchair, which really sucked a lot but it was one of Bruce’s compromises. He seemed to have a lot of those.

“I’ll warn you,” Steve said quietly, the wheelchair squeaking as he turned down another sterile white hallway. “He’s sedated now—Doctor Cho found an anesthetic that works with his metabolism—but he…doesn’t look good, Sam.”

I gripped the arm of my chair, grateful Steve was behind me and couldn’t see my face.
“How bad is it? What did they do to him?”

“His arm is…awful,” Steve said, his voice breaking slightly on the last word. “They cut it open and left the wound to fester for days. It’s healed some now, but his rate of healing has decreased a lot, and they don’t know why. He has pneumonia. He was kept in the basement of the base with absolutely no heating in Siberian winter, and it did a number on him. His ankles are raw from the electrical burns. His nose is broken. He has a gash on his forehead and his upper lip is torn in two. He—”

“Alright,” I finally ground out, unable to let the tirade continue. “Alright. Okay. He’s screwed up bad, just—alright.”

“There’s something else,” he said, stopping outside of what I presumed was Peter’s room. He didn’t make any move to go inside, instead coming around and crouching in front of the wheelchair. His eyes were…haunted. “There’s one more thing you need to know.”

My heart was beating a mile a minute inside my chest, butterflies dancing in my empty stomach at the thought of what could make Steve look quite so upset. I stiffened, the pull on my stitches uncomfortable, and gripped the chair. “Spit it out, Rogers.”

Steve lowered his head and put a hand on my knee. “I—we think Jason was the one to do it, but we don’t know for sure. He—he carved HYDRA with straight cuts across Peter’s chest.” He paused. “It’s going to scar. Even with his healing, we think. They’re too deep, and we don’t think Peter’s healing is going to be able to take care of the tissue damage enough to avoid that.”

I went back over the words very carefully. I slowly relistened to each one of them in my head, remembering and examining and inspecting. After I understood what had been said, I took a deep breath through my nose. I parted my lips and exhaled through my mouth, closing my eyes.

“Ross 2.0 is dead, right?”

“Yes.”

“Ross 1.0 is on total lockdown at the opposite end of the Compound?”

“Yeah…?”

I opened my eyes, breathing again. Controlling the bubbling, burning, bursting rage, feeling it diminish to a cold simmer in the pit of my gut. Part of my job was controlling my emotions. I would deal with them later.

“Take me inside,” I said, looking at the door.

Steve didn’t say anything, simply opening the door, wheeling me in, and parking me next to Bucky, who looked like an extra on the Walking Dead.

I saw Peter’s face and part of me died a little.

The bruises and little cuts on his face were so at odds with his peaceful, relaxed expression. His left arm was absolutely covered in bandages, from his wrist to his forearm. A blanket went up to his chest, edges of the bandages peeking out from under the scrubs he wore.

And he was so, so thin.

We’d tried so hard to get his weight up, to get him eating enough.
Damn them. Damn them all.

Bucky sent a glance my way, letting his metal hand drop onto my shoulder. “Good to see you up, Sam.”

“Thanks, old man,” I said, but the retort had no humor.

Bucky didn’t respond. He, Steve, and I didn’t speak a word for hours, simply watched Peter as he slept on peacefully, reassuring ourselves that he was alive, and okay.

Shuri, Daughter of T’Chaka

“T’Challa,” I whined in Xhosa as he paced the guest quarters, Nakia and Okoye lounging nearby. “You know I hate to rush you, brother, but I have no problem doing so. When are we leaving?”

“When we are sure there is nothing we can do to help their child recover,” he said, his voice ringing with finality.

“And while I admire you dearly for that,” I continued, absently swiping spam emails out of the way, “I do have the entire technological industry of Wakanda to run, which is a bit hard to do from here.”

My brother stopped, shooting me one of his “looks.” “Why don’t you go do some exploring? You can examine Mr. Stark’s technology. Maybe it’ll give you some ideas.”

I scoffed, distinctly aware that that would never happen, but complied.

I wandered for a bit, foraging the kitchen for some traditional American delicacies (their instant Ramen was really quite good) and continued to scour the rest of the Compound for something entertaining to do.

I was absently fiddling with my *kimoyo* beads when I heard something interesting coming from their training room.

I slipped through the ajar door and saw Colonel Rhodes working his way across the parallel bars, his braces cast to the side. I’d seen them on him earlier, but hadn’t paid them much mind.

He was struggling to walk on his own, his arms shaking beneath his own weight. His legs moved slowly, like a fly through amber, and his face was beaded with sweat. I crossed my arms and stood silently, out of his line of vision, and watched him.

On some level, I knew this was very personal, and that I should leave. Personal boundaries were never very important to me, anyhow. Brother would give me quite the scolding, were he to know.

Needless to say, he would not know.

Finally, the strain on the Colonel was too much, and he collapsed. Luckily, he held on to the bars long enough to adjust himself to a sitting position; had he fallen forward, he would’ve collapsed face-first.

“Well, that didn’t seem to do much,” I offered bluntly in English.
He jumped, whirling to face me, his expression somewhere between shocked and angry. “Uh, hi. Princess Shuri, right?” He wiped a hand over his forehead, slick with sweat. “Could you leave? I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“Nope,” I said, coming forward and inspecting his braces as he watched me with nothing short of slack-jawed shock. “I’m bored.”

“Well, I was in the middle of something, and I’d like to continue, so please—”

“Who on Earth built these braces?” I asked with horror, examining the primitive mechanisms and caveman-like parts. “You’d think they got their skills from Neanderthals.”

“Actually, Tony Stark built them, and they’re the only reason I can walk,” the Colonel ground out, his hands white where they were fisted on his thighs. “So I’d appreciate it if you didn’t insult my friend, or his work, since it’s actually helping me live a somewhat normal life.”

I tossed his towel at him in response, crouching and examining the braces. They were simple in function, designed to support the legs from all angles in a way that held the entire weight of the user while remaining painless.

“Do you have feeling in your legs?” I asked, swiveling back around to face him.

His face screwed up in anger once again, and he tore the towel from his shoulders. “What’s it to you? Look, I get that in Wakanda you’re royalty and all that, but here, you’re really not very important, okay? I’ve got a kid upstairs suffering in pain, and I’m trying to do something productive to keep my mind off of it, so I’d appreciate being alone and able to actually think without some upstart brat asking me a thousand questions I don’t want to think about or answer!”

He panted once he was done with his tirade, leaning against the bars, his face collapsing. “Please just go,” he said, dragging a hand down his face, his words muffled. “I just…need to be alone.”

T’Challa always did say my mouth ran away with me sometimes. I supposed this was one of those times. Although I still wanted answers to my questions, I did feel a bit guilty.

“I’m sorry,” I ventured, making no move to leave. “Brother says I have a habit of speaking before I think. But in my defense, I did have a point.” I glanced back at the braces, then at his legs, shaking from exertion on the matted space between the bars. “Would you like to come to Wakanda for treatment? I could probably repair the damage to your spine and your legs in a matter of weeks. Or I could at least make you some better braces, because these are disgraceful.”

At his expression, I hastily added, “Sorry. Not disgraceful. Simply…sub-par.”

That sounded more diplomatic.

“What is it with teenagers trying to insert themselves into my problems?” He mumbled to the ceiling.

“Ah, your friend upstairs noticed it to?” I asked quietly. Even I knew I was venturing into delicate territory.

He shot me a glance, then nodded once, heavily. “Yeah. Says he wants me to get some therapy, and not the physical kind.”

I nodded. “He’s smart. You probably need some.”
He scoffed. “How would you know?”

I cocked my head, sitting with my legs crossed beneath me. “I went to therapy after my father died.” His eyes shot to me, a question dancing in his dark irises. I smiled a bit. It didn’t bother me, talking about the therapy, not since talking with T’Challa and my mother about it. “I am only sixteen, Colonel. Princess or no, genius or no, my father died, and my brother went out seeking revenge and fighting wars right after. My mother was distraught, and I…” I shrugged. “I stayed behind when he left and picked up the pieces. For myself, my mother, and my country.”

I paused, pursing my lips and continuing on. “I hated it at first. All these know-it-all adults trying to dig around inside my head. But some of what they said and suggested held some merit.” I looked back at him, his eyes focused intently on mine. “You should try it. It will help more than you think it will.”

He stared at me for a moment longer before sighing, wiping his forehead once more on the towel. “I…think I will.”

I nodded, satisfied, and grinned at him. “Well. Glad that’s taken care of. I believe your friends are quite close to developing something to help your friend, so I’m going to offer my assistance.”

The Colonel scoffed. “You mean take over the entire operation and tell them all they’re doing it wrong?”

My eyes twinkled as I glanced at the man, winking. “Something like that.” I softened my smile. “It was nice speaking with you, Colonel Rhodes. I hope your friend recovers swiftly.” I start to exit, but curiosity takes hold, and I have to ask. “I understand the basics, but how did he become so precious to you all?”

It was the first time he’d smiled throughout our whole conversation. “I have no idea.”

I laughed quietly. “An old Sudanese proverb comes to mind—umntwana ungumntwana wabo bonke.” At his confused look, I continued, “‘A child is a child of everyone.’”

He pondered my words for a moment before smiling again, closing his eyes. “Yeah. That—yeah. That makes sense.” He looks at me. “Thank you. For helping us find him.”

“My pleasure, Colonel,” I said, smirking with my next words. “If you ever want help with your situation, you know where to find me. I’m sure I could dumb it down for Stark, too.”

As I swept out of the room, I could hear him laughing.

I grinned to myself, determined to find the medical laboratory. It wasn’t a bad way to waste a few minutes, but I was determined to help these people fix their child, so we could go home.

Natasha Romanov

“You need to eat, Nat.”

I made no move to respond to Clint, who stood in the doorway. My eyes continued to scan the encrypted files covering the wall of screens, decoding every shred of information from Ross’ base.
“Lady Natasha,” Thor’s rumbling voice was unexpected, but I still didn’t respond. “We are worried for you.”

I stood, arms folded over my chest, statuesque as I studied covert mission files and personnel folders and illegal banking transactions. Hunting for every shred of information I could find on Thaddeus Ross.

“You should go see him, Natasha,” Clint said quietly. “He’s asleep, but…I mean, it’ll be good for him and you. I think he needs us all right now.”

A worm of guilt slithered uncomfortably through my chest, and I squashed it decisively. Peter needed to be safe.

I was making him safe.

I archived a particularly gruesome file on one of Ross’ experiments in which the subjects had been injected with a special component of their theoretical serum designed to protect the subject from ingested poison. When poisoned, the subjects had shriveled to husks and died, the poison and the serum fighting each other in the subject’s body until they died an agonizing death.

I added it to the list of heinous crimes, which would be the first on the list to be exposed.

“Natasha.”

I deleted one file about an affair with his secretary three years. It was a trivial matter, and it wouldn’t fuel my revenge at all.

“Tasha.”

I didn’t flinch.

“You cannot ignore us forever,” Thor said quietly, gently putting his hand on my shoulder.

Something nuzzled my calf. Barely flicking my eyes down, I saw Stella rubbing up against my leg, looking up at me with wide, innocent eyes that reminded me far too much of my Pyotr’s.

“You have your ways of coping,” I said flatly, archiving another experiment, the list of files still growing as FRIDAY continued hacking into the more secure levels of the server. “I have mine.”

“This isn’t coping,” Clint said, coming around to stand in front of me, blocking my view of the screen. My eyes locked onto his stonily. He knew what a dangerous move it was to come between me and my mission.

“I haven’t seen you like this in a long time, Nat,” he said, taking me by the shoulders and looking me in the eyes. “It’s kind of scaring me.”

“I have work to do.”

“Come with me,” Clint said, his voice soft, borderline pleading. “Just—come with me. Come see Peter. Talk to him. Let him know you’re here.” He paused, opening his mouth, closing it, opening it again. “You’re…I know you’re avoiding him, Nat.”

Unable to stomach the conversation any longer, I grabbed his shoulder and shoved him out of the way, shaking off Thor’s hand as I do so. Stella leapt back, surprised by the sudden
movements, and I archive another file.

“I’m not avoiding him,” I said decisively, glancing back to the screen, back to my priority, my mission. “I’m making sure that piece of utter filth in the containment cell underground is never going to see the light of day again. I’m making sure that Peter will be safe.”

“Are you sure about that?” Clint asked quietly. “Or are you just scared to face him?”

I didn’t dignify that with a response. After a moment, I heard Thor, Clint, and Stella leave, Clint giving a resigned, worried sigh.

As I archived another file, I found myself wishing he hadn’t left.

Because I knew exactly how I was acting, and it was scaring me, too.

Chapter End Notes

Natasha noooooo!
“Well, the antibiotic is almost ready,” I said slowly, peering through the microscope intently. Breaking the silence was a bit unusual, but I realized it must have been because Stark wasn’t here, and it was actually quiet in the first place. “I just have to test it.”

“Good,” Banner commented, seeming lost in his own work on the pain reliever. “Tony said his cough’s getting worse, even in his sleep.”

I sighed. The poor boy couldn’t seem to catch a break.

“Actually,” I said, not quite sure I wanted to broach this subject of discussion just yet, but positive that it had to be done. “I have a suggestion.”

Banner looked up from his work, intrigued by my tone, his eyes slightly narrowed. “Sure…?”

I took a deep breath and set my shoulders. “I think, after we’ve developed all the pharmaceuticals and are certain that they work, we need to do surgery on his arm.”

Banner didn’t speak for a moment, simply regarded me over the bridge of his glasses. Finally, he slipped them off, rubbing the bridge of his eyes. “You’re right. I know.” He paused, and I let him continue. “I just…don’t know how everyone’s going to feel about that. How Peter will feel. Hell, how I’ll feel.”

“Sure…?”

I took a deep breath and set my shoulders. “I think, after we’ve developed all the pharmaceuticals and are certain that they work, we need to do surgery on his arm.”

I shifted, knowing it was a touchy subject. Whatever the scientists had done to Peter, from what I could gather, he’d been awake. Even though we’d put him under for the time being, and would do so for the surgery, he probably wouldn’t like the idea of someone else cutting into his arm.

“I know it’s a lot,” I said gently, “but the infection is still dangerous. He could relapse and it could spread to other parts of his body.”

Bruce rubbed his forehead, sighing heavily. His shoulders sagged. “I know, Helen. I’ll…I’ll talk to the others. I know it needs to be done, it’s just…not going to be pleasant for him.”

Touching his shoulder, I came forward a bit. “How long has it been since you’ve slept?”

The question seemed to surprise him, but he gave a tired, guilty smile. “You noticed.”

“Of course I noticed,” I said, feigning offense. “I’d have to be blind not to. You’re here when I am, and you’re here when I leave and when I come back.”

Bruce squared his shoulders and peered back through the microscope. “I’ll sleep when the pain reliever is done.”

I sighed, really not wanting to antagonize him, but still certain that he needed to sleep before anything else was done. “You’re not going to be able to finish it correctly running on fumes
like you are. Can I take a look?"

Silently, he leaned back, and I took his place looking through the microscope. The culture was well on its way to being what we needed, but not quite. Clucking my tongue, I leaned back, scanning his notes. "I can finish this. The antibiotic will be done as soon as I run it through the centrifuge and add a bit of penicillin; I don’t think Imipenin alone is going to do the trick."

Bruce ran a hand through his hair, clearly unhappy, but rational enough to know that he wasn’t any help like this. "Just…” He sighed, looking me in the eye seriously. "Take care of him."

I nodded. "You have my word. He’ll start the antibiotic as soon as I’m done with it, and as soon as this is done and tested, he’ll be getting a full dose every six hours to help manage the pain."

Shoulders sagging, he nodded. "Call me if you need me."

The sleep-deprived scientist all but stumbled to the exit, and I heard his sleepily tell FRIDAY to take him to his room.

I sighed, shaking my head and smiling to myself. These people were so different from the last time I’d seen them; their dedication to Peter was…incredible. This boy had done them a world of good.

I quickly took the steps to finish the antibiotic, determined to continue Bruce’s work on the pain reliever within the hour. I was so absorbed in my work, I didn’t notice when someone else slipped into the room.

“This lab is dreadful,” the young, accented voice scared me half to death, and I whirled to face her, knocking over an empty tray in the process. She looked at me, unimpressed. "Who are you?"

I cursed in Korean before turning to her, my hand over my chest. "My name is Helen Cho. I’m a geneticist from South Korea, and I run U-GIN, stationed there. Who might you be?"

The girl examined a vial before placing it back in its beaker, glancing at it haughtily. "Shuri, Princess of Wakanda and leader of Wakanda’s technological Research and Development. I’m here to help. What have you done so far?"

It was an impressive title, but her attitude wasn’t winning her any favors. "I think this is better left to the professionals, Princess—"

"Hmph," she said, looking through Banner’s microscope. ‘‘Professional’ is generous, Doctor. Oh, I see. You know, this pain killer would be much more effective if you added half the Castor Oil and replaced it with more naproxen. It could also do with a touch of diluted Fentanyl—" She looked at me.

I can’t say I was very dignified, standing there with my jaw dropped. She sighed and lifted her eyes to the ceiling, as if she simply couldn’t stand someone who didn’t understand. I understood her words, just not her actions.

“Oh, never mind,” she said, grabbing a pair of rubber gloves and a test tube. "I’ll have this finished in an hour. You go back to whatever else you were doing."

Not really sure why I listened, but not really able to argue, either, I did.
Peter Parker

When I came to, I felt heavy and cloudy, but I also knew exactly where I was.

I was in Avengers’ Medical. In the Avengers Compound. I was home, and nothing hurt.

Relief flooded my mind even as guilt ate at me, a constant reminder of my impending conversation with my family about how I’d—I’d—

Hushed voices reached me first.

“He’s been asleep for a few hours, but he’s been doing a little better,” Bucky’s voice reached me, and my heart thudded in my chest and I felt my limbs relax. He hadn’t left. “I think he’s beating himself up about…about the letters he left.” His hand was settled on my head, wary of the bandages on my forehead. I relaxed into it, feeling safe under his watch, even though the mention of the letters made my heart pound.

Someone cursed. Someone whose voice I hadn’t heard in what felt like forever. “That’s gonna be a shit-ton of baggage to sort through,” Sam’s blunt words wracked my mind, and I hadn’t seen him yet, him or Natasha, but everyone else had been there at some point, and I wanted to see him—

I struggled to open my eyes, eyelids fluttering for a second before the hazy world took on colors and shapes. Turning my head towards the voices, now silent, my eyebrows furrowed at the crick in my neck, but then I saw Sam.

I managed a smile, though a dull pain cut through my lip.

“Hey, squirt,” Sam said, grinning wide. He reached out with his left hand, taking my right one in his own, squeezing tight. “Thought you were gonna sleep forever.”

I closed my eyes as I huffed a little laugh, the tickle at the back of my throat threatening a cough. I managed to swallow it down, my body too tired to withstand another coughing fit right now.

When I opened them again, I noticed a couple of things.

One, Steve was behind Sam. I’d seen him before, but I’d been too out of it to really acknowledge him. I sent a smile his way, too tired to do much of anything else.

He came around the bed, a smile lighting up his face and Bucky moved to the side a little to let him through, smiling at me. “Hey, Peter,” he said gently, his eyes shining as his throat bobbed. “My God, you—I was so worried about you.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, tone it down, you crybaby,” Sam said, though with another slow glance in his direction, I realized he wasn’t looking too dry himself. At my knowing look, he cleared his throat, looking away. “What?”

I gave the tiniest grin, squeezing his hand. With another look, though, the grin faded.

The second thing I noticed was that Sam was in hospital scrubs like mine, and his arm was casted in a sling. My eyes quickly scanned over his form, which I now realized was in a wheelchair.
Sam caught my worried eyes and looked down in realization. “Oh. Kid, don’t look at me like that, I’m not about to keel over.”

I squeezed his hand insistently, though it wasn’t a very strong grip. I was still too tired to talk. The heart monitor sped up a fraction.

“I’m fine,” he said with a more serious tone, looing me in the eye. “Everything was pretty superficial. I picked a fight with a wall and lost,” he said with a smirk. “I’ll be back to normal in a couple weeks, so quit looking like the world is ending.”

Watching him intently, I felt myself relax, the monitor slowing. He definitely looked okay. He was maybe a little tired-looking, but they all looked exhausted, so I didn’t think it was that bad. Suddenly feeling like I’d just spent three days in the Sahara, I tried to swallow, my throat like sandpaper. I opened my mouth to ask for water, but Bucky beat me to it, holding out a spoonful of ice chips.

I sent him a grateful smile and sucked on the cold shards for a second, the water trickling down my throat and easing my thirst. I sighed in contentment, and the cold spoon touched my lips again.

“You need more than one spoonful, kid,” Bucky said with a half-smile.

I let him give me a few more spoonfuls before turning my head away slightly, my stomach doing somersaults after being empty for so long.

“How’s he—you’re awake!” I saw Doctor Cho come in out of the corner of my eye, her white lab coat igniting a flash of panic before I forced myself to settle down. She’d been looking at her chart when she came in, but she smiled when she looked up and saw me awake. Instinctively, I leaned more into Bucky’s hand, but I tried to offer her a polite half-smile.

“He woke up a couple minutes ago,” Steve offered, patting my shoulder. “Had some ice chips. He seems a lot more attentive.”

“That’s good,” she said with a smile in my direction, setting the chart down and taking a vial out of her pocket. “You remember last time I was here?” I gave a small nod, my neck protesting. “I’m done with that antibiotic, and the pain reliever just has one more round of tests before it’s ready. Princess Shuri took over the whole operation and is going to have it out in a little while.” She smile became strained at the mention of the princess, but I didn’t have any idea who that was, and I was too tired to ask. “I’m going to start you on the antibiotic now, is that alright?”

Only hesitating for a second, I gave a small nod, looking at Bucky before doing so. He gave an encouraging smile. “It’s okay, Peter.”

She put the antibiotic in through the IV, then checked the machines surrounding me. “It looks like you’re doing better,” she said gently. “Your healing seems to be speeding back up a little bit, which is good. We’ve been giving you nutrients through the IV.” That explained why I didn’t feel all that hungry. “Are you up for talking to me a bit? Answering a couple of questions?”

I wasn’t sure how much I’d be able to say, but I nodded. I didn’t know what kind of questions she’d be asking, but I knew I probably wouldn’t be able—or more accurately, wouldn’t want to—answer all of them. I also wasn’t comfortable with her standing over me. It took me back to that room, with all the doctors and scientists in their bright white coats—standing over me, their faces blurring and their hands holding—and cutting and—
“Could you—” I coughed a bit. I wasn’t used to talking. I felt my face flush with the request forming on my lips, but I spat it out, not meeting anyone’s eyes. “C-could you, maybe, uh…s-sit down?”

She blinked once, but that was the only surprise she showed. “Sure,” she said easily, pulling up a plastic folding chair and sitting down in it, crossing her legs. She also shrugged off the coat. I wasn’t sure if it was intentional or not, but I immediately felt my fear ease.

“Okay,” she continued, smiling at the other occupants in the room. Steve had moved to my other side, where Doctor Cho was, and sat on the spinny doctor stool thing, so I’d be able to see him. “Can you tell me your full name?”

That wasn’t the question I’d been expecting, and it must have shown. She laughed quietly. “It’s to check your concussion. The head wound was a little worrying, so we just want to make sure you’re not exhibiting any signs of amnesia or swelling.”

I nodded. That made sense. “Peter B-Benjamin Parker.”

“Date of birth?”

“August 15th.”

She continued with a few more routine questions, and I answered them all correctly. She shifted her posture, then, and leaned forward. “Peter, can you tell me how you got the burns on your ankles?”

I sucked in a breath, totally unprepared for the question.

Bucky said something, but there was water thundering in my ears, and his voice was drowned out by—

*God, you’re such an infant. Crying over a bit of electricity? This is nothing. Wait until we really get started.*

The words shook me out of my stupor, and I took a deep, shaking breath. “It’s okay.”

I said it almost to myself, but the talking stopped. Bucky’s hand was threading through my hair in comfort, and I drew strength from that. “It’s…it’s okay.”

*His* voice continued to taunt me, but I forced it down.

I didn’t want to think about why I couldn’t bear hearing or saying his name. I’d been fine earlier, but now that I was somewhat lucid, and I could control my thoughts, I couldn’t—I couldn’t stomach any thoughts of him. Not even of just his *name*.

“They had me…chained, in a…a cellar? A b-basement?” I said uncertainly. I’d never known where exactly I was. “It was…c-cold. There were always ch-chains on my ankles. J—Uh… he h-had a remote,” I continued, stumbling over my words when I tried to say his name, a shudder coursing through me at the memory of the electricity. “It w-would electrocute me when h-he pressed it.”

She nodded, her face impassive, but I felt Bucky’s hand tense up against my hair and I heard Steve’s controlled breathing. I heard the wheelchair squeak under Sam’s grip.

“Thank you, Peter,” she said gently, writing something down. “I just needed to know to
make sure we knew how the burns occurred, so we could treat them correctly.”

I blinked, appreciative that she was telling me why she needed the information.

“Now, how did—”

“Great Baast, this Compound is confusing,” a young girl’s voice said just before she came into the room. She had dark skin and several beaded bracelets, dressed in loud colors that seemed to combine traditional African dress with something you’d see on the streets of New York. “Ah, I found you.”

I didn’t know her, but she didn’t look particularly threatening, either, so I didn’t feel too on edge. She was maybe a little older than me, and a bit taller. She was carrying a vial.

She grinned at me, and I stared back at her, confused. “You must be Peter. Pleasure to meet you, I’m Shuri. Doctor, here’s that pain killer.” She winked at me as she handed the vial to a flustered looking Doctor Cho, and I couldn’t help but give her a half smile. “You’re cute. Well, I’m sure you’re cuter when you don’t look like you’ve gone a couple rounds with a brick wall.” I felt myself blushing spectacularly, but I couldn’t contain a small laugh at her words.

She was…something else.

“I’ll talk to you more once you’re feeling better,” she said, waving as she bounced back through the door without another word.

“Uh…” I started, thoroughly confused.

Sam was laughing into his hand, wheezing in pain but still unable to contain a snort. “You’ve got an admirer, Peter.”

“That’s Shuri,” Steve said with an apologetic smile. “She helped us find you.”

“Oh,” I said, accepting the explanation for now, but still very confused.

“Okay, well,” Doctor Cho said, collecting herself and setting the vial on the table, “I’ll give you some of that once the anesthetic has completely worn off. Sound good?”

I nodded, happy to know that I wouldn’t have to be put under anymore.

Just then, Rhodey and Clint came in. Clint’s shoulders were slumped, but he beamed when he saw I was awake. “Little dude!” He said excitedly, sitting down at the foot of my bed. “How’re you feeling?”


“Hey, kiddo,” he said, his entire frame slumping with relief. He walked around Doctor Cho and leaned down, giving me an awkward hug. I squeezed Clint’s hand in warning before letting go and clumsily wrapping my arm around his shoulders, enjoying feeling safe. He pulled back slowly, giving my hair a ruffle. “Got enough beauty sleep?”

I huffed a laugh. Doctor Cho stood and made her way to the door. “I’m going to run some more tests; we can finish later, Peter,” she said with a smile. “And you guys?” Five sets of eyes flicked to hers, already somewhat guilty. “Do not get him worked up, am I clear?”
They nodded, each with a distinct look of embarrassment on their faces. Cho smiled triumphantly before leaving the room.

The six of us talked for a little while, making light conversation, keeping things humorous and away from anything concerning my time in that base, away from Ross, away from—

I shuddered, but I quelled that thought instantly, listening to them talk above me, Sam insulting Steve and laughing like a madman at his reaction.

Rhodey texted Tony that I was awake, and he showed up a few minutes later with a bowl of chicken broth, Thor trailing behind him. Thor gave me a smile and set Stella down next to me. The cat hopped up on my chest, nuzzling my neck and purring, the vibrations soothing. I smiled, so overjoyed to have her back with me it was embarrassing, and stroked her fur. She settled on the pillow beside my head and breathed softly in my ear, her tail flicking back and forth.

“Hey, Pete,” Tony said, not nearly as hyper as the others, but probably because he’d already spoken to me while I was halfway lucid. “Think you can take some of this?”

Yes, the warm chicken broth sounded utterly amazing, but I didn’t know if I could sit up enough to drink it. When I mentioned that, Clint grabbed a straw and stuck it in the bowl. “Gotcha covered, little dude,” he said with a wink.

I drank about half the bowl, the saltiness utterly delicious. I hadn’t tasted anything but water and blood in days, and it was maybe the most amazing thing I’d ever tasted.

I squashed the memories that rose with that thought, determined to keep them all hidden away nice and tight.

“Where’s Bruce?” I asked Tony as he set the bowl down.

“Sleeping,” he said with a smirk. “He’s had a lot going on the past few days, trying to keep the Hulk down and everything.” Seeing my guilty expression, he plowed on, “By the way, Big Green really wants to meet you, kid,” he said with a smirk to hide his worry. “He about went crazy when you—

He stopped short, looking at a loss for words.

“You can s-say it,” I said quietly, looking at him intently. As long as I didn’t think about anything that happened there, or anyone who was there, I could deal with that thought that I had been—missing. Missing was safe. Missing didn’t lead to those memories. “When I was missing.”

That wasn’t the response Tony had been looking for, but he sighed quietly and patted my knee, smiling. “Yeah. When you were missing.”

I looked at Clint, then, desperately wanting to see the only person who’d yet to make an appearance. “Where’s Tasha?”

Clint tried to smile, but his face fell pretty quickly. “She, uh—” He looked like he couldn’t spit the words out.

The expressions on the others’ faces weren’t too promising, and my heart started thudding erratically, my good hand fisting the sheets as my eyes darted wildly from face to face. The heart monitor went crazy. “She what? She’s—she’s okay, right? Clint?”

Stella flipped out, standing pin straight and yowling in alarm at my actions, rushing to my side and
pawing at my stomach. The others reacted similarly, but Steve was the only one who really got a handle on it enough to calm me down.

“Whoa, hey, calm down!” Steve said, sensing my distress. He planted his hands firmly on my shoulders, earnest eyes boring into mine as I breathed much too quickly for my abused lungs. “She’s fine. She’s in her room, I think. She’s okay.”

I sank back to the bed, complete and utter relief sweeping through me. My chest ached and I absently laid a hand on it, struggling to pull in a deep breath as I closed my eyes. Stella, satisfied that it was over, curled up against my side, still alert.

Something touched my face, and I jerked back, still on edge. I opened my eyes to see Tony hovering above me with an oxygen mask. “It’s just gonna help you breathe,” he said, fixing it over my face before Bucky lifted my head so he could pull the elastic over my hair.

The whir of artificial air signaled the stale oxygen flow, but it was so much better than breathing on my own. I pulled in one deep breath after another, feeling myself settle down gradually. “Sorry,” I whispered.

I thought the word was lost in the mask, but Clint leaned down, guilt lining his face. “No, I’m sorry, Peter, that was—that was stupid of me. She’s okay,” he said, still looking like he was struggling for his next words. “She just has some things to take care of.”

I tried to hide the hurt, but I was too tired to do a very good job. If she was really in her room, then did she really not have time to come see me for a few minutes? Was she avoiding me for some reason?

A horrible thought suddenly sprang to life, and my throat bobbed at the thought of it being true. Did she hate me?

I knew how close it came to J—to his endgame, making me believe no one was there for me, no one loved me, but now that I knew better, it was a valid concern. She’d shown me a part of herself that I knew for a fact she didn’t show to many people. Really no one but Clint, and maybe sometimes the others. But she’d shown me.

And I’d left her. Her and all the others, but I knew how hard it had been for her to open up to me, and that letter had practically thrown it all back in her face, and I—

I felt a tear slip out of my eye and I clumsily wiped at it with my right hand, still trying to get some coordination back.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Sam asked, putting his hand on my shoulder. I startled under his touch, but he didn’t let go. “Peter?”

“Sorry,” I breathed again. “Just…tired.”

It was a sorry excuse, and everybody knew it. But they let me get away with it. “We will leave you to your rest, young Peter,” Thor said, giving me a small smile.

Everyone but Bucky said their goodbyes and filed out of the room, Sam promising to bake me something once he was back on his feet. I forced a laugh, but I did appreciate it. Stella remained, a spot of warmth against my side against the perpetual cold.

Bucky palmed my forehead. “You okay, Peter?”
I turned to him, still winded from my freak-out earlier, but terrified by the notion of Natasha hating me. “I…is Tasha really okay?”

“She’s fine, Peter,” he said reassuringly, scooting closer, his expression pinched and worried. “She’s okay. Do you not remember seeing her in the base?”

My eyebrows furrowed, because I remembered Bucky asking a similar question when I’d first woken up. “I—no. Did I…did I see you? And h-her?”

“Yeah,” he said, his expression all but blank. “She and I were the ones who found you. You had a pretty bad head wound, so I guess it’s normal that you don’t remember. She shot Jason and then we—” I jerked at his name, then squeezed my eyes shut in shame, hating myself for reacting so strongly to just a word. Bucky paused, seeing my reaction.

“He can’t hurt you,” he said soothingly, his calm voice blotting out his cruel one, still mocking me from my memories.

“I know,” I said slowly, fogging up the mask. “Go on.”

He hesitated, but he did. “We found Ross trying to get you out. You asked her not to kill him, and she didn’t. That’s why we brought him back. She said she was going to expose him, so I guess she’s been going through all his files to put a case together.”

I blinked, searching his face and finding nothing but utter honesty. That explained why she was busy, but not why she hadn’t come to see me.

Bucky read the question in my eyes and sighed, looking pained. “I don’t know, kid. I don’t know why she isn’t here.”

That was the answer I’d been expecting, though not the one I wanted.

I nodded, taking a deep breath, and rolling my head away from him. “Okay,” I said, closing my eyes.

Despite knowing it’s what he wanted, that he wanted me to question everyone and everything, I was having a hard time keeping the doubt at bay.

**Natasha Romanov**

I sat holed up in my room, the walls covered in holographic projections of Ross’ most horrifying files.

I was compiling them into categories, an orderly folder of heinous acts capable of bringing even an emotionless man like Thaddeus Ross to his knees in utter shame.

My body betrayed me, then, my stomach growling indignantly. Annoyed, I continued my task. I knew this wasn’t smart. I hadn’t eaten in…what, two days now? I hadn’t slept in even longer. But I wasn’t shaky. I wasn’t cloudy.

I was utterly focused on my mission.

I’d gone longer without food or sleep, both in the Red Room and on various missions. Besides, this wasn’t a very physically demanding task. I knew I’d be fine for another little while.

A knock at the door sounded, but it didn’t startle me. I’d heard the hesitant footsteps in the
“I’m busy, Clint,” I said, scanning the wall again, making sure I hadn’t missed any of the files.

The door opened, and I turned to see dark skin in the doorway, the light from the hallway unfamiliar in my dark room.

“Rhodey,” I said, annoyed with myself for having not picked up on the shuffling sounds of his footsteps. I cursed myself for not being on my best game with Ross so close. Confined, but still close. “Close the door. I’m working.”

He closed the door, but only after he’d stepped inside, which wasn’t really what I’d had in mind.

“Clint’s worried about you,” he said hesitantly, but strongly. “Thor, too, and I’m getting there myself.”

“Clint worries about everything,” I muttered, swiping another file away. The list was growing steadily, the burning fury simmering in the pit of my stomach, giving me more fuel that food could. “Thor, too.”

“Yeah, but I don’t,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest, his expression pinching in worry as he gazed around the room. One of the gruesome pictures of one of the experiments just so happened to project onto his stomach, and he grimaced as he looked down, stepping to the side a bit too quickly.

I almost smiled.

“When did you eat last?”

“A few days,” I said shortly. “I don’t need you mothering me.”

He scoffed disbelievingly and sat in the armchair, free of any disfigured corpses. “We’re a family, Nat. It’s our job to mother each other.”

A twinge of gentle warmth squirmed within the writhing mass of fury, but I ignored it.

“Helen just administered the first round of antibiotics,” he said when I didn’t respond. Though I didn’t give any indication that I was paying attention, I listened with rapt attention. “Peter’s arm is…pretty bad, all things considered, so that’ll help. They’re also for pneumonia. He’s coughing pretty badly, even in his sleep, from the cold in the basement.”

The writhing mass began to boil.

“Helen also created an anesthetic, so he’s been getting some sleep. He wasn’t sleeping very well, before. Kept waking up confused, and he couldn’t sleep because of the pain, after that. She’s almost done with the pain reliever, so he’ll be able to talk to us and be alert and everything without hurting too much. He was just awake for a while, and we learned some more about his time there, according to Steve.”

Boiling. Bubbling, expanding, burning.

“He’s confused sometimes. We don’t think he remembers the rescue.” I barely contained a flinch at that. “Bucky said Peter didn’t remember talking to him while you two were carting him
out of there. That means he probably doesn’t remember seeing you, either.”

Building and rising and on the brink of exploding, now—

“You’re the only one he hasn’t seen,” he said gently, quietly. “Bruce and Tony talked to him a lot, and Bucky hasn’t left, pretty much. He woke up from the anesthetic to see Sam, and Steve was there, too. Thor stopped in earlier, and he’s taking Stella back later today. I just came from there. Clint was there, too, with me; I think he might actually still be there.” He paused, sighing. “He’s asking for you.”

My fury was suddenly utterly silent.

“Clint didn’t know what to say. Made up some bullshit excuse on the fly, but Peter was disappointed.”

I dropped my hand to my lap, ignoring the slight tremor that ran through it. I stared sightlessly at the pictures of horror and human destruction lining every inch of my walls.

“He wants to see you,” he said, standing up with a little difficulty. I expected him to go to the door, but instead, he came over to me.

He didn’t say anything, just sat beside me on my unmade bed and pulled me into his arms.

“I know you know that we’re a family,” he said even as I didn’t reciprocate it. “I know it in the way you talk and act and are. But you close yourself off from almost everyone all the time, too. It’s a little frustrating.” I tried to be offended, but I could hear the smile in his voice. “I know you have your reasons, but we’re all here for you, Nat. For each other. You try to exclude yourself, but it’s not that easy.”

I sat rigid in his arms, trying so hard not to let myself feel.

“You don’t have to be afraid all the time,” he said gently. The words cut into me, right down to my core, exposing the writhing mass of hatred and pain and—and of fear. The coils of brutality and anger that had been squirming inside of me since Vasilisa’s body had gone limp under my hands. “We’ve got your back.”

We sat there, just like that, for a few moments. When he didn’t get a response, he sighed, pulling back, and I could almost feel himself putting his walls back up, because I knew how vulnerable that confession had been. “I’ll get Clint.”

I snagged his shirtsleeve.

He looked at my hand on his sleeve, then up at my face.

And even though it wasn’t Clint, even though I had alarm bells screaming in my head and parts of me were cowering and begging to be covered again, begging for me to throw the dusty tarp over all of my emotions and lock them up tight, I looked him in the eye and I allowed him to see.

“I’m afraid,” I said quietly, my hand shaking, just a small tremor, but enough, where it gripped his sleeve.

When I didn’t continue, he put his hand on mine, his earnest expression never wavering. “Go on.”
“The last—” the words were lost in my throat, and I forced them out anyways. “The last time he saw me, I… wasn’t Natasha. I wasn’t his Tasha.”

He didn’t move, and I kept going. Every shred of myself was straining to wiggle its way back into the vault. Everything in me was screaming that I would be rejected, that I would be disowned and disgraced and cast away. That I would be looked at with disgust and hatred. That I would be hated.

That I would become nothing, because my vulnerability would have been discarded as nothing.

I kept going.

“I wasn’t his Tasha,” I said again, fighting the urge to look down. “I was the Black Widow.”

He tried to hide his confusion, and I laughed humorlessly. “It doesn’t make sense. I know. But she’s a different woman, and I hate her more than anything,” I continued. I’d given Clint a very brief, very guarded summary of this years ago, but nothing to this level of exposure. “I hate her more than the Red Room. More than HYDRA. More than anything.”

I shuddered, just once, but Rhodey just looked at me earnestly, waiting for me to continue at my own pace.

The alarm bells got louder, and louder, and they kept screaming.

My small voice drowned them out.

“She’s a part of me, but—over the years, I’ve learned how to control her. That side of me. That part that came from the Red Room. It’s bloodthirsty and vicious, and I don’t think I ever wanted to be like that.” I paused, taking a deep breath. I knew that my face held absolutely no expression. My words were Rhodey’s only clue into my mind, and I could stop at any time.

I still kept going.

“I tried to shield him from that.” I continued, staring at a file on the wall past his shoulder. “To protect him from that side of me. I couldn’t.” I gave a humorless laugh. “I’m afraid that he’s going to be terrified of me.”

“Aww, Nat, no,” he said, understanding finally filling his features. “Clint didn’t—when Peter asked about you, Clint couldn’t think up a good excuse fast enough, and Peter thought you were hurt or worse. He worked himself up so much we had to put him back on oxygen. He was terrified, but not of you. He was terrified for you.”

I drank in his words, the fear slowly giving way to a wisp of hope.

“When Clint said you were busy doing something, he was… well, he didn’t take it well. He was pretty upset.”

Guilt and more than a wisp of hope rose to the surface together, quieting the fury in my gut.

“He wants to see you.”

I don’t know when I gave my body permission to nod.
Rhodey smiled, taking my arm and using my steady shoulder to stand, then helping me up himself. The walk to the medical wing was something like sleepwalking, and before I knew it, I was in front of Peter’s door.

“Go on,” Rhodey said, patting my shoulder. “I’ve got you.”

I opened the door.

He looked so small against the white sheets. Most of him was covered under the blanket or bandages, but he’d lost weight. His face was bruised and cut, bandages swaddling his forehead and arm.

But he was here.

“Мой Питер,” I breathed, Bucky’s eyes following me as I made my way to the bed. He smiled at me with something like pride. Rhodey stayed in the doorway, leaning against the frame, smiling. “Мне так жаль.”

I ran my fingers through his knotted hair, settling my hand on the side of his face that the oxygen mask didn’t cover. Stella nuzzled against my stomach and moved when I sat down, leaning down to Peter’s face.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered in his ear, his soft breathing fogging up the mask beside my head. “Я здесь теперь, любовь моя. Я здесь.” I unknowingly echoed Rhodey’s words.

A tiny hint of movement had me gently pulling back, staring into wide brown eyes that, just a few days ago, I was terrified I’d never see again.

I choked down the emotions threatening to spill over, settling on a soft smile. “Hi, Малыш.”

“Hi, Tasha” he said back, the words muffled by the mask. His eyes were damp with gathered tears, and he reached out his hand to me. I took it in my own, pressing it against my heart, holding it there when he lost the strength to do it himself. “Where’ve you b-been?”

I smiled again, giving him a wink. “Nobody else around here is going to get any work done.”

He gave a small grin, restricted by the oxygen mask, but it was enough.

It was more than enough.

Chapter End Notes

SHURI TO THE RESCUE LOL
Plus sweet Nat finally letting herself be loved
Thanks for continuing to read!
Chapter 40

Bucky Barnes

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d gone so long without a shower.

Well, that was a lie. I remembered weeks in the hot, arid jungles while I was still in the army, where all the water was for drinking and nothing else. But after cryo, after getting out from HYDRA’s control, I couldn’t remember feeling so greasy.

But I couldn’t leave Peter for long enough to take a shower, so…

I sighed, pulling a hand down my face. I’d washed my face and brushed my teeth in the bathroom attached to his room while Steve sat next to him, but even that left a pulling in my gut that I didn’t like. He’d been more alert, more awake and coherent, and it was so easy for him to slip into his memories. I was afraid if I left for even more than a second, he’d slip into another panic attack.

“Hey.” Steve’s voice jolted me out of my head, and a mug appeared in front of my face. “Coffee. Decaf, with lots of sugar.”

I looked up and gave him a tight smile, taking a sip. Damn, Steve made some good coffee.

“How’s he been today?” He asked, sitting softly on the end of Peter’s bed. The oxygen mask had been replaced by a nasal cannula, and a lot of the cuts and bruises on his face has healed. His nose was still a little swollen, and he still had a thin cut above his eyebrow, but the nutrients in his IV and the soft foods he’d been able to keep down over the last few hours had done wonders for his healing.

His arm, however, was still a wreck. Bruce, Tony, and Helen were still working on a way to fix it that wouldn’t require surgery. I didn’t know how Peter would feel about going back under like that, knowing people would be working on his arm again.

I didn’t even want to think about his chest. I knew it was healing, but only physically.

“Better,” I said, ripples forming on the coffee’s surface as I jostled the mug, distorting my reflection. “Hasn’t coughed much. The antibiotics are working.”

Steve nodded, patting Peter’s knee once. “He’s a strong kid.”

I gave him a half-smile. “I think that’s an understatement.”

Steve gave a short laugh, running a hand through his hair. “Yeah, you could say that.” Then he dropped his hand, looking at me dead-on. Uh-oh. “How’ve you been?”

I shifted. “Fine.”

“Mm-hm. Want to define that?”

“Making it.”
“Hm, so not so fine?”

“That’s what fine means, punk.”

“Oh, is it?”

“You want to do something other than ask a question?”

“You’re not fine.”

“That’s not what I had in mind, but it’s progress.”

Steve pursed his lips and glared without any heat. “You look like you just came back from two weeks in the jungle.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’d say I’m considerably cleaner than that.”

“I wouldn’t,” said a new voice from the doorway. Sam leaned there, his arm in a sling, his good arm holding his ribs. His face was pinched in pain, but he was steady on his feet. “I could smell you from down the hall.”

I flipped him off, taking a sip of my coffee. He settled into an armchair with an expression of discomfort “Did you sneak out of Medical?” Steve asked, his expression pinched in concern.

“Do you blush as red as your uniform?” Steve’s ears lit up like Rudolph’s damn nose. “That’s a yes, then.” I hid my grin in my coffee cup. He turned to me and said, “So, Buck, what’s up? Wanna share with the class?”

“Steve’s trying to steal your job.”

Sam gave a smile. “You’re not distracting me that easy, Barnes. Spill. How’re you coping with all this?”

I sighed, fully aware of how cornered I was. Stella, who was resting beside Peter on the bed, flicked her tail unsympathetically and stretched, curling up against Steve’s leg. Steve smirked a little, scratching her head. “I’m not. I’m waiting until he’s better, then I’m going to cope.”

Sam nodded thoughtfully, fully immersed in therapist mode. “Okay. Fair enough. How are you going to cope when he’s better? He’s going to need you.”

I shrugged, glancing at Peter’s face. Eyes closed, expression smooth and unaware, he looked peaceful, and a hell of a lot better than he had last night. “Harder workouts. More training. Lots of destroyed punching bags. Maybe a swing or two at Ross.”

Steve rubbed the bridge of his nose, and Sam grinned. “You sure know how to rile Miss America up, Buck.”

I gave him another half-smile and stood, stretching my legs, doing a lap around the room. “It’s a talent that requires years of dedication and devotion.”

“No, it’s not,” Sam scoffed. “You could say ‘darn it’ and he’d spin into a lecture about bad language.”

“I’m right here,” Steve defended weakly.

“We know,” Sam and I said together.
I found some of the tension coiled in my chest easing, slightly. This had probably been their plan all along—pull the comedy routine, tag team it and calm me down. I definitely felt a little lighter. I hadn’t laughed in a while, not with Peter as bad as he’d been.

Peter shifted on the bed, and I was back at his side in an instant, my sore muscles quieting as he scrunched up his face in displeasure, turning his head.

“Hey, kiddo,” I said as his eyes flickered open.

“Hey,” he said quietly, barely more than a whisper. He cleared his throat and said again, stronger, “Hey.”

“How’re you feeling?” Steve asked as I grabbed a glass of water from the nightstand. Sam leaned forward, too, and Peter turned towards them.

“Oh, hey,” he said, his face lighting up a bit. “I didn’t see you. Um…I’m good. I feel…a lot better, actually.”

Steve grinned, and Sam’s eyes lit up. “That’s good!” Sam said, patting Peter’s shoulder as he sucked some water through the straw. His bed was angled slightly up to help him breathe, so that made things like eating and drinking a lot easier. “You’re on the mend, squirt. Helen’s antibiotics and pain reliever are doing wonders for everything.”

Peter smiled, but his eyes darkened and he chanced a glance at his arm. “But…not my arm, huh?” Silence hung thick in the air, and he sighed, looking away from the limp appendage. “Yeah, I…I figured.”

“We’ll work it out, kid,” I said, running my fingers through his hair. It was about as greasy as mine, but it didn’t matter. He relaxed every time I did it. “Helen and Tony and Bruce are figuring out how we’re going to fix it, but it’ll be fine.”

He swallowed and shut his eyes, his shoulders tense. “I know. I j-just…I don’t…I don’t want anybody messing with it. I…” He shuddered.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to right now, Peter,” Sam said gently. “You don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to, and you can wait as long as you want to. Is there anything you want to talk about now?”

Peter opened his eyes and glared at Sam. “Don’t therapist me. I’m too tired to resist your mind tricks.”

I barked a laugh so suddenly my shoulders hitched, and I had to cover my mouth with my hand to avoid spitting out the coffee I just drank.

“Ha!” Sam said, pointing with his good arm. “He can laugh!”

Peter gave a sleepy grin at me, his shoulders bouncing once with a silent laugh, but his face tightened as it pulled the cuts on his chest. They were nearly healed, but I’m sure they were still uncomfortable.

Peter’s grin faded, and he cleared his throat. “But, uh, actually…yeah, I…” He took a deep breath, shaking, and focused on unraveling the blanket in his lap. “There’s…something I want to talk to everybody about.”

I knew where this was going. He was going to apologize for those damn letters.
“Hey,” I said gently, trying not to antagonize him. I knew what a sensitive topic this was. Hell, he’d almost blown into a full out panic attack the first time he remembered them. “You don’t have—”

“Zip it,” Sam said, throwing a pen at me. I dodged it easily and stared incredulously at him, about to get up and toss his ass out the window, injuries be damned, but he stared me down. “If Peter wants to talk about, we’re gonna talk about it. Ah!” He said as I opened my mouth to protest. “Who’s the therapist?”

“The guy I’m about to throw out the window,” I replied neutrally, standing up and stalking around the bed.

“Hey!” Steve said, getting up and placing himself in my path with an exasperated smile as Sam fled the room. “He’s injured. You can’t do that.”

“Oh, so you’d let him do it if I wasn’t injured?” Sam asked, sticking his head back around the door frame, eyebrows up to his hairline. “You’re assholes, both of you. Oops!” He glanced at Peter, and as I looked at him, I could see he had his good arm wrapped around his chest, wheezing as he tried to stop laughing. “Sorry, Steve. Young ears. You’re both…jerks.”

Peter snorted into his hand, wheezing, “Ow. Ow. No m-more, ha-ha, ow.”

Sam grinned as Peter’s breathing evened out, those damn dimples that made him look all of nine years old out in full force. Hell, I’d missed those.

“I’m gonna get the others, okay?” He said, disappearing without waiting for an answer.

“Idiot,” I whispered under my breath, sitting back down next to Peter.

Steve took Sam’s armchair, smiling at him. “Aren’t they, though?”

Peter grinned, his eyes crinkled, smiling bigger than I’d seen in a long, long time.

Bruce Banner

“Have you talked to the others about Peter’s arm?” Helen asked me as I studied Peter’s bloodwork, making sure that the platelets and the red and white cell counts were still improving.

I sighed, taking my glasses off and cleaning them on my shirt. “Yeah. Bucky says he wants to see how Peter’s doing mentally before suggesting that, and…I’m going to talk to him later about everything that happened with his arm, if he’s up for it. See if we can get a clearer picture of what actually went on.”

She nodded, setting a vial back in the medicine cabinet. “I just need to go in and clean it out, make sure all of the infection is gone. Then I can do a skin graph to replace some of what’s damaged, and stitch it up. As long as his healing continues to improve with the nutrients we’re giving him, he should regain full control after some Physical Therapy. I’m sure Rhodes could help with that.”

“I know,” I said, leaning against one of the tables, feeling more exhausted than I had in a long time. “Physically I know he’s going to be fine. I just don’t know how he’ll feel about someone working on his arm again, especially depending on…on how he actually got the wound.”
She lifted her head and took a deep breath, understanding flitting across her calm features. “You think it was inflicted in a medical setting? Like in a surgical room?”

I shrugged. “Probably. That would be my best guess. I just…don’t want him freaking out at the idea of another doctor that he in all honesty doesn’t know very well standing over him.”

Helen nodded thoughtfully. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. I’d just like to do it sooner rather than later in case he relapses in any way.”

I was about to respond, but Tony popped his head in, sipping from a coffee mug. “Bruce, Peter’s calling us all to his room. He wants to talk about something with everybody.”

He nodded to Helen then swept his way out, and I made eye contact with the geneticist. “Ask him about what happened,” she said, turning back to her workstation. “Then I can at least start planning what needs to be done while you guys talk to him about the surgery.”

Thickly, I swallowed, putting my glasses back on. “I’ll try.”

With a heavy heart, the Hulk angrily huffing in the back of my mind, I grabbed a clipboard with Peter’s charts and made my way to his room, really afraid of what his reaction would be to the questions I had to ask.

**Peter Parker**

Despite the laughter I’d shared with Bucky and Steve and Sam, I was terrified.

How was I going to talk about the letters with them? How was I going to tell them everything that had happened, everything I’d found out? How was I going to tell them everything that Jason had done, and said? How was I going to tell Bucky that—that the Rosses had been planning to cut off my arm and give me one of his?

It would kill him. I didn’t know if I’d be able to.

Sam came back with a caravan behind him, and they settled down around the room. All of them. All nine of them.

We hadn’t all been together—at least, not while I was awake—since before the meeting with Ross.

There were two extra men, too. For some reason, I didn’t freak out the second I saw them. One of them had a gentle, soothing smile, and walked quietly, gracefally. The other one just… didn’t look threatening.

Geez, that first one was a girly description. I felt like a fangirl all over again.

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“Pete, I want you to meet someone before we powwow,” Tony said, clapping the dark-skinned man on the shoulder. The man smiled at me, something sad in his eyes. “This is T’Challa, the king of Wakanda. You met Shuri? Her older brother. He’s also the Black Panther. He helped us find you; I don’t think we would’ve been able to without him.”

My jaw dropped as T’Challa said, “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Parker. I am very glad to see you awake and alert.”
His accented voice was calming, and his hand was calloused as I hastily took it with my own, stuttering, “Uh, y-yeah, you c-can, uh, call me Peter, Mr. Black Panther—uh, Your Majesty? Your Panthenerness—”

T’Challa was decent enough to look down and try valiantly to contain his smile, responding, “Well, Peter, you can call me T’Challa.”

The others weren’t so kind. They laughed so hard I was sure they’d all hyperventilate. Even Natasha grinned behind her hand, shaking her head. The other new guy was laughing, too, positively howling. He was wiping tears from his eyes.

For my part, I blushed bright, bright red. Probably even redder than Steve’s uber-patriotic suit.

“Whoops,” I said quietly, fighting the urge to crawl under the blanket and die.

“God, you—you’re a riot, aren’t you?” The other new guy said, still crying. “My daughter would love you.”

“Oh, thanks?” I managed, still thoroughly embarrassed.

“This is Scott, also known as Tic-Tac, Tiny Man, Guy That Shrinks, Tiny Dude, Pain in my Ass —”

“Excuse you, Peter, I’m Awesome, it’s nice to meet you,” Scott interrupted, shoving Sam out of the way (gently, since he was still hurt). He stuck his hand out and shook mine a little vigorously, but not enough to hurt. “My actual super-hero name is Ant-Man, because the suit lets me shrink to about the size of an ant or grow really freaking huge. I’ll show you sometime.”

Gaping, I shook his hand, stuttering, “Uh, yeah—yeah, that would be cool!”

T’Challa dipped his head at me before putting a firm hand on Scott’s shoulder. “It was very nice meeting you, but I think we should leave you to your conversation, hm?” He said with a smile and a firm tug towards the door. Scott gave me a goofy smile and a two-fingered salute before shutting the door behind him, leaving the ten of us and Stella, who had found her way into my lap.

Silence ensued.

“Uh,” I started, my voice shaking more than I wanted it to. “They were, uh—nice. And interesting.”

Thor laughed, one of his huge gigantic laughs that would have shattered lower-quality glass. The sound was loud on my now-enhanced ears, and I winced involuntarily. I figured it wasn’t nearly as bad as it would be usually, since the pain relievers were dialing everything down. “King T’Challa is a great ally, and the small man is most humorous, indeed!”

I breathed a laugh, trying to hide my shaking right hand in Stella’s fur. Bucky’s metal hand took my shoulder, but I didn’t look at him. My heart was beating out of my chest.

“Uh,” I said. Great start, Parker. I cleared my throat. “Um…I—”

I took a deep breath, about to start over, but Rhodey beat me to it. He was sitting on the edge of the bed. He put a hand on my knee, and my eyes flickered up to his involuntarily. “Deep breaths, bud. We’re not going anywhere. Take your time.”

I twitched a smile and glanced back down as Stella, who was almost asleep. Taking a deep, deep
breath, the cuts on my chest twinging in pain, I let it out. “I…the letters. That’s what I—what I want to start with.

“Those were…a mistake,” I said, determined not to raise my eyes until I was done. “I shouldn’t have written them, and I shouldn’t have left. I was just…I know I said this in there, but…the tape was, uh…really, really horrible, and I was just so angry. And I wouldn’t have believed it, but Ross looked—I mean, he looked so sorry for me, and I got enough of that on the streets. I thought he was being serious. I really thought he felt bad for me, or something, and that was…awful, you know? And it wasn’t fair to you to just leave that and expect it all to be okay, but I really didn’t think—I thought I’d be safe with J—with, uh…with him until you found me or until I—” I stopped abruptly.

The words on my lips had been, until I realized you wouldn’t be coming to get me, and I wasn’t sure if I could say them.

I could hear Tony’s foot tapping on the linoleum floor, loud and sharp in my enhanced ears. The lights were too bright, and the sheets were too coarse. The antiseptic was too strong. The taste of the last pills I’d swallowed, bitter and grainy, still lingered on my tongue.

“Hey,” Clint said, leaning into my line of sight. “Hey, take a breath, okay?”

I did, inhaling sharply when I realized I’d been holding it, trying to exhale slowly. “Sorry, it’s just—it’s all—bright and, and loud…”

“Uh…bright and loud?” Bruce said, looking confused, and concerned. I brought my hand up to pinch the bridge of my nose, nodding.

“FRIDAY, lights at 20%,” Tony said immediately, his voice hushed somewhat. I sighed in relief as the room dimmed, my shoulders slumping a bit.

“Warning you I’m going to put something on you head, Peter.” Bruce said quietly, then slipped what felt like earbuds into my ears. I let him work, confused, but willing to give it a try. When I felt him pull back, I opened my eyes and blinked, feeling a lot better. I realized that a lot of the excess sounds I’d been hearing—the beeping of the heart monitor, the flow of air in the (horribly uncomfortable) nasal cannula, the rattling of the air conditioner—all of that had been filtered out.

“Is that better?” Bruce said, and his voice was a little quiet, but completely audible.

“Uh, yeah, that’s—that’s amazing,” I said, giving him a genuine smile and reaching up to feel the pod in my ear. “What are these?”

“A project for Steve and Bucky, and now for you,” Tony said, smiling, though his face was concerned behind his façade. “It’s to help with enhanced senses.”

“Oh,” I said, realizing that confirmed one of my fears. “Um, side note—part of my powers is…enhanced, uh…senses?”

Tasha scoffed, ruffling my hair. “Thanks, genius. We figured.”

I gave a little smile, blushing.

Bucky’s arms were crossed, and he was staring a hole in the opposite wall. I swallowed, realizing he was probably mad. Probably not at me, but at the Rosses. At my parents.

“Um,” I continued, “anyways, the letters…I just…I wanted to tell you that I was…so sorry. As
soon as I left I wanted to come back. I mean, I didn’t want to leave, I just—” I stopped, pressing the heel of my hand into my eye, frustrated. “I’m not saying it right—”

“Don’t strain yourself, little dude,” Clint said calmly, patting me knee. I blinked at him, taking his relaxed posture and easy smile. “Those letters are literally the least of our concerns.”

I swallowed. “But—”

“But nothing,” Sam said, using his authoritative I’m-the-therapist-so-you’re-going-to-listen-to-me voice. “You were emotionally traumatized and backed into a corner with like negative two real options. You reacted completely normally. Well, I guess most people wouldn’t have run, but most people haven’t been in a situation like yours. Everything you said in those letters was said under enough emotional distress and mental stress and tension to cripple a fully functioning adult. Given your age, what you’ve been through in the past, what you were going through…” Sam breathed a sigh, leaning back, and looked me dead in the eye. “You reacted outstandingly. Most people would’ve had a complete and utter mental breakdown.”

I blinked at him, utterly stunned by all the things that had just come out of his mouth. Clint whistled. “Damn, Wilson, don’t sugarcoat it or anything.”

“Being blunt is literally a hallmark of my personality, Katniss,” Sam retorted, then looked back at me. “We’re not mad. We’re not angry or upset or even really hurt, Peter. We were just worried for you.”

I looked down, emotions swirling around each other a million miles an hour, and let out a breathy laugh, a smile forming on my face. “That’s—God, that’s good to hear. I was… I was really, uh… really worried I’d hurt you guys.”

“I know. I—thank you guys. Just… thank you guys so much.”

I couldn’t suppress a grin at his words.

Bucky nudged my shoulder, smiling. “What did I tell you, kid?”

I laughed a little, remembering his words from earlier. “I know. I—thank you guys. Just… thank you guys so much.”

Smiles were on every face in the room for the first time since I could remember, and it was so uplifting and so relieving I just wanted to break down right there.

“So, putting the letters aside for a second,” Bruce said, sitting down beside me, leaning forward. His expression was serious, and apprehensive, and I tensed. The air got a little heavier. “I’d like to get some more information on your powers while we’re on the subject. Helen and Tony and I are still trying to figure some things out, so we can help you get better.”

“Oh, uh, sure,” I said, trying to sit myself up a little more. My core muscles shook, probably all atrophied and useless. Bucky’s and Clint’s steady hands guided me until I was more or less upright. “Um… I mean, I don’t, uh, know everything, but I figured a couple things out while I—while I was there.” I swallowed, and continued, “Well… enhanced senses. Duh. I think super strength, or whatever? After my powers came out, I tried to use a steel table to stand up and I ended up crushing it.”

“Hm,” Bruce said, scribbling something down. “Do you know how your powers came out?”
I took a deep, deep breath. “I think I was having a seizure,” I said slowly. I didn’t mention any of the other circumstances. I didn’t know if I could yet. “You said…earlier, when you found out about my weird DNA, you said my powers would either come out when I became an adult, or…or if I had…what was it?”

“Trauma,” Bruce said, his knuckles white as he gripped the clipboard. “Extreme trauma, all over your body.”

I gave a humorless laugh, looking back at the blanket. “Yeah, that’s—yeah. Uh…he had a thing for…uh, electrocution, I guess. My ankles…”

“We saw the burns,” Clint said, patting my shoulder. “You don’t have to explain.”

“Okay,” I breathed, happy that was one thing I didn’t have to get into. “I think…he did that a couple times, so I guess when my powers came out…it was from that?”

Bruce nodded slowly, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. “That would do it, yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly, unable to keep myself from apologizing. I knew rationally that this part of the conversation had nothing to do with being my fault, but I was still the one explaining it and everybody looked like kicked puppies and I hated it.

“Not your fault,” Bucky said firmly, fingers sweeping through my hair once. I instantly felt my shoulders loosen. “Light years away from your fault, kid.”

“What else, young Peter?” Thor asked, his muscles coiled and tense, his arms crossed.

“Uh, speaking of my DNA…the HYDRA scientists found out what I’m crossed with,” I stammered. “I still…geez, it sucks. Um…it’s the spider. Just, like…a generic spider.”

For some reason, Tasha full-on snorted into her hand. Like, immediately.

“Uh…well, that wasn’t the reaction I was expecting…” I said, looking at her curiously.

“No, I’m sorry,” she said immediately. Her expression sobered. “I know you don’t like spiders, Pyotr. I’m sorry. I just…” She shrugged, and gave me a little smile. “They call me Black Widow. I knew there was a reason I clicked with you so easily.”

I blinked up at her, totally throttled by what she’d said, because…well, damn. I hadn’t thought about it like that.

Rhodey snorted. “Mama Spider. Damn, Peter, all the jokes this opens up…Tony, Clint, Sam, we’re having a meeting about this later. I expect you all to bring at least five original jokes prepared to share with the class.”

“Done,” they all said, grinning like kids in a candy store.

I looked up at Tasha, who gave me a wink, and couldn’t hold back a grin. Maybe it…wasn’t as horrible as I’d first thought.

“If you’re all done giving Tasha more reasons to castrate you,” Bruce said, shaking his head at the others and turning back to me with a ghost of a smile, “Peter, what else?”

“Um…super healing,” I said, getting back into a rhythm. “For sure. My arm is…a lot better than it was.”
“How bad did it get?” Bruce asked. “I know you said it was gangrene, but do you know what stage?” He paused, seeing the panic flit into my expression. “I’m sorry. I know this is probably hard to talk about, I just have to get a couple things straight. We can take a minute, if you want…?”

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “It’s okay. It was…really bad. Like…really bad. Um, it was…black and green and just…really gross. And really painful, and…I couldn’t feel anything past the cut. Like, my palm or my fingers or anything.”

Every face in the room (minus Tasha) was a different degree of unsettled, and I felt my stomach churning just picturing the memory. I had to close my eyes and take a deep breath to quiet the nausea brought on by just the thought of how terrifying that had been.

And I really hoped that would be it, and that Bruce would stop asking questions about my arm, and that I wouldn’t have to tell them—

“Do you think it was bad enough to…have required surgery, or amputation?”

“God, Banner, we talked about tact,” Tony said, closing his eyes and turning around.

The pain medicine was diluting my strength and my abilities somewhat, but I grabbed onto the hospital railing so hard it snapped under my palm.

I dropped the jagged piece of metal quickly, my heart beating loud and fast in my ears, pulsing against the earbuds, thumping against my ribcage.

“Shit,” Bruce said, his eyes wide. “I’m sorry, Peter, I’m—”

I could barely hear him over the roaring rush of blood in my head. I put my hand over my chest, sure I was having a heart attack, or stroke, or aneurysm or something, because I could not breathe, and my heart was going to come bursting out—

Bucky’s metal hand found mine and I squeezed it with all I could muster. “That’s it. It’s Vibranium, kid, it isn’t gonna break. Squeeze all you need; we’re all here, you’re safe.”

I did. I didn’t know how the metal held up, but it did until the wave of panic had passed, until my breaths were no longer gasps and my heart was beating normally. I leaned my head back against the bed, Bucky’s flesh hand carding through my hair, and I didn’t even fight it when someone pressed an oxygen mask over my face.

“I’m sorry, Peter,” Bruce said, sounding wrecked. “I’m so sorry. We can skip that part, yeah? What other powers did you find out about, hm?”

“Yes,” I breathed, because I had to get it out of my head, suddenly. Consequences be damned, I knew if I freaked out every time it was brought up, every time I thought about saying it, I’d never be able to. It would just…weigh me down, like a suitcase of boulders on my mind. So I spit it out, eyes closed, and hoped desperately that everything would be okay.

“Yes, you want to skip that part?” Rhodey asked, sounding confused.

“Yes, they were…going to amputate it,” I said, my shaking hand grabbing onto the oxygen mask and I continued to suck in deep breaths, my eyes closed tightly. I knew that even without the earbuds, the room was utterly silent. “That’s what…they were…that’s where I was when my powers came out. They were…about to cut it off. With, uh…one of those metal saws, for surgery.”

I took another shuddering breath, hating how realistic his voice was in my head, belittling me and whispering in my ear about how I’d never have to think again. “They were…oh, God, I don’t…I
don’t—I was awake…”

“You’re okay,” Bucky said, his voice tight, strictly controlled. I heard someone curse and walk out of the room, but I couldn’t tell who, and I didn’t think I could deal with opening my eyes to find out. “You’re fine. They didn’t get that far.”

“Bucky, I’m so sorry,” I said, because I knew that telling them everything would hurt him so badly, but I had to get it all out. I had to say it, I had to convince myself that it was real but that it didn’t happen, that he hadn’t won. That I was out and safe. “I don’t want to—to hurt you—”

“You can’t, Peter, I promise,” he said, his voice tight with worry. Natasha whispered something, but I couldn’t tell what with the headphones. “If you’re worried about something you want to say hurting me, don’t, okay? I promise, I’m gonna be here no matter what you say.”

Hesitantly, I opened my eyes and looked at him, trying really, really hard to keep the tears I could feel contained. “Promise?”

“Promise.” He twitched a smile, but it was tight.

I kept eye contact with him, trying to convince myself that he was here, that they were all here, and I was safe. “He, uh…he told me that…once they cut off my old arm, they were…going to give me one of…one of yours. One of your old ones. That we’d be…matching.” I spit the word out like poison. “He told me they were going to brainwash me like they did you and that I was going to…kill all of you,” I spat the words out like vile things, anxious to get them out of my head and off my heart.

And now that they hung in the air, it was almost worse.

I didn’t stop, though. I couldn’t. “He told me he was going to take my name away. And I got—I got so angry, because I was so scared and so hurt and just…I just wanted to go home, and he was—God, he was such an asshole, and I told him if he was going to name me…” I laughed a little despite myself, putting the oxygen mask down and wiping the tears that had leaked out away. “I told him to name me Medea. God, he got…he was so mad. I don’t…I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone so mad. That’s when he…” I put a hand on my chest and swallowed. “That’s when he…when he did this. He said he didn’t know what he was going to name me. And then next time he came…it was to cut my arm off.”

The words left my mouth in a desperate rush of air, and finally, I felt like I could breathe. I felt like the weight of the world had been taken off my shoulders and that all the emotional baggage I’d been carrying wasn’t quite so heavy now.

I braced myself for the unavoidable questions, feeling my shoulders tense under Bucky’s hand. I knew there would be several of them, and I was willing to answer them, but they were all going to be so upset and so angry, and I—

“Who the shit is Medea?” Sam asked with a voice of pure confusion.

I opened my eyes and found him, my eyebrows almost at my hairline. Most of the others wore similar expressions.

That wasn’t the first question I’d been expecting.

“Oh,” I said, feeling some of the tension leave my body at the utter confusion on his face. “Uh, sorry, I…should’ve, uh…explained that?” I shrugged, swallowing, my throat thick with the weight of the words I’d just exposed. “She was…I mean, there was this…Greek hero named…uh, J-
Jason.” I could only bring myself to stumble over his name because I wasn’t actually talking about him, but that was a problem for another day. “And he turned out in the end to be a total asshole. A similarity.” A couple of them snickered, and I smiled despite myself, so relieved to be surrounded by them again.

“Um…his girlfriend, I guess? He cheated on her and she…ruined his life. And I guess I just…I was so mad because he was…controlling every aspect of my surroundings, and talking about how he was going to take away everything that made me me and make me his mindless soldier…I told him to name me Medea, because I wanted him to know…that…I’d take him down. That if he did that to me, I’d…I’d fight back.”

With that explained, I looked around the room and studied my family’s faces. Because they were my freaking family no matter what any HYDRA asshole said. They were understandably upset, and hurting from what I’d told them, and angry as hell.

But every single one of them looked proud, too.

“Hands down,” Tony said, rubbing his forehead, “that has got to be the most badass Greek mythology-based insult I’ve ever heard.”

I gave a short laugh, some of the tension leaving my chest. “Seriously?”

“What, you’ve got something better?” Sam said, grinning like an idiot. “Because that was gold, and I’ve literally never been prouder.”

Catching on the lightening atmosphere, enjoying the rush of warmth in my chest that spread from his words, I responded without missing a beat, “Literally crack any Percy Jackson book.”

“Oh, do not start!” Clint shouted, smacking his forehead and collapsing dramatically. “Cooper made me read him those books every night for years!”

I laughed, and he laughed, and soon, everyone was laughing. And the weight of everything I’d just thrown at them dispersed a little, and the air wasn’t quite so heavy.

Bucky’s metal hand was still closed around mine, his flesh hands trailing fingers through my hair. I looked at him, an apology on my lips, but he shook his head and smiled. “I’m proud of you, kid. I’m…I’m so proud of you, Peter. You got through all that, and you’re home safe with us, and… Geez. Medea, kid? Really?”

It was a small smile, but coming from him, paired with the pride in his eyes and his hand in mine, it lit up the entire room.

I grinned, shrugging, my family surrounding me. “I’d like to see you do better, old man.”

A chorus of “OHHHS” and “BURN”s filled the room, and he laughed, and I laughed.

I wasn’t better. But I was healing, and that’s all I could ask for.

**Bucky Barnes**

I put on a smile and I held Peter’s hand and I told him I was proud of him. I joined in on the laughter surrounding me, I took part in the feeling of relief that he was talking to us, that he was here and safe, that he wasn’t so emotionally unstable that he couldn’t bear to remember or recall anything.
I was relieved and happy and proud and so overwhelmingly grateful he was safe and on his way to being okay.

But the smile was strained, and it was all I could do to keep my hands from trembling.

I waited a moment. I let everything settle down. I let the joking start, I let Peter start to laugh and follow one of Tony’s outrageous stories, let those dimples come out. I squeezed his hand in warning and pulled back. At his questioning look, I managed to quirk a convincing smile. “Now that everyone’s here, you mind if I take a quick shower? I feel like a dog that just jumped in a vat of oil.”

Peter let out a little laugh and nodded, smiling gently at me. There was a note of uncertainty in his eyes, which I knew was completely normal right now. He was still a little high on the meds, and after everything he just put out there, who wouldn’t be. I leaned down, ruffled his hair, and pressed my lips to his head, then slunk out of the room.

Steve followed me and stood beside the doorway, expression worried. “Buck, where are you going?”

I didn’t turn around, but I stopped. “To shower.”

“Come on, Bucky.”

I paused. “To cope.”

He didn’t say anything, but I heard him sigh. “I’m…you know where to find me. If you need me.”

I nodded sharply and left.

I headed straight for the gym. I didn’t even stop to wrap my hand before I was pounding the reinforced punching bag, watching it swing madly with each hit. With each hit, I remembered every word that Peter had poured out, every tear he’d shed, every hitch of his shoulders, every expression and fear and doubt. Every sentence he’d spoken.

They were...about to cut it off.

Punch.

...oh, God, I don’t…I don’t—I was awake...

Kick.

...once they cut off my old arm, they were...g-going to give me one of...one of yours. One of your old ones...

Smack.

That we’d be...matching.

Creak.

...they were going to brainwash me like they did you...

Snap.
Good morning, Soldier.

Crash.

Ready to comply.

I sank to my knees, covering my hand with my mouth, nausea churning my stomach.

Ready to comply. Ready to comply. Longing, rusted, seventeen, daybreak, furnace, nine, benign, homecoming, one, freight car rusted daybreak homecoming benignninedaybreakhomecominglonging—

Peter.

Choking on the memories, on the horror of what had almost happened to one of the only people in this world I needed more than anything, of the only one completely undeserving of every horrible thing that had ever come his way, I raced to Bruce’s panic room. Tony had given me the access code in case I ever felt myself slipping back into the Winter Soldier, just as a precaution.

I slammed the door shut and fist my hands in my hair, my bloodied, bruised, fractured flesh hand aching and burning from where I’d broken it. The enhanced punching bag lay busted and broken on the floor of the training room from where it has crashed, demolished.

Ready to comply. Ready to comply. Readytocomplyreadytocomplynodon’tmakeme—

Good morning, Soldier, goodmorningsoldiergoodmor—

Good morning, Peter.

A small, innocent voice.

Ready to comply.

The room was soundproof, so I screamed louder and longer than I had in my entire life.

Chapter End Notes

BUCKY NO
My child omg
Thanks for reading!
Natasha Romanov

Thin oatmeal, a glass of water, an apple, and two soggy chicken nuggets that had been in the freezer for God knows how long. It was more than Ross deserved, but I knew that he had to be alive for me to condemn him.

He was sitting on the thin mattress on the rickety bedframe shoved into the corner, staring sightlessly at the wall opposite him. His eyes flickered to me as the elevator doors slid open and he tried to correct his posture, no doubt trying to salvage some of his dignity.

“Dinner,” I said, my voice emotionless. It was actually a bit after eleven in the morning, but I wanted to keep his sense of time confused. I slid the tray through the slot in the glass, leaning against the wall. I watched as he stood precariously, stumbling over to drag the tray inside his little cell. I closed the slot as soon as he did so.

“How are your accommodations?” I asked, allowing the tiniest hint of disdain to creep into my voice.

Ross simply threw a smirk my way, munching on the apple. “Jason asked Peter the same thing the second day he was there. If I remember correctly, he had a bit of a smart mouth, and Jason punished him accordingly.”

I cocked my head, letting a smile slip onto my face. “And I punished Jason accordingly.”

Ross flinched. His smile wavered.

“I want you to know that your file is complete,” I said, leaning against the glass, my stance casual. “I’ve compiled a very detailed, organized list of your most heinous crimes, and I’ve discovered copious amounts of evidence that lead every single one of them back to you. Once I give it to SHIELD to review—all of your spies are gone, by the way, but nice try—they’re going to pass it on to the President, and then to the world’s leaders. I’m going to recommend that a panel of judges be elected from the United Nations to try you, seeing as these are international crimes. With as thick as your file is…” I shrugged. “You don’t stand much of a chance.”

Ross lifted his chin and glared at me, his lip curled up in disgust. “You’ll regret this, Romanov. Don’t think that I don’t still have contacts. I can—”

“What?” I asked, smiling at him. The smile I gave my prey just before I killed them. The smile that let them know that they were unequivocally, undeniably finished. “What will you do, Ross? Please, tell me. You tried to force us into submission with the law, and we denied you. You tried to bully us into compliance with force and violence, and we beat you. You used your son to try to hurt our child…and we paid you back in kind, Ross. We paid you back dearly, and that was when you crossed the line and dug your own grave.” I leaned forward, my breath fogging the glass, and stared directly into his eyes. “Our child is safe. Our child is recovering, both physically and mentally. You’ve quite literally lost everything. So, what do you have to show for your endeavors? Hm? Please, enlighten me, you tyrannical, foolish megalomaniac. Tell me exactly what it is that you can do to us.”
Unsurprisingly, he said nothing. His face reddened in anger and embarrassment, and in a fit of rage equivalent to a child’s tantrum, he threw the plastic bowl of oatmeal in my direction. It splattered harmlessly against the glass, dripping down the side.

I raised an eyebrow. “That was quite unbecoming of a former Secretary of State, General Ross.”

“I don’t care what it takes,” he seethed, standing now, his hands in tight fists. “I’ll make you pay for this. All of you. Especially that brat.”

“Careful,” I tsked, gliding to the elevator and stepping inside. “That ‘brat’ is the only reason you’re still alive. I can just as easily toss your file—mind you, it would be a waste of a lot of good work, but I’d do it—and shoot you in the cell.”

The elevator doors slid closed. I folded my arms as it rose quickly, bringing me back to the surface. The lights rushed past, embedded in the rocky tunnel ensconcing the elevator, and soon I was stepping into the Compound’s sublevel.

“How’s your car insurance?” A voice asked from the doorway. Bruce stood there, fiddling with the edges of his sleeves, his shoulders hunched slightly, a little smile on his face.

“Huh?” I responded, unsure exactly what he was talking about. “I don’t have a car. I just use Tony’s.”

Bruce blinked, stuttering, “Uh, I mean—you went to see the General…get it? That tacky car insurance commercial, with Shaquille O’Neal…”

He didn’t get anything in response to that but a confused blink. Sighing, he rubbed his stubbled jaw. “Never mind,” he huffed. “I should stop making jokes.”

I quirked a smile at him, patting his shoulder and pulling him into the main elevator. “FRIDAY, kitchen, please,” I said. “Your jokes are fine, we just don’t get them.”

“They’re not useless.”

I laughed breathily, appreciating Bruce’s distraction from Ross’ words. I’d hidden my emotions from him, but his words had both angered and unsettled me. Logically I knew that he couldn’t do anything from the hidey-hole we’d dropped him in, but holding him so close to Peter still made me nervous.

“They’re not useless. They made me feel better.”

Bruce chuckled slightly, looking down. “Guess that’s good.”

There was a pause. The elevator doors slid open, revealing the kitchen. Steve was cooking. “Hope there’s enough to share,” I said, sliding into a barstool. Bruce slid in next to me, still fidgeting.

Steve glanced at us and smiled. “Sure is. I’m making a lot; T’Challa and company are leaving tonight, and I want to see them off. I think Scott’s going to head out soon, too.”

“How. What are you making?”

“Spaghetti.”
I huffed, but there was no heat behind it. "So basic."

"I thought you liked my spaghetti!"

"Well, I do, it’s just we have it every—"

"Peter’s arm needs surgery."

The unexpected comment threw me for a second, and Steve’s and my casual banter ceased.

I turned to him, smoothing my features. "What?"

"Sorry, I…” Bruce sighed, readjusting his glasses. "I meant to tell you earlier, but…I know, don’t give me that look, I know how he’s going to feel about it, but we can’t put it off any longer. The Cradle isn’t up and running, and Peter could relapse at any second."

I had to admit that the drastic topic change gave me a little bit of whiplash, but then it clicked why Bruce had been so fidgety. He hadn’t known how to broach the topic, so he’d just blurted it out. I sighed, rubbing my thumb and forefinger together in a nervous tic. "That isn’t good."

"No," Steve agreed, mechanically tossing a few leaves of basil into the bubbling pot of tomato sauce. "Bucky’s not going to like it, either."

The room instantly darkened, even with the bright sunshine spilling in through the windows.

"How is he?" I asked quietly.

Peter’s revelation two days ago had…not been kind to Bucky. Steve had found him in Bruce’s Hulk-Out room with a broken hand, silently staring at nothing, flush against the wall. After a shower and some soup, he’d shut down entirely, going to his room for a day before reclaiming his post at Peter’s side. Thankfully, Peter had slept during most of his absence.

"Dealing," Steve said, not looking at me, choosing instead to stir the sauce. "I don’t think he’ll really be able to until Peter’s better, though. I know he didn’t mean to, but…what Peter said, what they did…it really hurt him. You know how much he hates that arm, guys, and the fact that Jason was going to—"

He accidentally cut himself off when then wooden spoon snapped in his hand. Startled, he looked down, sighing in exasperation. I couldn’t hide a smirk at his thoroughly done expression as he threw it away. "That was my favorite spoon."

"We have six more just like it, Steve," Clint said, coming into the kitchen. "I heard the gist of the conversation. Little dude needs surgery?"

"The squirt needs what?" A new voice said from behind us, and I sighed as Sam came storming into the room, his arm still in his sling.

"You should be resting," Bruce hissed, standing up and making a move towards Sam, who blanched and raised his functioning arm placatingly. "There was a hole in your damn side, Wilson, and you don’t have super healing—"

"Mind your blood pressure, Green Bean," Tony said, sauntering in and adding to the melee brewing in the kitchen. Man, these boys gave me a migraine sometimes. "Tweety Bird’s fine. What’s up with the kid?"
“Oh, God,” I said, rubbing my temples. “All of you, shut up. Peter’s arm needs surgery. We all saw it coming, stop fussing.”

“What?” I let my head thunk against the counter at the new voice and groaned. “Young Peter? I thought he was healing!”

“He is, Thor, we just need to help him along—” Bruce tried to calm him down, but Thor just turned an unhealthy shade of red and stormed out, nearly steam-rolling Rhodey in the process. Thor didn’t handle being angry well; he was as bad as Bruce, sometimes. Random bursts of electricity would break out if he got too mad, so over time he’d learned that it was best to leave the room if something were upsetting him.

“What’s the matter?” Rhodey asked, eyebrows creased in confusion.

I picked up my head only to let it thunk back onto the granite countertop. “This house is a nightmare.”

“Why did we all come to the kitchen, again?” Clint asked, staring appreciatively into the bubbling pot. His stance was tense, tight; I recognized similar stances all around the room.

Everyone was on edge.

“It’s almost noon. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m hungry,” Sam answered, grabbing a cookie from the pantry.

“Hell no,” Bruce seethed, stomping over and snatching it right out of Sam’s hand. “How many times do I have to tell you? Your intestines were bruised, you dimwit! Soft foods!”

“I’m sorry, doc, I’m a little sick of Jell-O,” Sam bit out through grit teeth, swiping the cookie back and stuffing it in his mouth before anyone could do anything about it.

“Here we go,” Steve breathed, sighing and stepping between them. “Sam, Bruce is just trying to take care of you—”

“Cool, great, but I’m a para-rescue, Banner! I know how injuries work, and I know that one cookie won’t kill me, so lay off!”

“Hey, back off,” Tony said, eyebrows pinched in anger as he came to Bruce’s defense. “You’re not a medical doctor.”

“No, Stark!” Clint said angrily, coming to stand beside Sam. “I think Banner can fight his own battles, Stark.”

“Oh, last names now, Barton?” Tony seethed, taking a step forward. Rhodey intercepted him, pushing him back and trying to placate him, but Tony just continued yelling over Rhodey’s shoulder, “That’s rich, by the way! You just stepped in front of Wilson like a damsel!”

Bruce gripped the countertop and I heard it groan under the pressure, green creeping up his neck, his muscles straining as he fought to keep it contained. The room was large enough to hold him, so I didn’t move to do anything, far too fed up with their behavior to try to discipline them just yet.

“Guys, please,” Steve said, trying to worm his way into the middle of all the shouting, the volume escalating. I watched passively, drumming my fingers on the granite, waiting for them to wear themselves out before I ripped them a new one. “We don’t have to—”
“What the hell is going on?” A new voice shouted from the doorway. I looked up, startled to see Bucky standing there, his eyes darting every which way. His hand was in a brace—almost healed, but there were still a couple hairline fractures—and his stance and posture just screamed tired.

The fighting dissipated, but the tension blanketing the room was still thick. I sighed, slipping from the barstool. “These idiots are wound so tight they just snapped on each other.”

“Well, pipe the hell down!” Bucky said, eyes narrowed. “I could hear you all the way in Peter’s room.”

That sobered everyone up a bit, though you could still see the tight jaws and narrowed eyes. “Pipsqueak didn’t hear us, did he?” Sam asked, looking worried.

“I don’t think so,” Bucky said, deflating a bit, himself. “He fell asleep a few minutes ago. What were you fighting about, anyways?”

“Something stupid,” I cut in before anyone could respond. “And childish. And unreasonable.”

“God, save it, Natasha,” Sam scoffed, turning away from us, opening the fridge. “Your high and mighty act is getting old.”

My eyebrow twitched. “You wanna say that again, Sam?” My voice was dangerously cold. Cold enough to hide the flinch of hurt at that statement.

“Sam, dude, chill—” Rhodey said, putting a hand on Sam’s shoulder.

Sam shrugged him off, turning to face us, red in the face. “No, you know what? I’m really sick and tired of this. I’m sick of being treated like an invalid. I’m sick of you—” he pointed an accusatory finger at me, and I lifted my chin, my jaw tense, “—pretending that you’re so much better than the rest of us. I’m sick of you—” he pointed at Bruce next, “—running around like an effing World War 2 doctor, screaming to high heaven about amputation and cookies and God knows what else, and I’m sick of all of you waltzing around like this is okay!”

“No one’s saying it’s okay, Wilson! Calm the hell down!” Tony cut in next, looking about ready to call down his armor. “Chill the eff out, take a Xanax, something, ‘cause you’re way outta line, pal.”

“No, you know what, Stark, you’re the worst of them! You drag your daddy issues around in a damn backpack and unpack them whenever you do something wrong, and I’m sick and fricking tired of it all!”

Tony went very still for just a second—long enough for me to catch the Sam’s guilty wince, quickly lost in his anger, and Tony’s hurt flinch, hidden by a mask of indifference—before he said, “What did you just say to me?”

“You heard me,” Sam retorted. Tony nodded, scoffed, and in a split second, lunged at him. He looked two seconds away from calling one of his suits.

Steve jumped in, next, and then Rhodey. Thor came back, having heard the noise, and he jumped in, too. Bucky and I stood and watched it all. I barely refrained from strangling Sam with his own sling, because he had pissed me off, but I didn’t want to add fuel to the fire.

Sam was the worst, flinging insults left and right, but Tony and Clint were responding in
kind with digs of their own. Rhodey and Steve tried to be the voices of reason, but even they were at the end of their ropes of patience, and they let more than a few harsh words slip. Thor was trying and failing to calm Bruce, whose struggles were becoming more pronounced.

At some point, the fight spread, migrating from the kitchen partially into the living room, and Rhodey had to physically restrain Tony after one of Clint’s particularly bitter comebacks.

I scoffed, shaking my head and turning away.

Bucky sagged against the door frame, watching with sad eyes, rubbing his temples and looking for all the world like he was going to keel over right there.

The fighting escalated, and for a surreal second, a rush of terror flew through me at the prospect of another ‘Civil War’ situation, as it had been dubbed. Everyone had been so on edge these past few days—weeks, months, it seemed like—and now, we’d finally snapped. All the pent-up anger and hurt…most of them didn’t get any closure for it. Bucky and I were the only ones who dealt with the Rosses, either of them, and we were paying for it now.

One was dead, one was defeated and imprisoned, and yet they’d still found a way to tear us apart.

**Peter Parker**

I never really went to sleep.

Sure, I was tired, and emotionally drained, but I’d heard the fighting start, even with the headphones. I could tell that Bucky did, too. He didn’t say anything about it, but when it got loud enough that I could hear every word they said, he stood to leave. I’d dozed off, but had become more aware at the sound of raised voices traveling through the floor and walls. I never would’ve been able to hear them without my newly enhanced hearing.

Stella was curled against my side, Bucky scratching her ears as she snuffled contentedly. I felt her head perk up at Bucky’s change in position once the fighting started.

Bucky brushed my hair away from my forehead, and I barely suppressed a flinch at his touch. If he knew I was awake, he wouldn’t let me listen, and I wanted to know what was going on. I knew that everyone was trying to protect me, but I was a little sick of being kept in the dark so much.

Bucky took his fingers away from my hairline and whispered, “I’ll be right back, kiddo.” I guess he wanted me to know, even if he thought I was asleep.

I heard the door close and waited a few seconds, then opened my eyes. Stella looked at me curiously, pawing up to beside my head, meowing insistently. I reached up and scratched her head; the purred under my hand, rolling over and snuggling into the pillow. Bracing myself, I sat up slowly, only using my right arm to support my weight. I’d gotten stronger over the last few days, but I was still shaky, sometimes. Taking out the earphones, I closed my eyes and strained to hear what was being said.

There was an immediate burst of little sounds as soon as the headphones were gone, no longer filtering out the annoying drones of the monitors, air conditioning, electric hum from the lights…everything audible, now.
I winced, automatically going to put my hands over my ears, but only my right ear was covered. My left arm twitched uselessly on the bed, and I almost gave up and put the headphones back. Everything was too loud, and the shouting and the harsh words sent me into a panic, and I couldn’t—I didn’t want them to fight—

Steeling myself, pulling in a shaky breath, I lowered my hand, sitting up fully. My chested burned, my sore ribs aching and pain flaring across my stiff joints, but I grit my teeth. Keeping my chest steady, I used my right arm to lower the bed rail with the manual release, swinging my legs over the side. They dangled, and I was suddenly aware of how weak I was; my core muscles strained to hold my upper body off the bed, and the thought of having to stand on my own two feet was almost too much.

Stella came around to my other side, and if it was possible for a cat to look disappointed, Stella was doing it. I huffed a wheezy laugh at her, standing ram straight on the bed, looking at me like she knew I was definitely not supposed to be up yet.

I sighed, pulling in a deep breath, and slid off the bed.

My legs immediately folded under me, and I collapsed to my knees and then fell back against the legs of the bed, my back slaming into the frame. The IV in the crook of my elbow was ripped from my arm, tape and all, and the IV stand smashed to the ground beside me; the nasal cannula fell from around my head. Pain ricocheted around in my spine and over my body, and I grunted, squeezing my eyes shut as I waited for the spasms to pass.

Stella leapt off the bed and inspected me as I panted, circling me twice before finally calming down once she deemed me for the most part okay.

“Peter, you shouldn’t be up,” FRIDAY’s voice chided me gently. It was too loud, and I flinched, ducking my head. “I’m sorry; I momentarily forgot about your newly enhanced senses,” she continued, her volume several decibels lower.

The shouting was still coming from several rooms away. Gasping shakily, in pain, I raised my right arm and dragged myself up to my knees, staying like that for a moment to catch my breath, before slowly dragging myself to stand, leaning heavily against the bed.

“I have t-to stop them,” I said, my voice wavering.

“Peter, they’re adults; they seem to be having a heated discussion, but they will resolve it themselves.”

“But…b-but it’s my fault,” I whispered, sagging back onto the bed, blood dripping from the fingertips of my right arm from the IV puncture. It stained the white tile beneath me, and the sight of it made me dizzy.

I spotted one of Sam’s extra slings on the opposite counter, but it seemed like it was miles away. If I could get to it, I could secure my arm long enough to get to the kitchen and calm everybody the hell down.

“It’s not. They’re all just very worried—”

“Yeah, and they’re about t-to tear each other apart,” I yelled hoarsely, sitting back fully on the bed, my legs shaking violently. The voices grew, and something broke; glass, from the sound of it. “They’re all…”

I could hear every word being said, hear how the insults were getting worse, more
personal, the words becoming more and more unforgiveable. Every word was like another punch to the gut.

You’re right, his voice rang in my head, and I flinched, squeezing my eyes shut. It is your fault. Look at you, Pete! Still driving them apart, even immobile. That’s the spirit!

I whimpered, desperate to put my hands over my ears, as if that would make the voices and the noise somehow go away, but I couldn’t even do that.

“FRIDAY,” I whispered, not even sure that she could hear me. “I have to get up there…”

Silence from the ceiling. I knew that she probably didn’t know what to do, either. I felt frustrated tears prick at my eyes and bowed my head, listening to the shouting as it grew. I tucked my left arm close against my bandaged chest and tensed my muscles, going for round two.

This time, I managed to hold my weight, though my legs were shaking like a newborn faun’s.

Stella circled me worriedly as I leaned against the counter with my right elbow, my right hand holding my pulsing left arm to my chest. Drawing in a ragged breath, I took shuffling steps forward until I reached the sling.

By the time I got there, I was sweating like I’d just run two marathons in the Amazon, and it stung the still open wounds across my body. I slumped with my back against the counters, trying to maneuver my limp arm into the sling, finally getting it secure against my chest.

I couldn’t quite hold back a sob as the movement aggravated the bandaged wound, hot pain spearing my entire arm up to my shoulder. Grasping the counter with my good arm, I fought to my knees, but my entire body was shaking. I didn’t know if I could make it back to the bed if I wanted to, let alone the kitchen.

“Peter,” FRIDAY’s apologetic voice interrupted my thoughts. I raised my head a little to show I’d heard her, sweat beading on my forehead and my back. The hospital gown clung to my skin, and all of a sudden, I felt claustrophobic. “I’m sorry. I tried to get them to stop, but I don’t think they can hear me. Dr. Banner is…close to turning into the Hulk, and he’s drowning out any noise I try to make. Even Boss can’t hear me.”

Closing my eyes, panting, I nodded.

They were all heroes capable of incapacitating and injuring without a thought when they were in a fight. If someone didn’t stop them, they were going to hurt each other, and…I couldn’t take that on my conscience, not after everything.

I had to stop them.

Gritting my teeth, feeling like a house of cards, I managed to drag myself to my feet and out the door.

The hallway spun around me like a funhouse. I was dizzy enough that it felt like I was walking at a forty-five degree angle until my body slammed against the wall from where I’d listed to one side, my frame rattling from the impact. Hazily, I made out the elevator on my right, clumsily pressing the button.

“I’ll take you straight to the kitchen, Peter,” FRIDAY’s (apologetic?) voice said, and I could only nod woozily, trying not to throw up. Stella pounced into the elevator after me, her hair
standing straight on edge as she paced fervently.

The elevator ride gave me a minute or reprieve, and I needed it for the sight that greeted me when the doors dinged open.

It was chaos.

The shouting was a nearly unbearable volume, and I shrank back instinctively, wincing at the noise. Forcing my eyes open, leaning exhaustedly against the wall, green filled my vision.

Slowly, I looked up.

Oh, boy. So that’s what the Hulk looked like up close.

The huge, green, muscled humanoid was huffing and puffing and looking ready to blow a freaking city down, the flat-screen cracked and broken in his hand. He was looking around for something else to grab, the sound of splintering glass drowning out the other shouting.

Thor was holding the Hulk’s other arm, yelling at him, screaming at him to calm down, but it did nothing. My eyes flicked around, and my stomach bottomed out at the chaos of what was once the living room and kitchen.

I couldn’t count the hours I’d sat on the shredded couch playing video games or studying with one or more of them. The numerous times I’d stared at the fragmented TV and laughed when I won or lost. I turned to the kitchen, only to see the broken granite countertop splattered around the floor, crumbling pieces laid out on the linoleum. I’d sat at that same counter and eaten and talked and laughed.

I couldn’t quite stop myself from crying. It was too much. Sweeping my eyes over the nine most important people in my life—Sam, Clint, and Tony going at it like mortal enemies at the end of their ropes, Steve and Rhody thinly holding onto their own patience as they tried to intervene, Thor and the Hulk wrestling, and...Tasha and Bucky, watching. Bucky was slumped against the wall, Tasha standing next to him, watching with hard eyes.

I couldn’t even breathe deep enough to shout for them, and no one noticed me.

Well, until I collapsed. Then the Hulk did.

My legs had been shaking the whole time, and I knew they’d give out sooner rather than later. They folded under me, and I barely caught myself with my right arm. The jarring impact rattled my entire frame, and I clenched my teeth to keep from crying out, squeezing my eyes shut, two steps away from having a full-on meltdown, because they were still fighting and screaming and I couldn’t—I couldn’t—

A roar interrupted me, and I looked up with wet eyes, only to make direct eye contact with the Hulk.

Thor stilled when the Hulk did, following his eyesight, and he saw me, too.

“Peter!” He said, letting go of the Hulk and walking towards me, almost running, worry covering his face.

The Hulk beat him, though.

The green mass basically shoved him out of the way and stalked toward me, expression
unreadable. Stella stood straight, hissing up a storm as I looked up, a little terrified because *holy shit the Hulk is really big and coming towards me really fast and wow he’s getting really close—*

The sudden shift in atmosphere had alerted the others to my presence, but the thing everybody was really worried about was the Hulk. I saw worried faces switch to terrified and shouting filled the room, but I could only kneel there.

He got to me, and without preamble, swept me up in his arms.

For such a big guy, he was surprisingly gentle, too. He plopped down cross-legged on the ground and held me securely against his chest; the walls rattled as he sat heavily. He wrapped an arm around me and I let my head fall against his chest and the crook of his arm, letting myself settle exhaustedly into his warmth.

“Mini-friend hurt,” his gruff voice said quietly as he jostled me a little, readjusting me. My wounds ached, but it was bearable. “Make Hulk sad.”

“Uh…I’m sorry,” I said after a second, not really knowing how to respond. Hulk blew out a breath, seeming satisfied, and settled down again. Stella, obviously satisfied that the threat had passed, pawed at Natasha’s leg until Tasha picked her up mechanically, holding her close.

Tentatively, I looked out over the remains of the living room and kitchen to see eight shell-shocked faces.

“Um…” I started, trying to sit up a little, but the Hulk let out a soft growl, keeping me close against him. I gave up, settling back, and said, “I…could hear you. I came to…uh, stop you.”

I avoided eye contact, but I caught the way the winced out of the corner of my eye. Frustrated, I wiped at my eyes, struggling to get the words out. “Guys, I can’t…” My breath hitched, and the Hulk lifted me a little, snuffling. “I can’t…do this by myself,” I managed.

No one replied, and I took that as permission to continue. “I…I’m trying, I’m trying to get better, to get over it, to move on, but…guys, I can’t do it when…when I can hear you shouting through the walls and floors and even the headphones, I can’t—”

I cut myself off with a sob, covering my eyes with my one working freaking hand, my other still strapped securely against my chest, throbbing dully under the bandages. It was pressed right up against the horrible word carved into my chest, pain flaring over the irritated cuts hidden under the cotton.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered through the sobs, unable to articulate everything I wanted. “I’m sorry and I’m trying but I—I just keep hurting you guys, and I can’t get him out of my head and I hate it, and you’re not—I—”

“Sh,” Bucky said, hurrying forward as my chest heaved. The Hulk let Bucky stand next to him, running a hand through my hair and putting his metal one on my shoulder, trying to calm me down. “Breathe, Peter, okay? Just breathe; we’re listening.”

Sucking in a shuddering breath, I hitched another sob, trying to continue. “I know—I kn-know it’s been hard…and I’m s-sorry, I—I haven’t made it any easier, b-but…please, please stop fighting,” I begged, turning my face into the Hulk’s chest, desperate for the comfort.

Hulk snuffled again, hefting me higher and tighter against him, Bucky’s hands following.

“I can’t take it,” I sobbed breathily. “I c-can’t take it…”
I gasped, hearing the wheeze in my voice as I struggled to get enough air through the sobs. The infection in my lungs was almost gone, but they were still weak from the extended abuse, and even getting a little worked up was almost too much.

There was a guilty, heavy silence as I tried to calm down, my sobs dying down to shuddering breaths against the Hulk’s chest. I felt bad. I’d wanted to stop them, but I hadn’t thought I’d break down like I did. The stress of the past few weeks had just reached a breaking point, and I’d finally snapped.

I knew how upset Bucky had been after I’d told them everything. He’d tried to hide it, but I knew him better than he thought I did.

He was devastated, and even though I knew that rationally it wasn’t my fault—that honor fell entirely to the Rosses—I’d still been the one to tell him. I had to be the one to watch his face quietly fall when he heard what they’d done to me.

And the others…they were trying, too, but even delirious, I could see the toll it had taken on them, and today had been the breaking point for all of us.

“I’m so sorry,” I breathed, finally cried out enough to calm down. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry…I didn’t w-want to hurt you, I—I’m sorry f-for leaving, I’m sorry for—”

“Hey, stop it,” Clint said, coming forward, the first of the other seven to break out of their stupor. “Stop that, Peter, you know we’re not mad.”

“But I am,” I admitted, still unable to turn and look at them. “I am, because it was stupid, no matter w-what you say. And…and I know in my head that…that what happened there isn’t my fault, but…but I can’t even say his name, you guys, I can’t—”

“That’s totally normal, Pete,” Tony’s voice broke through next, sounding guilty and worried. “That’s more than normal, and it’ll get better with time. We’ll help you—”

“That’s it, though!” I shouted, on the verge of tears again. “You can’t help m-me when…when you’re busy fighting each other like the next supervillain!”

Somebody sighed, heavy and world-weary, but I kept going before anyone could interrupt me. “I h-heard the things you were saying, all of you, a-and they were awful,” I almost whispered the last part, unable to fully verbalize the confession. “I…you’re my family now, guys, and you’re—you’re all I have. You’re all I have. How…how can I get better if…”

I trailed off, feeling exhaustion settle deep and thick over me. I wiped the tears from my face, turning tentatively into Bucky’s hand where he still brushed his fingers through my hair. “I’m sorry I hurt you,” I said quietly, hesitantly meeting his eyes.

“Aw, kid,” he said with an exasperated smile, his eyes lighting up a little more than they had yesterday. “You could never hurt me. I was…I was hurt by what happened, yeah, but…not by you, Peter. Never you, kiddo.”

Hulk shifted me, cradling me closer against him. The sudden movement made my stomach drop a bit, seeing as I was a few feet off the ground, but I quickly settled back against his chest, the warmth comforting and consuming.

“Shit,” a voice said to my left. I turned towards them, to see Sam leaning against the broken counter with his back to us, his good arm braced against the countertop. “I—son of a bitch, I’m sorry.”
“Sam?” Steve said tentatively, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, his voice choked and thin. “I’m…so sorry, guys. Tash, and Tony, and Bruce—well, I’ll apologize to him later, but—God, I’m such a douche…”

“It’s okay,” Tony said, puffing his cheeks out and shoving his hands in his pockets, turning to survey the damaged rooms. “We all said some pretty douchey stuff. You are a douche, though.”

Sam choked on a laugh that turned into a wince, his good hand going to his side.

Steve noticed, his face growing concerned. “You wanna sit down?”

“No, I’m—” Sam stopped, sighing, putting a hand on his injury. “Maybe. Yeah, I…sure.”

Steve grabbed a (miraculously) undamaged chair and Sam all but collapsed into it, scrubbing his face with his good hand. “I’m sorry, guys. I…I guess I just…haven’t been coping well with everything, and I took it out on you. I didn’t…I didn’t mean any of it. Shit, I was just…looking for someone else to blame, and you guys just happened to be there when I snapped.”

“I think we were all pretty much at the end of our ropes, Sam,” Steve said gently, giving him a glass of water. “You just happened to snap before the rest of us, is all.”

Sam didn’t look like he bought it, but he didn’t reply negatively, either. Taking a sip of water and swallowing thickly, he looked up at me. “I’m sorry, Peter. I didn’t mean for you to hear us. I—we—you know we all love you, kid, and we’re all going to be here for you, no matter what. Parents fight, you know? Dysfunctional superhero families sometimes have to fight, too.”

I smiled, scoffing at his choice in words. “You b-broke half a building.”

Sam winced, surveying the damage, and I saw similar expressions on the others. “That’s what happens when a bunch of super-powered idiots go off,” Rhodey scoffed. He gestured to a flickering table lamp as if to prove his point. He reached under the shade to tug the chain, trying to turn off the lamp, but as soon as he pulled downwards, the entire things shattered into a million pieces, scattering all over the floor.

The only thing left unscathed was a lampshade that dangled from his frozen wrist.

I couldn’t quite help the snort at Rhodey’s thoroughly done expression as he shook of the lampshade, sighing through his nose and looking at the ceiling.

“We’ll talk it over,” Tasha said, gliding over and running a hand through my hair, smiling gently. “We’ll work it out, and then we’ll make sure you’re better, hm? Sam’s already apologized, and none of us are mad. I think you took care of that.”

I smiled slightly up at her, glad that something good had come of my escapade.

“I was worried for you, Young Peter, and my actions were a rash decision in consequence of that emotion,” Thor said gravely, bowing his head in apology. “You have my sincerest apologies; we did not mean to trouble you further.”

“It’s okay,” I breathed, blinking heavily. “I know you guys didn’t mean it. I just…couldn’t listen to you fight and do nothing.”

“You’re a little hero in your own right, kid,” Clint said with a sincere grin, patting my knee, leaning against the Hulk’s muscled arm. Hulk gave a faint growl, but made no attempt to shove
him off. “A mini-Avenger.”

I laughed a little, the title making me feel warm. I could get used to being a mini-Avenger.

“Now,” Steve said, his voice serious, authoritative. “We’re going to get you—” he zeroed in on me, and I grinned sheepishly, “—back to the Med Bay, and Tasha, I need you to get Bruce back so he can make sure everything’s still alright. Sam, too, because you are getting checked over.” Sam rolled his eyes, but there was no bite to it, which eased the tension in my chest a lot. “Tony, can you get some of your suits to help us start cleaning all this up—”

“Holy shit,” a new voice exclaimed from the doorway. Ten heads whipped towards the entrance in unison to see one Scott Lang standing stock-still, his eyes roaming every inch of the rooms.

“Oh,” he said, startled once he noticed all the eyes on him. Laughing awkwardly and holding up his hands in surrender, he stammered, “Oh, h-hey, guys, didn’t see you there. Uh, I came to…get some lunch, or something, but, uh, don’t mind me, I’ll just b-be going…back to my room and I’ll, you know, probably never feel safe to leave again, so, bye—”

The words weren’t even out of his mouth before he was gone, jerking back around the corner so fast I thought I saw smoke coming from his shoes.

There was silence for a moment, broken by Sam’s unsteady laugh. “That guy is the weirdest dude I’ve ever met.”

“That’s saying a lot,” I joked quietly, looking pointedly around the room.

Sam grinned back, laughing, his eyes downcast. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Small bits of laughter spread through the room until all ten of us were laughing, standing around in a broken room with sparking wires and broken glass spread everywhere. It was the scene of a madhouse.

But it was my madhouse. My family.

And I knew, as I surveyed them all, smiling and joking and teasing, that we’d be okay.

James “Rhodey” Rhodes

Peter went into surgery the next morning.

After Nat had given Hulk her lullaby, Bruce had come back to himself, exhausted but okay. When he’d heard Peter had snuck out of bed, he’d been…well, terrified.

“Oh, my God,” he’d said, terror evident on his face. “Hulk, he—I—we didn’t hurt him, right? Please, please tell me I didn’t hurt him—”

Sam scoffed from his bed (which Stave had damn near tied him to) and said, “No, you dimwit. You cradled him against you like a freaking mama gorilla. He fell asleep while you carried him back to the Med Bay. It was adorable, actually.”

Bruce all but collapsed in relief, his entire body sagging as Natasha caught him and steadied him against the wall. “Thank God,” Bruce said, his face pinched. “Thank God.”
He’d taken a quick nap and conferred with Tony and Helen after, and they’d drawn up a
game plan for Peter’s surgery.

Peter had taken the news fairly well, all things considered. He’d only requested that
someone stay with him throughout it. He’d been hesitant about being knocked out again, but he’d
finally agreed to it, his hands shaking.

“Hey,” I said, ruffling his hair as the three “doctors” (Bruce didn’t count, and Tony was
nowhere near a licensed medical professional) flitted around the room making preparations. Bucky
was in one of the special surgeon showers, decontaminating so he could go into the OR with Peter.
“You okay?”

He gave a tight smile and nodded, fiddling with the Avengers blanket over his lap. Clint
had taken Stella up to the common room earlier so she couldn’t get any germs anywhere after
they’d finished sanitizing everything. “I’m…I’m nervous, but…I know I’m not there anymore, and
I know exactly what they’re gonna do, which is nice.”

I nodded encouragingly. They were first of all going to flush out any remaining pockets of
infection, then clear away the damaged tissue. The wound was deep and severe, so they were then
going to repair muscles and veins as best they could. They’d take some skin from his leg and graft
it into and onto his arm, replacing some of the damaged skin. He’d heal, but the scarring would be
awful.

As would the scarring on his chest, but that was a topic we hadn’t even begun to approach
yet. The cuts on his chest were…well, healed. Sealed, scabbed over, little more than scars, but they
were kept bandaged so Peter didn’t have to see them.

“We’ll be waiting for you when you’re done,” I said with a smile, giving his shoulder a pat.
“Any movie you wanna have waiting? We’re clearing up the common room so we can get you set
up on the couch when you’re ready to leave this prison. So once the new TV gets here, we’ll watch
some stuff.”

Peter grinned. There was still a tense edge to his shoulders, a slight, frantic nervousness
shrouding his small frame, but his smile was relaxed. “Star Wars. Episode V, please, that’s my
favorite.”

I smirked, mussing his hair. “You got it.”

The surgery was a complete success, and Dr. Cho was happy with the prognosis.

“He’ll definitely have some massive scarring, but he’ll retain full use of his arm with some
physical therapy and his enhanced healing,” she said, smiling at the relieved faces around the
room. She looked at me, saying, “You think your PT specialist would be willing to work with
him?”

I nodded. “Amanda’s here a lot, anyways, so I’m sure she wouldn’t mind. Sam will need to
join us too, anyways.”


“A radial head fracture can permanently reduce the amount of movement possible in the
elbow joint,” Helen said disapprovingly. “You’re doing PT if you ever want full mobility back.”

Sam muttered something under his breath, but he didn’t argue again.
The night before, T’Challa and company, as well as Scott, had left for their respective homes, wishing us the best. Shuri promised to be in touch with the ‘cute white boy’, and I was not going to miss the chance to rub that in Peter’s face when he was better, and Scott said to call if we needed anything. Or if we wanted to hang out.

I gave him a polite smile and sent him on his way.

Natasha sought me out that morning after Peter had gone into surgery, a grim smile on her face. “I sent Ross’ file to the UN. They’re reviewing it now, and… I should have a definite response on their decision whether to open a case or not in a day or so. They did as that we transfer Ross to the UN Headquarters in the city, but they gave us forty-eight hours. I’m not in too much of a hurry.”

She gave everyone else the news, watching faces darken and fists clench. I was glad, along with everyone else, that Ross was going to see justice.

It would never feel like enough, though. Not after everything.

After the surgery, Peter slept off the anesthetic long enough for us to clear away the debris from the common room and kitchen, dragging another couch and a few armchairs from our various bedrooms and setting them up around the spot on the wall reserved for the flat-screen Tony had fast-tracked to the Compound. By the time Peter was awake and coherent, we’d gotten then gigantic thing mounted and connected (it helped, having a technological genius to speed along the process) and Episode V of Star Wars was loaded up.

Bucky, Tony, Bruce, Sam, and Peter came up ten minutes later, just as Clint had finished the popcorn. Stella was curled on Thor’s chest, sleeping soundly as they emptied the elevator, Peter and Sam in wheelchairs. Peter was still a little sleepy, but we set him up on the couch, his arm heavily bandaged and immobilized against his chest.

He lay sideways on the couch with his back against Bucky’s right side, Bucky’s right arm around his shoulders. We all piled into the chairs and the couch, throwing popcorn in the still half-demolished living room, turning all the lights off as the characteristic theme started rolling.

An hour later, Peter adjusted his position, lowering his torso more against Bucky’s chest. Bucky wrapped his arms around Peter and tucked his head against his left shoulder, Peter’s face almost buried in Bucky’s neck as he dozed off to the sounds of fighting on the screen, snoring softly as Bucky rubbed his back.

I watched Bucky look down at the kid sleeping in his arms and smile gently, with more fondness than I ever thought I’d see on Bucky Barnes’ face. Natasha draped a blanket over the both of them, sliding herself onto the couch, lifting Peter’s feet into her lap.

The three of them fell asleep, the rest of us following soon afterwards. The credits of the movie played forgotten in the background as we slept.

For the first time since Peter had been taken, we were all together, safe and content.

Safe and happy as a family.
Peter is the best couples counselor in the whole world
Thanks so much for reading!!!
“—latest reports of the stolen objects in more detail. In other news, Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross is currently being held in the United Nations headquarters in New York City for multiple counts of murder, kidnapping, terrorism, treason, smuggling, and more. These heinous acts are just the tip of the iceberg for Secretary Ross, whose illustrious, decorated history holds some dark secrets. Is one of America’s most influential leaders really the mastermind behind the century-old terrorist organization HYDRA? We’ll have more for you on the matter tonight at ten. Back to you, Matthew.”

“Thanks, Janet. So, definitely a scary story there; be sure to tune in tonight for all the details as they come to light in real time. Now, the weather for this week will be fairly sunny with a few scattered showers heading into Thursday—”

The TV blinked off. I cast a glance at Thor, who set the remote on the coffee table, his mouth in a hard line. “I do not wish to watch any more of that.”

“You could’ve changed the channel, Point Break,” I sighed, leaning my head back against the couch. “But you’re right. I don’t wanna watch it either.”

Two weeks had passed since the shouting match and Peter’s surgery, and everyone was getting better. We were all coping in our own ways—I’d called Pepper and told her everything, and God bless that woman because she knew all the right things to do and say. She’d offered to fly in from Japan, where she was at an important conference, but since Peter was making such good progress, I told her it was fine.

“Coffee?” I asked as I stood up to go to the kitchen, minding the tarp over the still-broken countertop.

“Hot chocolate, if you don’t mind,” Thor said absently, throwing one of Stella’s toys across the room, watching her scramble after it.

I took a sip of my coffee, nice and black, and gave him a look. “Since when? What, you want me to make a face with the whipped cream and add precisely six marshmallows? Are you nine?”

Thor grinned, coming into the kitchen. “No. Young Peter shared the wonders of hot chocolate with me one night after we’d both been woken by night terrors. It is quite good for a foul mood.”

I blinked at him over my mug, sighing. “Fine, whatever. I’ll put some milk on.”

I made Thor his hot chocolate, watching as he took a tentative sip, staring critically into the mug. He grabbed the whipped cream can and shook it so hard I thought the damn thing would combust in his hand, then sprayed half the contents into the drink, a satisfied smile appearing after he’d tasted it again.

I raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him, rolling my eyes to the ceiling and pouring out the rest of my coffee. “You’re ridiculous.”
Thor just grinned.

Thor had been better, too. He went back to Asgard for a couple days on some business, and I thought the distance and the distraction helped him deal with everything, because he came back in good spirits.

“FRIDAY, how’s the session going?” I asked. Sam, Peter, and Rhodey were all having a joint physical therapy session with Rhodey’s specialist, Amanda. I’d personally interviewed and hired the woman after Rhodey’s injury; she was one of the best in the country, personable, and very good at her job.

“It’s going well, boss,” FRIDAY said, sounding pleased. One of my coping mechanisms had been to run a trial program with FRIDAY, introducing the six basic emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, fear, and surprise) on their most fundamental levels into her coding. AI’s with emotion were little more than experimental, but so far FRIDAY had been responding well to the testing. I did dial back the emotions for fear and disgust, though; I wanted her to be able to function well in any situation instead of getting bogged down by fear. “Rhodey has completed his routine exercises and is now helping Sam, while Amanda is still working with Peter.”

“Mm,” I hummed, happy to hear it was going well. “Keep me posted, FRI.”

“Will do.”

Nat strode into the kitchen a few minutes later, Stella in her arms. She gave us a smile as she set Stella on the counter, fishing out the cat food from the bottom of the pantry. “Hot chocolate?”

“Indeed,” Thor said happily, holding up his mug as an example. “Tony makes good hot chocolate, I highly recommend it.”

I rolled my eyes, nodding to the pot on the stove. “I boiled some milk and blindly poured in about half the kid’s Nesquik powder, then Thor drowned it in whipped cream. It’s great if you want diabetes tomorrow morning.”

She set a bowl in front of Stella, who started devouring it, and grabbed a mug with a smirk. “Somehow I think I’ll be fine.”

“Your funeral,” I muttered with a smile, glad that the easy banter between the nine of us had more or less resumed normally. I couldn’t say I hadn’t missed it.

“I’m heading out to the UN headquarters tomorrow morning,” Nat said, grabbing a container of fruit from the fridge a popping the lid off, diving in. “They want me to clarify a couple parts of my file and provide a witness account of what happened in the HYDRA base. I may take Steve with me so he can give the other half of the story, but Bucky and Peter and the others should be fine staying here.” She gave me an apologetic look, a piece of pineapple ready on her fork. “There may be a bit of a PR scandal after all this, you know. It’s not everyday the Avengers adopt a kid.”

I laughed a little, thinking of the mess Pepper and I were going to have on our hands. “It’s alright, I don’t mind. It’s probably Peter’s decision, though; I mean, it doesn’t have to be public. I know there’s always the possibility of a leak, but we can do everything confidentially.”

“Just prepare for the worst,” she said, scooping up the container of fruit and retreating to the living room. “Also, it’s your turn to clean out Stella’s litterbox.” I could hear the smile in her voice even from the other room.
My eyebrow twitched as I shot an offended glance at the cat, happily stuffing her face while I questioned my sanity. “You know, sometimes I hate you.”

“I know,” she shouted back, and I heard the TV turn on.

Thor laughed heartily, scratching Stella’s ears as she pawed over to him, purring. “Onward, Stark, your chores await you!”

“Screw you all,” I muttered as I made the trek to Peter’s room. Billionaire or not, I didn’t get paid enough for this.

Peter Parker

I cringed in pain as I flexed my hand, feeling beads of sweat collect on my brow, but I finally managed to open my fingers, restricted by the ring of putty on my fingertips. I sagged in relief once the set of twenty was finally complete, my arm falling limp into my lap.

“Good job, Peter!” Amanda said proudly, beaming. “You’re healing really well! I can tell you’ve been doing your home exercises.”

I smiled exhaustedly up at her. “Yeah. They suck, though.”

She laughed. “It’s not supposed to be easy, champ. You wanna know a saying we have in my PT facility back home?” I nodded, and she said, “Pain is weakness leaving the body.’ Classy, eh?”

I couldn’t stop a little laugh, myself. That was quite the slogan.

“Well, I think we can be done for today. Unless you want to keep going?” She raised an eyebrow, smiling challengingly.

I breathed a laugh, shaking my head. “No, thanks, I’ve suffered enough.”

She gave my hair a quick ruffle and shouted across the gym, “I’m leaving, Rhodes! Get your butt back in those braces and do your exercises! You too, Wilson!”

Rhodey gave her a smirk and a dismissing wave, while Sam looked two inches away from flicking her off. He wasn’t looking so hot, himself. His sling had been set to the side; his arm was still casted, but his fingers were mostly free, so they were doing some light exercises that were supposed to get his muscles working again.

With one last wave, Amanda left out the back to take the employee elevator down to the garage. I stood, hissing in pain as I jostled my arm back into the sling, but it was doing much better. “Are you guys going up yet?”

“Nah, Sam’s not done,” Rhodey said, a grin on his face as the man flipped him off. “We’ll be up later.”

I gave a short laugh and waved in their direction, walking down the hall and taking the elevator to the common floor. A couple things were still being fixed, but it had been mostly repaired from the Avengers’ collective temper tantrum.

During that time, we were fixing more than just the living room, too. I’d started physical
therapy and I’d started having biweekly sessions with a Doctor Andrea Sanders with a Ph.D. in pediatric clinical psychology. She was nice, not overly formal, and answered questions instead of just asking them. I’d started talking to Sam, too; he gave me some tricks to help me fall asleep and daily reflective exercises to do that were supposed to help me get a handle on the flashbacks and nightmares.

Everyone else had been healing, too, since their fight. The mood was a lot lighter than it had been beforehand; I hadn’t even realized just how tense everyone was until after things were back to normal.

Steve and Bucky had also started helping me control my strength and learn how to manage the enhanced senses. I’d worn the headphones for about a week straight, including to sleep, until I felt comfortable taking breaks without them, acclimating to the new world of the tiniest sounds and vibrations. I had to admit, once I got past being overwhelmed, it was actually incredible how much sound surrounded us that we didn’t hear—the vibrations of floors being stepped on, the *thu-thump* of beating hearts, the *whoosh* of blood pumping strong.

We hadn’t been able to do much to help me control my strength since I only had one arm to practice with, but I’d made some progress, anyhow. Opening doors and drinking had been especially tricky for a while—doorknobs frequently came off in my hand and glasses shattered when I grabbed them too hard on accident, so we’d started with mundane tasks that I really had to be able to do to function properly. It had only been two weeks, and I had a ways to go, but the progress was visible.

Needless to say, with PT, therapy with Dr. Sanders, therapy with Sam, training with Steve and Bucky, and me trying to catch up on the schoolwork I should have been doing, my days were full.

When I finally got to the living room, I collapsed onto the sofa, turning on my side and snuggling into the pillows, exhausted. Stella was with Tasha, I thought, so I didn’t have to worry about taking care of her for today; I could just *sleep*.

“You okay, Peter?” Bucky’s disembodied voice asked as he walked into the room, sitting in the armchair to my right.

I didn’t open my eyes, instead humming in reply. “Sleepy.”

Bucky snorted, tossing a pillow at my head. “Sleep later. I have a couple things I wanna talk to you about.”

I opened my eyes, and Bucky could tell he’d gotten my attention. Sitting up, leaning against the armrest piled high with pillows, I looked at him as I situated myself under my blanket draped over the back of the couch. “What things?”

“Bit of everything. Well, first of all,” Bucky said, his eyes darkening. “Nat and Steve are heading out to the UN tomorrow to officially testify against Ross and give the Avengers’ involvement.” I sucked in a breath, my eyes widening. I hadn’t thought that it would be so soon. “They’re going to have to tell the investigators everything that happened, including your part in everything.”

I hesitated, then nodded slowly, biting my lip. “Will they have to…t-tell them about my powers? And the experiments?”

Bucky rubbed the back of his neck uncertainly, leaning back. His expression was
conflicted. “Well—”

“What’s with the doom and gloom?” Clint asked, walking into the room with a can of soda.  
“You’d think someone died in here.”

“We were talking about what Nat and Steve are going to tell the UN,” Bucky offered, eyes  
sharpening like he did when he was thinking. “Actually, help us out. Would they have to disclose  
anything about Peter’s powers or the experiments? They’re not immediately relevant to Ross’  
overall crimes, so we could feasibly keep it secret, right?”

Clint tilted his head, considering. “I don’t see why not. Everyone thinks they took Peter  
because he knew the super soldier serum in the first place, anyways.”

The ball of dread in my gut started to ease, and I felt my soldiers relax. “So we can keep it a  
secret?”

“I’ll ask Steve to be sure he won’t spontaneously combust by omitting anything,” Bucky  
said with a smile, earning and snort from me, “but yeah, we should be okay. Is that all you want  
left out?”

Taking a deep breath, I sifted vaguely back through my time in the HYDRA base, ignoring  
the overwhelming memories that threatening to swallow me. I felt my hand start shaking and fisted  
it at my side, thinking carefully.

“You can stop if you need to,” Bucky reminded gently, lightly grabbing my wrist.

My hand relaxed and I cast him a sideways smile. “I’m okay. It’s just…a lot, sometimes.” I  
took a breath. “I don’t think so. Unless…” I bit my lip, considering. I hesitated. “Are you…I mean,  
you’re…uh…you’re going to upgrade temporary guardianship, r-right?”

“Yep,” Clint answered immediately, taking a swig of soda. “None of that self-questioning  
nonsense, now. It’s already in the system awaiting approval.”

Bucky sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I was waiting, you know, Clint.”

“And I didn’t agree with you,” Clint pointed out, looking entirely unapologetic. “So I told  
him. You’re welcome.”

A warm balloon expanded in my chest, and I felt like if I could I’d float all the way to the  
moon. I felt a grin split my face as I turned on Bucky, who gave a defeated smile. “Guess the  
secret’s out. I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“You should’ve told me!” I argued, feeling like a kid on Christmas morning. It wasn’t that  
I’d doubted them; I really hadn’t. It was just that no one had said anything about it, so I wasn’t sure  
if they were going to keep Bucky as a temporary guardian until I turned eighteen or go through  
with the official adoption process.

“Well, it’s out now,” Bucky said with a smile. “Can’t get rid of us anymore, kid.”

I didn’t even dignify that with an answer. Why would I ever want to get rid of them?

“But yeah,” I continued, thinking. “Do we want to…you know, tell people that? I didn’t  
know if you wanted it to be public or not…?”

Bucky rubbed his jaw, glancing at Clint, who shrugged. “Got me. I got my kids the old-
fashioned way.”

I snorted. Bucky turned back to me and said, “I guess it’s your decision, Peter. We’ll have to tell SHIELD and the investigators that you’re staying with us indefinitely, and we have the legal documentation to enforce it, but it’s up to you whether we make a PR statement or not. We can try to keep it a secret if you want, but I can’t promise anything.”

I lowered my eyes, my brain running at ninety miles a minute. Did I want my face plastered all over the Internet, the newspapers? The Avengers taking in an orphaned teen from Queens wouldn’t go unnoticed. It would be a big story; I wasn’t sure I wanted all that attention, especially not after laying low for so long, being hunted every minute. I didn’t know if I could let myself feel that exposed.

“Maybe just…not say anything?” I asked cautiously, gauging Clint’s and Bucky’s reactions. “Like, don’t make a statement, but don’t make a big deal of keeping it secret. Just kind of…let it happen, you know? I guess the lawyers and everybody will be sworn to secrecy or whatever, but I don’t want to not be able to go out in public with you guys, you know? We can just kind of let everyone find out gradually.” I took a breath. I’d started talking to a therapist and Sam about a couple things, and the therapist had really stressed being open about my insecurities so people could reassure me. “I don’t want to put myself out there so much, you know? After being on the run for so long, hiding, it just feels…wrong.”

Bucky nodded, a proud little smile on his face. “Totally reasonable. I’ll talk to Tony and see if he can have Pepper work something out.”

“I still haven’t met Pepper.”

“You will, trust me. She’s the only reason the Avengers are still seen in a favorable light by…anyone, really.”

“That woman is a force to be reckoned with,” Clint said, shuddering into his mug. “God, she gives Laura a run for her money, and that’s saying something.”

I laughed, glad that the adoption had been sorted. Pepper, from what everyone had told me, seemed more than capable when it came to handling both SI and Avengers business in anything to do with the media. She had to be, to be engaged to Tony Stark.

“Speaking of SHIELD, I expected Fury to be around more,” I said, letting the question linger in my voice. I hadn’t seen the man in quite some time, which I thought was unusual; he seemed to want to be in on all of the developments, and there had been a lot.

“Oh, he’s been around.” Bucky said dryly, quirking an exasperated smile. “We just haven’t let him see you. He’s been kept up to date on everything. He’s not…thrilled, I guess, with the living arrangements, but Nat talked him down some. They used to be pretty close, actually, so I guess she got him to back off a little.”

I blinked, surprised. I hadn’t expected getting the pirate out of my business to be that easy.

God, Tasha was a saint. A saint with interesting methods, but a saint nonetheless.

“One more thing,” Bucky said, his expression darkening. The smile slipped from my face as he leaned forward. “It’s been three weeks, roughly, since you were rescued.” Bucky took a deep breath, and I found myself holding mine, wondering what could be so important. “We haven’t…gone back to the base, yet, to do clean-up.”
Oh. The base where I was held and tortured.

I shivered.

“We were too worried about you to put a mission together,” Bucky admitted, leaning back, watching my reaction carefully. I felt Clint put a supporting hand on my shoulder. “But now that you’re better, we need to go. Find out what was taken, what survived…bury the people left inside and destroy the rest of the base to make sure no one stumbles across it and so it’s no longer usable to HYDRA.

“I talked to Sam,” he continued carefully, choosing his words. “We wanted to know if you want to come.”

My breath hitched, my eyes going wide. My heart pounded.

“You don’t have to,” Bucky said quickly, his face pinching in concern as he saw my reaction. “It’s just a suggestion. Sam says that sometimes, when people go through a trauma, visiting the site with a support system around you may help you start getting better,” Bucky explained, though it sounded kind of like he was reciting a therapy pamphlet. “It’s supposed to help your mind disassociate fear from the place and therefore the events, let you know that you’re in control now, and what happened in that place is over. It can backfire, obviously, but it’s been proven to help.” Bucky got up and plopped down next to me, putting an arm around my tense shoulders, looking me in the eye. “You do not have to go. You know your mind best, you decide if you think you can handle it or not. If you want to go, I’ll be right beside you the entire time; if you don’t, you can stay here while we go. Either way is fine with us.”

Bucky was really pushing me to make my own decision on this. I lowered my eyes, leaning into him as I thought, and he squeezed my shoulder gently, waiting patiently for my response. Clint didn’t say anything, either, watching the moment with anticipation.

On some level, I did want to go. It made sense. If I went there of my own free will, surveyed the wreckage of the place I’d been taken and chained and tortured, I’d know in my mind that I was in control, that I could leave at any time. That the place and the memories didn’t control my thoughts or actions.

On the other hand, I never wanted to go anywhere near there ever again.

Just vaguely picturing bloody snapshots of the events made me shudder. I still heard Jason’s (yes, I’d gotten better at thinking his name, but I still tripped over it when I spoke aloud) voice in my head, sometimes, when I started to doubt something or someone, or when the negative emotions that seemed to be swirling around got particularly bad.

I hadn’t told them about that yet.

Maybe if Bucky had asked me two months after, maybe three months after. But it had only been three weeks. Not enough time had passed for me to convince myself entirely that I was really free of the Rosses for good—just knowing that Ross 1 was still being tried gave me nightmares. I’d woken multiple others more than once when I woke up screaming, and the nightmare was always the same—Ross 1 had escaped conviction, gone free, and come after me. He’d used me and the science he gained from studying me to revive Jason, and together they cut off my arm.

“Peter,” Bucky said gently, shaking my shoulder. I realized with a start that I was shaking, shivering against him, staring sightlessly at the carpet at my feet. “Peter, can you hear me?”
I nodded, swallowing thickly, shutting my eyes.

“Open your eyes,” Bucky ordered softly, smoothing my bangs back out of my eyes. I did, slowly, still shaking. “Five things you can see.”

I swallowed again, calming slightly at the familiarity of this exercise. Bucky had taught it to me after my first nightmare—it engaged your senses to ground you to the present, one sense at a time, and the monotony of the exercise helped to calm me down. He confessed that he used it a lot after his own flashbacks.

“The carpet,” I said, flicking my eyes up and around. “C-Clint.” Clint gave me an encouraging smile and squeezed my good elbow gently in reassurance. “You.” Bucky smiled and nodded for me to continue. “The lamp, and…the TV.”

“Four things you can feel?”

“Your arm, the upholstery, my socks…and Clint’s hand.”

“Three things you can hear.”

“The air conditioner, your voice, and…the microwave.”

“Two things you can smell.”

“Popcorn? Air freshener.”

“One thing you can taste.”

“ Toothpaste.”

I let out a breath, feeling better. “I don’t want to go.” If that episode had proved anything, it was that I wasn’t ready.

Maybe one day…but not today.

Bucky nodded like he’d already known that was going to be my answer. He probably did, anyways, but he wanted me to make the decision for myself. “Okay. I think we’re just going to leave when Nat and Steve do tomorrow to knock everything out in one go; Rhodey and Sam will stay here with you, but I think everybody else is going. We’ll need Hulk to help us with some heavy lifting.”

“Will he be okay without Tasha?”

Clint laughed. “Big Guy’s actually gotten a little better about that. Her lullabies still help, but there won’t be any fighting, so he shouldn’t be too hard to calm down. If he is, we can always get Natasha over video chat and do it that way.”

I fidgeted with my hands in my lap, nodding quietly. Finally, tugging on the Velcro of the sling with my good hand, I asked, “Could you…do me a favor? When you do go?”

“You know I will.”

The response was immediate, and that confidence was enough to keep me going. “Could you…uh…f-find J-Jason?” I stammered, but I got it out completely, and I was a little proud of myself for it. “I mean, his…his, uh…body.” I took another shuddering breath. “I just want you to—make sure.”
“Of course, Peter,” Bucky said reassuringly, his quiet voice confident and gentle. “I’ll make sure I see him with my own eyes, and I’ll text you as soon as I do.”

I smiled, feeling a bit lighter. “Thank you.”

Before he could reply, the clock chimed at 2:45 in the afternoon. FRIDAY cut in, “Peter, you have an appointment with Dr. Sanders in Conference Room 7 at 3:00 pm.”

I groaned, flopping dramatically away from Bucky and onto the couch, shoving my head under a pillow with my functioning arm. “Peter isn’t here right now. Leave a message and maybe he’ll get back to you.”

Clint laughed, ruffling my hair before standing. “On that note, I’m gonna get ready for tomorrow. I’ll be leaving right after that to go see my kids for a while.”

I peeked out from the cushion, giving him a grin. “Have fun. Tell Laura I say hi.”

Clint left, and Bucky reached over, unceremoniously plucking the pillow off my head. “Up. Come on.”

“No,” I declared, reaching for the pillow only to have him hold it up out of arm’s reach. “Be nice, I’m injured!”

Bucky rolled his eyes, tossing the pillow over to the armchair. “I thought you liked Dr. Sanders.”

“I mean, I do,” I argued weakly. “She’s nice, but I don’t wanna do an appointment right now. I’m tired.”

“You’re breaking my heart.”

“A little more sympathy would be nice.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “You’re down to ten minutes to change out of your sweaty clothes and get across the Compound.”

“That’s not sympathy,” I huffed, but got up anyways.

I reached out to open the door subconsciously, twisting the knob, and a familiar creak-snap told me all I needed to know.

I leaned forward, banging my forehead against the door, and threw the broken doorknob in Bucky’s direction. “I broke the door.”

I heard Bucky give a world-weary sigh, grabbing the discarded knob and ruffling my hair. “Go change, Wreck-It Ralph. I’ll fix it.”

“Bucky! You just made a semi-modern reference!” I grinned excitedly at him, giving him a beaming thumbs-up. He just looked on dryly, looking completely unimpressed. “That’s good!”

Bucky sighed again, shaking his head. “You’re gonna miss your appointment. Don’t think I won’t carry you over there.”

My thumbs-up fell lifelessly, and I hustled to my room, calling over my shoulder, “You should be proud, you know! Tony said it took Steve, like, three years to make a modern reference.”
Bucky just grunted, fishing out a screwdriver from one of the drawers in the living room.

I got to my room, still watching him work, and promptly broke my doorknob.

Bucky looked up, and we locked eyes for a second. He stared, expressionless, for about five seconds before he calmly set down the screwdriver and said, “We’re getting you some mittens.”

I grinned sheepishly, getting ready for my appointment.

The days were long, and admittedly sometimes they sucked, but I was getting better—with each little victory, I was one step closer to being whole again.

Chapter End Notes

Yeeeee the baby we love him
Thank you so so much!!! Comment if you want!
Bucky Barnes

“Steve just texted,” Stark said from the pilot’s seat of the Quinjet. “He and Nat made it to the UN okay. The meeting’s gonna start soon.”

I nodded from the co-pilot’s seat, staring out over the frozen tundra. We were forty minutes out from the base. Clint, Bruce, and Thor were seated in a circle in the main body, playing poker. Clint, unsurprisingly, was winning; the real surprise was that Thor was following close behind despite not knowing any of the rules for the game.

Bruce was…trying his best.

“So,” Stark said, staring straight ahead. “How’s Peter been?”

I shifted, trying to get comfortable in the hard seat. “Better. You know that, you’ve been keeping an eye on him.”

Stark shrugged noncommittally, still keeping his eyes on the wasteland in front of us. “Yeah, but he talks to you more.”

I flicked my eyes over to him, but his face didn’t give anything away. Damn Stark, he could be downright sociopathic when he wanted to. “He’s okay. Still healing, will be for a while.”

Tony nodded. “That’s…good.”

I grunted.

Awkward silence ensued instantly.

Tony scratched his ear, fidgeting. I knew the silence was making him uncomfortable, but I didn’t know why. It wasn’t like we made small talk often. Hell, we barely spoke when we were around other people, and we didn’t make it a habit to get together.

Still, the man was usually the epitome of social grace and charm, no matter who was around. It was disconcerting to see him so…nervous.

I wondered if I was the one making him nervous. We had, after all, tried to kill each other on more than one occasion, not to mention his…parents.

I shifted again, more aggressively this time.

“With a multi-million-dollar Quinjet, you’d think you’d save some money to get some decent seats,” I all but growled, finally giving up and slumping against the uncomfortable back. Stark snorted, turning slightly to readjust the Quinjet’s course against the battering winds. “I’ll get you a pillow, princess. Pink or gold?”

“I know where you can stuff your pillow,” I muttered, crossing my arms over my chest.
“You wish, Terminator.”

I flipped him off.

Awkward silence resumed.

“So...how are you?” Tony asked. “You know...coping.”

I blinked. Tony waved a hand, continuing, the words shooting out of his mouth at top speed. “Well, you’ve had a rough go of it, finding Peter, the whole HYDRA thing, all the stuff Peter said they did, etcetera etcetera. Just making sure you’re not gonna shut down on us.”

As far as admissions of concern go, it wasn’t actually the most awkward one I’d heard Tony Stark make.

“Don’t stress about it,” I commented, shifting again. “I’m good.”

“Ah, shit,” Tony said, dragging a hand down his face. “This sucks.”

“What does?”

“This whole...caring thing,” Tony shuddered, his expression pinched like saying the words was painful for him. “Especially caring about you. Trying to.”

“Tell me how you really feel, Stark. Please.”

Stark scoffed. “Don’t get your bulletproof panties in a twist, honey.”

“Not hard when I’m this close to you.”

Stark sighed again, and I wished we’d get to the base already. He was freaking me out with all the...conversation.

Stark and I didn’t do conversation. We did cold looks and sometimes one-word exchanges. We did silence and a general understanding that, if we didn’t provoke each other, we could peacefully coexist, letting the others drive the conversations and fill the gaps of silence that inevitably stretched between us.

Stark turned the Quinjet again, sniffing. “Look. I...dammit, this is hard.” I raised an eyebrow. “We’ve had our...differences.” I snorted. “You suck at this. How did you and Steve ever develop a relationship? There’s zero empathetic listening happening here.”

“The point. You keep missing it.”

“We have a person to take care of now,” Stark finally said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “A real person with real...stuff. Like, he needs to be fed and tucked in and bought stuff. And there’s nine of us, but...if we’re gonna be co-parents of a kid who really doesn’t like it when we don’t get along, I figure we should...get along. A little. Not a lot. That’s too much.”

I considered his words, thinking of Peter. The kid didn’t...he didn’t like conflict, didn’t handle it well, especially when it was people he cared about. And while Tony and I never got into it, per se, we weren’t exactly on good terms, either.

“Okay.”
Stark glanced over, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “Okay? That’s it? No ‘wow, that’s so
noble, Tony’ or ‘I understand your feelings and emphatically agree because you’re always right?’
No acknowledgment?”

“Thought that was getting along too well. Besides, I figured you just used up your
emotional allowance for the day.”

Stark gave a grim smile. “Okay, you said it. That was good. I liked that. Banter’s good.”

I didn’t say anything, electing to look out the window, instead. Clint gave a victorious shout
in the back, and I heard the scraping of coins on the metal floor as he presumably grabbed a stack
towards him.

Thunder rumbled.

“Thor, we’ve talked about this,” Bruce said quietly, a hint of exasperation in his voice.
“Just because Clint beat you at poker doesn’t give you an excuse to blast us out of the sky.”

I snorted.

I gave Stark a sideways glance. He turned around and yelled at them, grinning. I…
appreciated that he was willing to make a step in the right direction for…our relationship, or
whatever, as better colleagues and better role models for Peter, but…it was a little too forward for
me to handle.

We’d tried to kill each other, we’d…hated each other. He’d hated me for brutally
murdering his parents…my excuse was a little less valid, I guessed. I’d hated him for not listening.
For hunting and chasing and condemning me before meeting me, talking to me, giving me a
chance to explain.

We were both wrong, but the hatred still pulsed on the bad days.

“Also,” Stark said quietly, his jaw clenched. “You didn’t…ruin Steve and I’s friendship.
That wasn’t on you. That was on him, and me, and you got sandwiched in the middle.” Stark took a
deep breath. “As someone who knows what it’s like to have a guilt complex the size of China, I
thought I’d let you know.”

That did give me a pause.

That…he didn’t have to say that. As far as I knew, Peter didn’t really…know about that.
Didn’t know about the things Tony and Steve and I had all done, gone through. Mending that…
that was all Stark.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, feeling something reluctantly ease in my chest.

“Yeah. Now I’m maxed out. No more emotions, not for at least a week. You’ll have to
book an appointment with Pepper at least two weeks in advance if you want another one of these.”

I scoffed. “If Peter so much looked in your direction, you’d spill your damn life story.”

“That’s different. He does that thing where he…looks into your damn soul and makes you
feel like every little thing you do is phenomenal and you can’t deny him anything. He’s downright
dangerous. I wonder if he realizes it.”

I snorted, smiling despite myself. “ Couldn’t have described it better myself.” I paused. “Has
he ever done that thing with you, where he holds stupidly earnest eye contact until you feel like you have to forgive yourself for not doing the dishes as a kid or something?"

Tony thumped the steering controls, laughing. “Yes. I thought I was the only one.”

This was…nice. Easy, even. Awkward, but…easy. “You’re not that special.”

“Oh, no, that’s fine. I’m glad it’s not just me. Thought I was going freaking crazy.”

“Nah,” I said, hesitating. Finally deciding to screw the self-doubt, I reached out with my metal arm and gently clapped his shoulder. “Just makes you a parent.” I waited for the flinch, for the jerk, the shock of cold metal to reach him and freak him out.

Instead, Stark…Tony…just glanced down, then gave a little smile. “No more emotions, tough guy. You should back me up on this. I’ll rat you out to Steve.”

I smirked.

The rest of the way to the base, the silence wasn’t so horribly awkward.

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Peter Parker

“How’re the exercises going?” Sam asked beside me, mixing the batter furiously with his one working arm. With my one working arm, I held the bowl steady. He’d said in one of our sessions that baking helped him destress, and I should try it. I’d pointed out that I only had one functioning arm.

He’d grinned and said together we made a whole baker.

So, now, we were making brownies, each with our one functioning arm.

“Okay,” I shrugged, adjusting my grip on the bowl when my fingers started to cramp. “The one Bucky showed me with the senses really helps.”

Sam nodded emphatically, flinging some excess batter off his spoon into the sink and grabbing the baking pan. “Good; he told me about that one. That’s a good one for coming out of flashbacks. What about your meditation? Is it helping the nightmares any?”

“A little,” I said noncommittally. The truth was not at all, really. The nightmares were still vivid and horrible, and they hadn’t gotten any better last night after Bucky had told me he was going to…that place. But I didn’t want to make Sam feel bad. “It just feels weird…meditating, you know?”

Sam snorted. “Got that right. I had a nightmare one night, ‘bout my mom dying…so I went to the couch in our little living room. Sat on the floor in front of it, legs crossed, hands upright in that…weird ‘ok’ symbol on my knees, literally everything.” I laughed a little at the sight of it, and he smirked. “Yeah, it was going pretty well til my brother caught me. Scared the living shit outta me, seriously. He couldn’t look at me without laughing for a week.”

I laughed, dipping my finger in the batter while his back was turned, but he turned back in time to catch me eating it. “You little sneak. It’s better baked.”

I grinned. “You’re so wrong, Sam. The batter’s the best. Someone needs to patent brownie
batter. You should do that.”

“Not in my house, you heathen.”

We fell into comfortable silence as he poured the batter into the pan while I held it steady; he shoved it into the over and heaved a sigh, kicking it closed with his foot. “I can’t wait until our arms work again. That was…a lot of effort.”

“Same.”

“So, how’ve you been coping, Peter? Really.”

I paused, shrugging, looking down. “I mean…okay, I guess, considering. Talking to Dr. Sanders…I know it’s supposed to help, but it doesn’t feel like it.”

Sam nodded, looking thoughtful. “I know it feels like that, but you’ve only seen her…what, three times? Four? It’s only been a couple of weeks, squirt. You’ve gotta give it time.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I know. I just…I want to be better. I want to…not be scared all the time.”

“Hey. Eyes up here, kiddo.” Hesitantly, I glanced it. “I got you. We all got you. You’re not doing this by yourself, and we’ll spend every day showing you that you have nothing to be scared of anymore, alright?”

I nodded, giving him a small smile, then looked down again. “I…um…I’ve been keeping something from you guys. Well, and Dr. Sanders.”

Sam blinked, leaning back. “Okay.”

I took a deep breath, fiddling with the Velcro on my sling, securing my arm to my chest. I shivered as I thought of my disfigured body.

I still hadn’t even gotten up the courage to look at it yet.

_Aw, that’s pathetic, dude. It’s not going away anytime soon, may as well accept it. Now whenever you look at it, you’ll have something to remember me by!_

I flinched, shaking my head to try to physically knock Jason’s voice around.

“Peter?”

I jerked at Sam’s voice, glancing up. His eyes were narrowed, his face concerned. “Slow your breathing, Peter. Okay? Nice and easy for me.”

He took an exaggerated breath, and I struggled to follow. That was the worst thing—all the panic attacks, the flashbacks, they all just…snuck up on me. I couldn’t stop them from happening, because I’d have just an inkling of a memory, I’d zone out, and the next thing I knew…someone was telling me to breathe, that it was okay, that I was safe.

I couldn’t even feel them coming on.

I took a shaky breath. I reached down to the chair, needing something to hold onto, something to grasp, but I remembered my strength at the last second. I’d probably end up breaking the chair, and I was really sick of breaking things. I settled for curling my hand into a tight fist, setting it in my lap.
“I don’t—God, you’re gonna think I’m crazy. I think I’m crazy.”

“Well, I know I’m crazy, so I’m winning so far.”

I managed a little smile, but I was still…scared. Scared of how he’d react, if he’d want me to tell everyone else…if the voice would ever go away.

I shut my eyes. “I hear him in my head sometimes.”

There was a pause. I didn’t open my eyes. “Who?”

I squeezed them shut tighter, bowing my head a little. “Jason.”

There was the sound of creaking wood as Sam leaned back in his chair, considering. “Okay.”

That…wasn’t what I was expecting.

“Okay?” I asked, looking at him incredulously, his easy posture, open and relaxed and normal. “That’s it?”

“I mean, it’s something we’ll have to fix,” Sam admitted, scratching his ear, still looking at ease. “But it’s…totally normal, Peter. He probably…talked to you a lot, you know? While it was all happening?”

I swallowed, nodding.

Sam nodded back, almost agreeing with himself. “So it makes sense that you’d associate his voice with the trauma and the fear. That it’s something your mind would subconsciously focus on. When do you hear it?”

I flinched, looking down again. I was sick of looking down. “When I…when I’m ashamed, or…thinking…you know, bad things. About, uh. Myself.”

Sam narrowed his eyes. “Mm-hm. That won’t do.”

I half-shrugged.

“Peter,” Sam said, leaning forward. His eyes were serious. “What could you possibly have to be ashamed of?”

“Um…” I felt a little flustered. He looked…genuinely confused. Geez, I had a laundry list of things to name. “I mean…a lot of things, Sam. You…I…” I took a deep breath. “My…my aunt and uncle. I know, I know in my head it’s not my fault, but…but I still feel ashamed of…hiding, you know? And now that I know Jason sent them, the people who did it, I just can’t—”

“Wait,” Sam interrupted, and I knew it was something bad if he interrupted, because he never did that when we were having our talks. “Jason sent them? The people that—that murdered your aunt and uncle.”

I stopped short in realization, my eyes widening.

I’d never told them.

“Yeah,” I said quietly, feeling a little shell-shocked. Sam looked it, too. “I—I’m sorry, Sam, I—I thought I told you everything. No, he—Jason was in charge of bringing me in. It was his…his
first mission, and the first thing he did—"

I stopped, my breath hitching in my throat.

"I need to stop for a minute," I said breathlessly. Dr. Sanders told me it was a good idea to stop when I was feeling overwhelmed, to take a few minutes and collect myself before going forward with anything I was doing.

"That’s fine," Sam said, still looking a little unnerved. "Take your time. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset, it…that’s just a lot to take in, kid."

I breathed shakily, feeling the panic in my chest ebb. "I know. There was…just so much that happened…I guess it just slipped my mind, among everything else."

Sam nodded. "It’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong."

"I know." I took another breath, holding it for five seconds, then released. It still shook unsteadily, but it was deeper and longer than before. "I’m okay."

"Okay." Sam paused, leaning back. "We can…talk some more, later, about Jason. If you want to. But I think you need to talk to Dr. Sanders about his voice."

I fisted my hand again. "I…I don’t wanna do that, Sam."

"I know. But you know you need to, right?"

I nodded. "I know. I just…" I sighed, looking down again. "She’s gonna think I’m nuts."

Sam scoffed. "She’s a psychiatrist, genius. She’s seen nuts, and you ain’t it."

I gave him a half-smile, but my heart was still thumping uncomfortably fast. "Can we just…watch a movie, or something? For now?"

Sam smiled. "Read my mind, shorty." He was almost cut off by a ding from the oven. "Freaking yes, that smells so good."

He practically leapt out of his chair, and I laughed at him as he set the gooey brownies on the cooling rack. "Go pick a movie, have FRIDAY get Rhodey. We’ll watch something together, okay?"

I smiled, moving to the living room as FRIDAY said she’d alerted Rhodey, and he was on his way.

I scrolled through Tony’s endless collection of movies, finally settling on Ghostbusters, the iconic jingle coming on in the intro. "Hurry up! I’m starting without you!"

"They’re cooling!" Sam shouted back. "Patience, you terror, I can’t cool things with my mind!"

"God, Wilson, did you bake again?" Rhodey asked from the kitchen, his voice drifting into the living room. "You’re gonna make me fat."

That last part was muffled, the words suspiciously jumbled.

"Stop eating it, then! What, you need to watch your hourglass figure? Get your ass on the couch before I decide to ban you from sweets indefinitely."
“You’re not allowed to be mean to me, I’m crippled!”

“Oh, please, Rhodes. Look at the arm. We’re both crippled. It’s a fair fight, now, at least.”

“Stop bickering like an old married couple!” I shouted, a smile on my lips. “The movie’s on!”

“Right after I kick Rhodes’ ass!”

“Oh, you’re done, Wilson.”

Bucky Barnes

I knew the base was as good as deserted, but I kept my handgun secure in my palm, just in case.

I picked my way through the frozen rubble, the crumbled base haphazard and jagged, spanning a good chunk of the visible white wasteland. Stark was hovering in the sky, conducting scans for any life forms, just in case someone decided to surprise us.

Bruce was on the Quinjet, staying safe and keeping watch on the jet’s radar until we needed him. Clint and Thor had been tasked with taking to dead to one spot; Stark would use some of his tech to help us dig a mass grave. They’d been monsters, all of them, but they still deserved to be buried instead of left to the elements for the foreseeable future.

I wondered if any of them had families.

I didn’t feel bad, per se. If they had families they cared about, they shouldn’t have been messing with HYDRA in the first place. However, the thought of kids without a dad coming home, husbands without their wives for the rest of their lives…it twisted uncomfortably in my gut.

“Got any survivors?” I said into my com, hefting myself up and over a jagged slab of concrete that stretched up, sticking out like a sand dune in a desert of rubble.

“Negative,” Stark said, the suit whooshing overhead to Clint and Thor’s location a few hundred yards away. “Didn’t expect any. Not after two weeks.”

I nodded, furrowing my brow. “Am I missing something, or was there more than one explosion?”

Stark paused, his suit turning back. “What do you mean?”

“The building,” I indicated, looking around. “We were only hear for one blast, but there must’ve been more. The supports got taken out, and it all collapsed a little after we left, I guess, but this…it’s all completely decimated.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Stark said, his voice crackling over the comms as the suit lifted him higher to give him a better vantage point. “FRIDAY, scan for the explosive pattern, see if you can pinpoint the locations of the bombs from any accelerant or incendiary residue.”

“Wow, big words,” I mumbled, almost twisting my damn ankle in an attempt to climb over the remains of the base. “You’d think you were smart or something.”
Tony snorted. “Guess I’m getting you a dictionary for Christmas.”

“Hey,” Clint said breathlessly over the comms, obviously dragging something heavy. “You guys don’t get to have fun banter while we’re doing all the hard work. Either move your asses or come help us.”

“Indeed,” Thor said, sounding miffed. “Friend Clint and I are using much of our strength in this gruesome endeavor. Assistance would be appreciated.”

“Don’t get your hammer in a knot, I’m coming,” Stark said. “FRIDAY, put the blast patterns on Barnes’ visor.”

As soon as he’d spoken, a holographic projection of the base appeared on my glasses; I tapped a button on the side to bring everything into focus, stopping momentarily. I was in plenty of layers, but the cold air burned my lungs.

The base was laid out, no less than ten red dots indicating explosion sites. “Damn, they really wanted this thing destroyed,” I muttered, continuing my trek.

I was trying to find the place Natasha had shot Jason. The turnaround for his death and the base’s collapse had been quick, and that area of the base had seemed pretty deserted. Everyone had been fighting off the others or evacuating, so his body would probably still be there. If it weren’t… it would take a while, but we’d find it eventually.

I was so glad the son of a bitch was dead.

And son of a bitch was such a perfect title, because Ross was, in fact, a bitch.

Following the holographic map, retracing my steps from the surgical room where Nat and I had found the blood trail, I noticed that I was getting closer and closer to one of the explosion dots.

A few more paces, and I finally stopped right above the spot where I was sure Jason’s body was, buried beneath the rubble. I frowned, realizing one of the blasts had evidently come from just a few yards away from that spot.

I wondered if there would even be a body left.

Sighing, resigning myself to my fate, I started digging.

…

It took three hours, two superhumans, a Hulk, and a pissed Iron Man to get everything out of the way.

Panting, wiping a gloved hand across my nose in the bitter cold, I looked down.

“How fun down there,” Stark commented, flying away. “Some of us are gonna go do actual work.”

I flipped him off, jumping down into the hole.

Picking my way through the precariously balanced beams and slabs of concrete, I finally found the spot Jason’s body would be, my visor’s location matching up with the spot Jason had gone down.

Looking down, the floor was scorched and scarred, jagged cracks on the concrete
spiderwebbing out, presumably several feet in front of me, though I couldn’t tell with the rubble. My brows furrowed, confusion and uncertainty seeping into my heart.

His body had to be here. He’d died.

I took another step forward, wondering if I’d gotten my location wrong, when something crunched under my boot.

It wasn’t unusual; a lot of things had been crunching under my boots on this mission—ice, snow, glass—but this sound was different. It had more depth to it.

Carefully picking up my foot, I looked down.

It was a jawbone, the bottom part of the mouth (mandible? I thought Peter had spouted that word at some point) with a row of blackened teeth sticking out. The bone was charred and burnt, but the structure looked intact. One of the jaw’s end pieces was cracked and broken, presumably from my foot.

I gingerly picked up the bone, the dots connecting in my mind. The blast had been close enough, powerful enough, to apparently incinerate Jason’s body.

I looked around, spotting my targets—the shriveled remains of what looked to be a femur, maybe an ulna.

We’d run a DNA test, compare dental records, just to give Peter peace of mind—however, I smiled, finally able to smile. To relax.

Jason Ross was out of our lives. For good. Dead in my hands, at my feet, Peter would finally be able to feel safe again.

New York Times

In a shocking turn of events, America’s Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross has been tried and convicted of multiple counts of murder, blackmail, kidnapping, domestic and foreign terrorism, and more by both the United Nations panel and a United States federal court.

Former Secretary Ross is a decorated General and war hero, instrumental in the adoption of the Sokovia Accords, which have since been disbanded. The man appointed into office by our very own President was simply using his position and power to further his terrorist organization’s, HYDRA’s, goals. HYDRA was discovered during World War II by Captain Steve Rogers, and was believed to be annihilated after Captain Rogers’ sacrifice in 1945. However, this dangerous group spent decades growing in the shadows, becoming stronger beyond the surveillance of every nation in the UN.

Ross used his power and position to force several scientists and government workers into HYDRA’s service. He conducted unauthorized experiments on both animals and humans, most of which were lethal, and has been proven guilty in the pursuit, kidnapping, and torture of a fifteen-year-old enhanced individual, whose name cannot be released. Ross showed no desire to have his case taken to court, but was proven guilty unanimously.

“I just...he was a cold man, sometimes, but I thought that the war had hardened him,” comments Secretary of Defense Jonathan Baxter. “He was difficult to work with, yes, but never in a million years would I have guessed that he was HYDRA’s secret leader.”

The whole of America shares Secretary Baxter’s shock and unease, but President Yates has urged
the public to remain calm. In a recent press release, President Yates said, “This unfortunate incident has brought to light that we are not invincible; we are corruptible. However, America, the United Nations, the world, is strong enough to rise above this and continue doing good. Thaddeus Ross is a troubled man with twisted ideals, and is going to be dealt with as such. An emergency appointment will occur shortly to secure a new Secretary of State. Until then, relevant decisions will be made among myself and my Cabinet members.”

President Yates also thanked the Avengers for bringing Ross’s actions to light. “I’d like to extend my deepest gratitude on behalf of the United States of America and the United Nations to the Avengers. I recently read the interview transcriptions of Natasha Romanov’s and Captain Steve Rogers’ witness accounts, and it’s safe to say that without their intervention, Ross would have continued to do terrible things. The Avengers have my gratitude and my deepest respect.”

Ross’s estranged daughter, Elizabeth Ross, is a renowned scientist, one of the brightest of her age. She is currently being questioned as to her knowledge of her father’s actions, but authorities say that Elizabeth Ross is simply a person of interest, and not a suspect. Elizabeth Ross declined to comment to us about her father’s actions, but is not being held by the government, and is continuing her research as normal. Ross has no other living family to question.

After a brutal public trial, including a comprehensive portfolio of Ross’s crimes compiled by Ms. Natasha Romanov, former Secretary Thaddeus Ross has been sentenced to life in a government supermax facility in an undisclosed location.
Peter Parker

*Ba-dump.*

A drum beat somewhere in the distance, loud and steady.

*Ba-dump. Ba-dump.*

Red coated the walls, the floors, my hands, my clothes…everything was dripping, oozing red. Bodies, facedown, lay stretched for miles. I was detachedly grateful I couldn’t see their faces.

*Ba-dump. Ba-dump.*

The drum was speeding up.

*Ba-dump ba-dumba-dumba-dum—*

It was going pretty quickly, now. As it quickened, faces melted from the shadows, and suddenly, the bodies were alive.

Hands shaking, droplets of thick blood flying from my fingers like raindrops in a storm, I backed up—

—right into Natasha’s corpse.

With a yell, I scrambled away from her upright, broken frame, red covering more of her skin than was exposed, her suit torn and shredded, her brilliant eyes vacant. She took a jerking step forwards, and I turned to run, only to see Sam. I turned, and turned, but then there was Steve, and Tony, and everyone else, and May and Ben were closing in as well, and I couldn’t escape, and there was no exit and the red was too much and—

“Peter.”

The voice was close, way, way too close, and I whipped around the see Bucky, and I wished I hadn’t.

He was the worst. His metal arm was missing, brutally torn off at the shoulder, and blood ran in rivulets from gashes on his skin. Bullet wounds littered his chest, his arm and legs, and scratches and gashes on his face bled freely. His eyes, too, were empty.

“You let this happen, kiddo.” I jerked, trying to back away, but my feet were frozen solid, along with the rest of me. “Why’d you do that? Why, Peter? We were counting on you. You let him do this to us.”

I flinched. I knew exactly who he was.

“I—” I started, but I couldn’t get enough breath to force out the apology. How had this happened? I didn’t—I didn’t remember—what horrible thing had I done to lead to this?
“Peter,” he said, louder this time. His face contorted, anger and disappointment etched in his skin, and I withered under his gaze. “Peter.”

“What?” I managed, waiting for the inevitable, waiting for—

“Peter!”

I gasped awake.

Bucky stood over me, his hands—both of them, both arms intact, no blood in sight—on my shoulders. He sat on the bed beside me, leaning over me, his face drawn in concern.

No anger. No disappointment.

“Bucky,” I breathed, a shuddering breath spasming in my chest. I flopped an arm over my eyes, feeling the sweat drenching my brow. “Geez. That—”

I shivered, and his hands tightened on my shoulders. It wasn’t the first time I’d had this nightmare. Far from it, but I never knew it was a dream—it was reliving a horrible memory you didn’t know you had until you woke up and realized it wasn’t real.

Every time, though. Every time, it felt real.

“Come on,” Bucky said, tugging on my shoulders until I reluctantly sat up, following him. “It’s almost seven, anyways. You won’t be getting back to sleep.”

I knew he was right, but it was still annoying.

“Just…let me shower,” I said quietly, staring down at my drenched t-shirt.

Bucky’s eyes drew together in concern. His hair was damp, and his t-shirt had a couple wet spots; he’d probably been up for a few hours, already, hit the gym and then showered. “Kid, you’re…you know what, stay for a second.”

He got up to leave without another word, and I leaned back against the headboard.

He was worried. They all were.

Despite Sam’s best efforts, despite my best efforts, I’d been getting worse, and everyone knew it. The team constantly tried to cheer me up—they took me out to movies, to little cafes and sometimes dinner if we could find a spot with no publicity and a trustworthy staff, but despite everything…

Even my talks with Dr. Sanders had gone downhill. She’d tried prescribing me antidepressants, and…well, that hadn’t gone over well.

I’d thought I was getting better. I’d felt better.

Physically, I was almost healed. My arm still locked up sometimes, the muscles were sometimes bunched tight and difficult to manipulate the way I needed, but everything was looking good—Doctor Cho said a few more days, I could be good as new. Ross was in jail, supermax jail, and Jason was dead—for good. The DNA tests were a match. I was almost completely in control of my powers. I still broke things on occasion, when I was really out of it, and sometimes my surroundings were—just too much, but for the most part, I had a handle on things.

None of it helped.
I knew how bad I was getting. I saw the worried looks, I saw the whispering on the side, and I knew how utterly terrified they all were, because I knew it, too. I barely went outside, anymore, and that was if someone dragged me. Gym time just wasn’t happening. I put something on the TV and I laid in bed, because—well, what could I do?

Bucky came back, steaming mug in hand, and I gave him a wan smile. “Hot chocolate doesn’t fix everything.”

“No, but it sure as hell doesn’t hurt, does it?” He asked, handing me the mug and sitting on the bed, facing me. “Same one?”

I knew he meant the nightmare; I’d told him about them when I finally couldn’t take it anymore. I nodded, looking down. I didn’t feel like myself. I didn’t like it, but I couldn’t change it. “I don’t like this.”

“What?”

“You know what,” I said, taking a sip. “I’m…geez, Bucky, I’m depressed. That’s not—I don’t like it.”

Bucky looked down, nodding. “I know. We can’t help you unless you give us something to work with, though, Peter.”

“What should I give you, though?” I asked loudly, frustrated. Taking a deep breath, I set the mug on the nightstand and ran my hands through my damp hair. “I’ve given enough. Haven’t I?”

Bucky sighed. I hated it, hated seeing him like this. He was doing everything he could, everything he could, to make me…happier, to make me see that I was safe. I felt bad that none of it worked.

I felt him scoot forward, and he put his arms around me, thunking his chin on top of my head. “You have. More than enough. I just need you to give a little more, Pete.”

“What, though?” I asked, feeling tears start to prick my eyes. “I don’t—I don’t want to be on any pills, Bucky. I—that’s just…too much, you know? I don’t, I don’t need pills, and I don’t want you guys to walk on eggshells around me, and I just—” My breath hitched, and I choked out a sob, feeling Bucky’s arms tighten. “I just want to be okay.”

Bucky didn’t say anything.

…”

It wasn’t gradual, but…it wasn’t exactly sudden, either.

The nightmares started, ironically, after I found out that I was finally safe.

Something, I guess, about the constant adrenaline, the constant unease and fear, had kept the nightmares at bay—maybe because the nightmares were still a real-world concern. Once Ross was sentenced, once Jason was pronounced officially dead…the first nightmare came that night.

It was brutal, and horrible, and everything I hated about my past and my present, and it was torture.

Then I woke up, and I told myself it was a one-time thing.
It happened the next night.

And the next.

And then the next.

Jason’s voice became more prominent, and I wondered if I wasn’t so much depressed as a damn schizophrenic. I heard him the most when I was at peace, happy…when I felt safe.

Even dead, he was a sadistic asshole.

So to escape the nightmares, I didn’t sleep. I stayed up watching reruns, reading books, anything to distract myself, but Jason’s voice just ruined that, too. I was going to go crazy at some point, I knew, because I was haunted in my waking hours and tormented in my sleep, and…and there wasn’t another option.

I broke down and told Sam after a week of surviving on eleven hours of sleep. He put in an emergency call to Dr. Cho and Dr. Sanders. Dr. Cho sedated me, told me to get some rest, with a knock-out specially made for people with my metabolism, sure to keep me out for at least twelve hours, probably more.

A nightmare woke me three hours later.

I told Dr. Sanders everything, and her reaction was to pump me so full of pills I’d be a walking zombie, and that wasn’t happening.

I was starting to think maybe that would be the only way, though, because I wasn’t living. Hell, I was barely existing.

Sam explained what PTSD was—post traumatic stress disorder. I’d heard of it, knew what it was, but in my mind, it was reserved for soldiers coming home from war, victims of shootings and bomb attacks, and large-scale issues that didn’t have anything to do with me.

He explained it slowly, patiently, and I could feel my face drain of color the more he spoke. He listed off symptoms: severe emotional distress or physical reactions to things that remind you of the event.

Check. Sam had tried to use the blender while I was in the kitchen. The mechanical whirring, the rhythmic vibrations, sounded so much like the bone saw that had almost cut off my arm that I fell off the stool and started sobbing.

Recurrent, unwanted, distressing memories of the event: check. It was hard to forget with Jason’s damn voice in my head.

Reliving the traumatic event as if it were happening again, or flashbacks: well, luckily I hadn’t had but one or two of those. The fourth symptom, though—the nightmares—made up for that plenty.

I couldn’t exactly argue with him after that.

Natasha read to me. When I couldn’t sleep, when Jason’s voice was just about ready to push me over the edge, she’d sit down with a book and read in soothing Russian until I fell asleep. Then, she’d continue to read. It helped, I suppose—I always managed a few hours before another nightmare woke me.
Tony and Bruce gave me stuff to tinker with, to get my mind stimulated and my hands working. They sat with me and continued to teach me, but it never lasted long. Steve told me stories. Sam, who’d finally finished physical therapy, went on runs with me when I was up for it, and Thor would sit with me while I watched TV; he knew how entertaining it was for me to watch him learn new things from the “talking box.” Rhody was on business a lot, still trying to sort out his part of the Ross Scandal, but he was home when he could be, and he’d just…talk, to me. About anything and everything. Clint was at home visiting his kids, but he called when he could. And Bucky just…God, he was almost as bad as I was. I could tell, I knew, that how screwed up I was just happened to be screwing him up, and with everything I had, I wanted to will myself to be better.

There was just…too much. Too many awful memories, too little prospect of a safe future. There was nothing I could think to hold on to, I guess. To try to get better for. Jason would haunt me whenever, wherever, I found happiness. Sam was constantly telling me to look for the future, try to figure out who I wanted to become, but…my self-image had become so utterly warped over the past year that I barely knew who I was anymore, and on top of all the other crap, I just…I didn’t know what that meant.

A family? Well, I’d already screwed up two, and the cynical, fatalistic part of me was waiting for the other shoe to drop on the third. And who was to say I could even have kids? Who was to say they wouldn’t inherit my genes and become freaks like me?

I couldn’t find purpose. That was my problem. I felt like I was having a mid-life crisis…which, considering the apparent occupational hazards and multiple near-death experiences, may have been accurate, because I’d be damn surprised if I made it to thirty.

I couldn’t find purpose. I’d been through too much too fast to see a world without danger, without evil in the shadows. To feel hope.

I forced myself to think, and make lists and conjure images of all the good I could see in the world. It was easy—I was surrounded by some of the most amazing men and women in the world, the ones who sacrificed everything they had to save people they didn’t know over and over again. It was so easy to make lists.

It was just so hard to believe that I would do something like that. I’d already let down so many people in so many ways, I just…there was no visible direction I could see that didn’t end in blood and pain and disaster.

So every night, I went to sleep, fully aware that I’d be woken up by nightmares. I ate mechanically, because I didn’t want to cause my family any further worry over me. I read, and watched TV, and responded to questions, and I ignored the worried glances and the too-obvious attempts to cheer me up.

I avoided the mirrors in the Compound, because I knew just how dead I looked, and because I didn’t want to see the scars in my chest that peeked out just above the collar of some of my t-shirts.

I didn’t want to see myself deformed or depressed.

So every day, I waited for a change. I waited for an epiphany. I waited for a purpose.

I found one three weeks later, and he turned everything around. I found a light at the end of the tunnel. I found a reason other than my family to make myself get up. I found a way to help people, not to replace the ones I’d hurt, but to justify that I survived even if they couldn’t. I found a
reason that I could justify to myself.

His name was Spiderman.

... 

It was a last-ditch effort, I think, but my family was willing to do just about anything to snap me out of my funk, so they brought in the cavalry.

The cavalry being the King of Wakanda, his sarcastic genius of a sister, two New York cops, and a shrinking man in a #1 Dad t-shirt.

“We thought it might be nice to have everyone over for dinner,” Steve said as he sat at the foot of my bed, wearing slacks and a nice button-down. “You didn’t get to meet everyone who helped us find you.”

Stella stretched, padding over to him and nuzzling her head against his hand, rolling over with a contented purr. Steve smiled, scratching her exposed belly with two fingers.

He’d surprised me by showing up at my door looking like he was going to meet his fiancée’s parents or something. I guessed I should have seen something like this coming—I knew they’d been planning something, and I should have guessed they’d make me socialize.

There was a time when I would have been really excited about that.

Sighing, I closed the book in my lap and set it aside, leaning forward. “It’s nice, I just wish you’d told me.”

Steve, who looked relieved—I wondered if he’d thought I’d get angry—quirked a half-smile and patted my knee. “Too much fun surprising you, Pete. Grab a shower, throw on something halfway decent, okay?”

“If I tell the King I’m too tired can he order you to let me sleep?” I asked begrudgingly, rolling out of bed and slinking towards the bathroom.

“Not unless you want to defect to Wakanda,” Steve said jokingly, his eyes lit up once I actually engaged in some halfway decent banter with him.

“Draw up the papers,” I muttered halfheartedly, with a little smile to let him know I was still joking. He scooped up Stella and gave me a smile halfway between proud and ecstatic, shutting the door behind him.

I sighed. That was exhausting.

Depression was exhausting. This sucked.

I’d tried countless times to just will myself to be better, but I had a feeling that wasn’t how that worked.

I showered quickly and got dressed, throwing on jeans without too many wrinkles and a polo that smelled halfway decent. I put on a little extra deodorant to make sure, though. I combed my fingers though my hair and looked in the mirror for a second, catching a flash of the ugly, jagged scar on my arm.

Hastily, turning away, I took off the polo and put on a high-collared sweatshirt.
When I arrived in the kitchen, the regular Compound residents were waiting. There wasn’t a nervousness, per se, but they were definitely worried about my reaction, as Steve had been. Natasha gave me a hug (she’d been doing that a lot) and Sam passed me a milkshake. “You need the calories.”

I quirked a half-smile and sipped on it, taking a seat at the bar. “You all look like Lindsay Lohan in the Parent Trap, when she gets found out.”

The tension eased somewhat, and something in my gut loosened slightly.

Thor blinked, leaning forward. “I apologize, but…what is a ‘Lindsay Lohan?’”

I couldn’t help but slip a grin at that, taking a sip of the milkshake as Tony answered, “A redhead with more issues than our resident assassins.”

Nat shot Tony a sharp glare at the same moment Clint piped up, “What the hell am I, then?”

“My minion,” Natasha answered seamlessly, sipping a mug of tea.

At that moment, FRIDAY broke in, “Boss, Officers Veromi and Travis are pulling up now.”

The second name struck a chord of familiarity, but I couldn’t for the life of me remember from where. My head perked up, my interest thoroughly piqued. “Who are they?”

“You’ll see,” Rhodey said with a smile as Steve and Tony went to get the door. “You’ve met Officer Travis.”

My brow furrowed. I was sure I had, but from where?

A few minutes later, Tony and Steve returned, with who I assumed were Officer Travis and Officer Veromi in their wake. Officer Travis’ eyes landed on me and stayed stuck there with something like awe.

“It’s good to see you up and about, Peter,” he said with a calm smile, walking up to me and sticking his hand out.

Hesitantly I took it, studying his face; then, in a violent burst of recognition, I remembered. “You!” I exclaimed, my eyes going wide. “The cop from the park! You kicked me out of the tree!”

The cop’s face brightened as soon as I recognized him, and he let out a chuckle. “Yeah. These guys—” he indicated the others behind me—“found my card in your bag and came to ask me some questions. Long story short, I volunteered to help find you, and…”

He shrugged, like it was the most nonchalant thing in the entire world. Like he hadn’t offered to help pull me out of a cold, dark pit of misery and terror and despair.

Sam nudged me, smiling. “He and Veromi helped track down the HYDRA operative that ultimately gave us your location. They were pretty good out there…for a coupla street cops,” Sam said with a teasing smile and a nod in Officer Travis’ direction.

“I…” I stammered, unable to say just how grateful I was that he’d…volunteered to look for me. That a one-minute conversation in the park had made him want to find me. “I…thank you.”
Officer Travis held eye contact with me, and said very deliberately, “You’re welcome, Peter. I’m glad you’re safe. You had a lot of people worried for you.”

He said it with so much conviction that there was no way I could do anything but believe him.

“You don’t know me, but I helped,” Officer Veromi said with a quirked smile. She had a severe face and a petite frame, but she commanded the attention of the room when she spoke. “Good to see you up, squirt.”

I let out a breathy chuckle at the nickname, returning her smile. “Thanks for…helping find me.”

“Anytime,” she said with a shrug, plopping herself on one of the open barstools. “Small-time crime wasn’t doing it for me.”

Though the statement was meant to be uncaring, it was pretty obvious that she’d been worried, too. For the life of me, I didn’t know why…I didn’t see myself as horrendously unimportant, or anything, but it was confusing to think someone I’d never met could care so much.

“So, Peter,” how’ve you been doing?” Officer Travis asked, taking the glass of ice water Thor offered him. “Healing okay, and everything?”

My shoulders stiffened, and I saw a couple of the others cast me a glance to see how I’d respond. Briefly, I made eye contact with Bucky, who gave me a thumbs-up and an encouraging smile, but his eyes were worried.

“I’ve…been okay,” I said slowly, trying to choose my words carefully. I didn’t want to lie and say that I was puppies and rainbows, but I didn’t want to say how bad I was, either…especially since the two of them had done so much to help get me back. “It’s just been, uh…hard adjusting.”

“Good,” Officer Veromi said bluntly, nodding her head in my direction. “It’d be weird if you didn’t have some trouble at first. Are you talking to someone?”

I blinked, a little surprised at her abruptness, and said, “Uh…yeah. Yeah, a couple people.” Sam, and Dr. Sanders, and sometimes Bucky.

“Good. Keep going; it’ll get easier,” she said casually, plucking a roll from the break basket and tearing a bite off and popping it in her mouth. “Who made these rolls?” She asked after a second.

Everyone but Natasha—who, consequently, had made the rolls—was thrown by the sudden change in topic, but I was grateful I didn’t have to give her an answer to her earlier statement.

“I did,” Tasha said calmly, dipping her head to the side. “Problem?”

“Opposite,” Officer Veromi said, not put off one bit by Tasha’s tone or the tenseness in everyone else’s stances. The rest of us were watching the conversation like a Wimbledon tennis match. “They’re nice and fluffy; just the way Italian bread should be. Compliments from a full-blooded Italian.” Veromi looked up with a stare that invited a challenge. “Could use a little more salt, though.”

The air dropped a few billion degrees, and I suddenly wished I were anywhere but here.

Anyone—anyone—who had the guts to criticize Natasha (who wasn’t, of course, any of
the Avengers, me, or Clint’s family) had a death wish.

To my utter surprise, though—and apparently, to everyone else’s, as well—she simply nodded and said, “I’ll remember that.”

“And I love your outfit,” she continued, nodding her head at Tasha’s lace-up black boots, “but not with the work shoes.”

Tasha smiled again, but the air had changed a bit, and I had the sudden urge to laugh at Tasha’s utterly blank smile. “I never know when I’ll have a job; it’s good to be prepared.”

“Mm-hm,” Officer Veromi said, smiling like a Cheshire cat, and wow I don’t think she knew what she was getting into. “Try matte instead of leather next time; it may work a little better with the dress color.”

Tasha—who was wearing a beautiful red sundress—slipped around the counter and leaned down in front of Veromi, almost purring, “Like I said, I never know when I’ll have a job. It’s nice to be prepared so that if some of the blood does manage to hit me, it’ll blend in.”

Veromi didn’t quite know what to say to that.

“Yeah, but not at the dinner table, right?” Clint joked, earning small laughs from the rest of us and a nervous chuckle from Officer Travis.

Natasha, though, just smiled, calmly sipping her tea.

…

The next to arrive was Scott Lang, who was just as weird as I remembered.

“Hey, Peter!” He exclaimed as soon as he saw me, eyes and grin wide. “I’m glad you’re up and moving! How’re you feeling?”

I blinked, trying to let my brain catch up with all the words (which had all been said in under maybe three and a half seconds), and replied, “I’m…better, thanks. Um…Mr. Long, right? Oh, sorry, Lang?”

“No worries, dude, happens all the time. You can just call me Scott,” he said with a smile. Something on his shoulder drew my eyes, and I focused my eyes to see a pretty large ant crawling along his collar.

“Oh, uh…Scott, you have a bug on your shoulder,” I said, grabbing a paper towel and handing it to him. “If you want to kill it—”

“Hey! That’s my ride!” He said indignantly, taking a good three steps back and raising his hands to cup the air around the ant protectively, looking horribly offended. “This is Serge. He’s good people, man, what the hell?”

Distantly, I realized how dumb I must have looked, sitting there gob smacked with my mouth hanging clear open.

The others, who had watched the whole thing, were laughing raucously, so loud I was sure they could hear us at Central Park. Unsure of what to do, I muttered an apology and crumpled up the paper towel, blushing furiously and escaping to the bathroom.
I closed and locked the door behind me, taking a shaky breath and leaning back against the door.

Outside, it was heaven, and it was absolute hell.

It was nice. To be with everyone, to see that people besides the nine of them really cared about me and were glad that I was up and moving. It was nice to be surrounded by them and feel safe, to be distracted from the trauma and exhaustion, to have the background chatter and conversation to drown out Jason’s voice and my own insecurities.

But everything together, everything going on, was too much to handle. I was constantly pulling my sleeve down, keeping the end of it balled tightly in my hand to avoid any possibility that it may scrunch up and reveal any part of my scar.

Slowly, with shaking fingers, I pushed the sleeve back just a little, letting the jagged pink gash show just a bit.

Taking a shaky breath, I made myself look at it, taking in every line and curve. I felt tears prick my eyes and hastily shoved my sleeve back down, curling my hands into fists to avoid punching the wall. I’d probably put a hole clear to the next room.

I shoved the heels of my palms into my eyes and crouched, back against the door, until I was calm enough to go back outside.

Luckily, no one said anything about how I’d been gone for pushing fifteen minutes.

T’Challa and Shuri were last to arrive, having had to fly in from Wakanda.

“It’s perfectly alright,” T’Challa assured us in accented English with a gracious smile. “We have some outreach business in New York City, anyways; you’ve saved us a trip, truly.” T’Challa apologized that Okoye and Nakia (okay, who?!?) hadn’t been able to come on account of official Dora Milaje business (I felt bad that my first thought was of the kid’s show *Dora the Explorer*, but Bucky explained it, and then I thought that would be the most badass kid’s show ever).

Shuri was…insane.

“I was right!” She said as soon as she saw me, grinning. “You *are* cuter when you’re healed.”

Well, my blush was back, and so were the teasing stares.

Dinner was pretty casual. We used the dining room, squashing chairs in tight and packing all the food on the table. A dinner party of fourteen (plus a cat) would be a stretch any time, but when a large number of those guests were super humans with insane metabolisms…

…let’s just say there was barely room on the table for our plates.

Steve, Nat, and Sam had really gone all-out. It was a whole spread of food (even an authentic African dish that T’Challa had suggested), and the desserts weren’t even part of the equation yet.

I ate better than I had in a while, letting myself smile and laugh, though I contributed little to the conversation. I let it flow around me and answered questions when asked directly, but I think
everyone knew one way or another that I wasn’t much up for talking, and I was content to listen. I was comfortable squashed between Tony and Bucky, too. Stella sat on my lap and I let her nibble off my finger before Rhodey told me to stop because the food was bad for her.

I pulled a face, the most normal I’d felt in a way, and earned a couple laughs.

After we were finished eating, I offered to help with the dishes, but Bruce and Thor shooed me into the living room with everyone else. I sat on the couch next to Nat, who let me lean slightly against her arm, knowing I needed the physical reassurance after such a taxing day.

It shouldn’t have been taxing, but go figure, it was.

The conversation turned from general small talk to politics to sports, and soon to work. Everyone was throwing in their two cents, but I was just happy to sit and listen, glad no one seemed to expect me to participate.

Shuri was particularly excited, rambling on about her latest projects and designs, which was actually really interesting to listen to. “And I’m working on a new project for stealth,” she said, her face glowing as she glanced at her brother and continued on. “I call them *sneakers*. They’re ultrasound-absorbent slip-on shoes that slip over almost regular shoe, and render footsteps almost inaudible.” Hm. That was interesting. “I’m still working out a couple of the kinks, but once I figure out the support problem, we should be good to go. It’s difficult to balance sound absorption with adequate arch support.”

She took a breath, no doubt to continue, but I stole that precious moment of silence to say, “Did you consider integrating the sound absorbent material into specially crafted insoles to slip inside? It should solve the support problem and keep at least most of the sound from escaping.”

The room went silent—either in surprise that I’d said anything at all, or surprise from our guests that I actually knew what I was talking about—until Shuri’s face split into a grin. “Cute *and* smart. Do you have a lab?” I opened my mouth to reply, but she said, “Good, come along. I have the blueprints. Let’s figure this out while I’m here!”

She stood up and made every move to walk out, but I was too surprised to move. Natasha saw that and leaned over, whispering, “When a pretty girl, especially a genius, invites you to nerd out…it’s standard practice to go.”

I blushed furiously and all but sped out of the room after Shuri.

“Elevator’s this way,” I mumbled, waiting until she turned to follow before turning away, heading down the hall. Stella pounced after me, apparently having escaped Bucky’s watchful gaze. I scooped her up and let her nuzzle against her, laughing a little as she licked my chin.

“She’s precious,” Shuri commented, stroking Stella’s back with two fingers. “What’s her name?”

“She’s a little terror.”

She huffed indignantly.

Shuri laughed, pressing the elevator button after I indicated that it was down. “Can I hold her?”

I smiled and passed her over as we stepped onto the elevator. Stella squirmed for a moment
in my hands, trying to get back to me, but Shuri readjusted her, cradling her in one hand and scratching under her chin with one finger.

Stella soon settled down, purring contentedly. I quirked a smile, warmth easing in my chest. “She likes you.”

Shuri, for one, looked genuinely happy, cradling Stella a little closer and she snuffled.

“The lab’s this way,” I said, leading her down the hall. “I’m usually not allowed in here by myself, but I figure Tony will have FRIDAY watching us.”

“FRIDAY?”

“His AI,” I said, looking up. “FRIDAY, this is Shuri.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Princess,” the accented voice said. Shuri jumped and looked up in awe, glancing around. “I am not in the ceiling, Your Highness, though it’s a common misconception.”

“Amazing,” Shuri said with a grin. “I’d read about Stark’s AI work, but I never thought it would be so advanced!”

From there, I showed her around, and we had a great time talking and building. I knew she was smart—she’d helped Dr. Cho with my impossible metabolism’s medicine, after all—but I hadn’t known that she headed Wakanda’s technical department. You know…the most technologically developed country in the world? That Wakanda?

I was a little starstruck.

And she was only sixteen, and if that didn’t smack my ego right out of the way, nothing could. She was funny, too, and gorgeous.

And she treated me like an equal, even though we were nowhere near the same playing field.

“Pass me the blowtorch,” she said nonchalantly, plucking a pair of welding goggles from the haphazard pile of scraps and supplies we’d accumulated in the center of the room.

I shrugged, reaching for it, but FRIDAY said, “Boss has expressly forbidden the use of flames or flaming tools without supervision.”

I sighed, rolling my eyes and putting the blowtorch down. “Tell him he’s a worrisome old man.”

“Noted.” I didn’t reply; at Shuri’s questioning look, I held up a hand, signaling her to wait. After a second or two of silence, FRIDAY’s voice said, “He replied with: ‘And you’re an immature kiddie with a stray cat for a role model.’”

I barked a laugh—a genuine laugh—and said, “He’s not wrong. They aren’t very dependable role models; I feel like the adult sometimes.”

FRIDAY may have scoffed, but it was a little hard to tell with the feedback.

“She even has a personality?” Shuri asked, in awe.

“Yeah, Tony’s been working really hard to introduce emotions to her programming ever
since I—” I stopped abruptly, spacing out for a moment before I got my train of thought back. “Uh…but only four of the basic six. He doesn’t really want to do fear or surprise, because he’s worried it’ll slow her reaction time if something happens. But she’s happy, and she can be sad, and…man, she does disgust really well. You should’ve heard her when Clint tried to make this new recipe and it…didn’t turn out well.” I laughed a little, still shaken from my almost-slip, but thankfully Shuri seemed to wrapped up in her revelations to care much.

“I have got to take a look at this programming…” she said with a dreamy look in her eyes, abandoning our half-built monstrosity. I wasn’t even sure what we were supposed to building. Stella looks interested, pawing at the poor creation with intrigue.

“So, Peter…how are you, really?”

I started at the question, not really prepared for it, and looked over at her. “Huh?”

She rolled her eyes, sitting in my favorite spinny chair and swiveling a bit. “You’re physically healed, but obviously you’re still struggling. Which is fine, but…what’s going on?”

I was kind of taken aback by her brusque question, but I didn’t know how to answer, anyways. My hands started shaking, so I balled the ends of my sweatshirts sleeves in my hand and shoved them under my legs, hoping they’d still. “I…I’m okay.”

She scoffed. “Liar.” Considering, she said, “I know you don’t know me very well, but I won’t tell all your dirty little secrets.”

I lowered my eyes, petting Stella as she came over and snuggled against my thigh. “I don’t…really wanna talk about this, Shuri. I’m talking to some…professionals, I guess?”

She nodded. “That’s good.” Giving a lopsided smile, she said, “Are your shrinks the same as mine? Want to pump you full of pills until you’re better?”

Blinking, I laughed a little, taken off guard. “I mean…I guess. You had shrinks?”

She nodded again, a timid smile on her face. Timid didn’t look good on her, I thought—she was far too confident and capable. “Yes, after my father died. I talked to Colonel Rhodes about it briefly.” She shrugged, holding eye contact with me. “You should consider it. They helped me, and I’m off them now.”

Immediately unsettled, I shrugged and tried to play it off, looking away. “I mean, I don’t know that they’d work with my metabolism, anyways—”

“I’ll help Dr. Cho make some. Consider it; that’s all I ask.”

I looked back at her again—her expression earnest, her desire to help palpable, though I didn’t know why—and nodded slightly. “Okay. I’ll…consider it.”

She smiled, eyes bright, and nodded. “Good. And you’d better stay in touch, too; here, put in your number.”

She handed me her phone; I opened her contacts to put in my number (after having a minor heart attack when the holographic screen jumped four inches off the regular-lookina phone) and saw one of her tabs open.

“Dude…you have Vine in Wakanda?” I asked, genuinely excited for the first time all night.
“Uh, are we *savages*?” She asked indignantly, excitement written all over her face. “I love you, bitch.”

And to someone who’d never seen Vine, that would have been insulting, but *immediately* I shouted, “I AIN’T GONNA NEVER STOP LOVING YOU…”

Read Shuri and I together: “*BITCH!*”

“I leave you guys alone for an hour and you’ve already corrupted each other?” A voice said from the doorway. I turned to see Clint watching us from the doorway, arms folded, a smug expression on his face. “What are you guys doing, anyways?”

I glanced at Shuri and before she could respond, shouted, “No off-topic questions!”

Clint blinked. “Wha—”

“Because I don’t want to!” Shuri finished, and I laughed harder than I had in a long time and continued through the literal *giggles of a pre-teen girl that made me question every ounce of my manhood,* “That’s an *off topic* question—” I glanced at Clint, “—you have been STOPPED!”

Shuri and I were laughing for a solid two minutes. Eventually, Clint gave up and left.

I felt a weight fall from my shoulders, and Jason’s voice was quiet.

…

Everyone left a few hours later.

Shuri and I exchanged contact information, and I promised I’d think on what she’d said. A bit of the heaviness was back, but I still felt lighter than I had in a while.

She gave me a hug and wished me well, and promised to send me any good vines she found; I promised to do the same. Scott ultimately apologized for yelling at me about Serge (Ant? Serge…Ant?) and admitted that it was a common mistake, could’ve happened to anyone.

I apologized for trying to squash his flying ant-taxi and wished him good luck with his shrinking suit, and that was the oddest sentence that had ever come out of my mouth.

Apparently, after the kids had gone to play and the grown-ups had stayed in the living room (as Tony so helpfully included) Natasha and Veromi had founded a new and improved HBIC club (*Head Bitch in Charge…? I decided not to question it*) and offered Shuri an honorary spot.

I was…more than confused, but I was just glad there wasn’t a homicide to deal with.

Officer Travis shook my hand and pulled me in for a hug. While the others were talking off to the side, he said, “You’re a good kid, Peter. You’re going to do great things, and…honestly, kid, what you went through…I know grown men who couldn’t handle it as well as you have.”

Blushing, denial on the tip of my tongue, I looked down, but he continued, “Listen. You’ve got a family of superheroes at your back, and that’s not nothing. If you ever need me, you call me, and I’ll answer, okay?” I nodded.

He took a breath, then continued with a smile, “You know, it may help to have something to focus on, you know? Something to work towards. There are things you can do now, even though you’re still a kid. Things your community needs that you can help with. You said you knew some people at a homeless camp?” Startled, I nodded, ignoring the buzzing voice in the back of my
“Help them. Focus your energy on helping other people, Peter. That’s…the best thing you can do to help yourself. It got me through the darkest period of my life.”

At my questioning glance, he quirked a sad smile. “A story for another time, but…think about what I’ve said, okay? Your community needs good young men like you.”

Despite the fact that his words were hard to swallow, and difficult to understand…I understood enough, and they resonated with me more than I thought they would.

*Focus your energy on helping other people, Peter.*

People like…like the homeless men and women I’d been with. People like the ones I saw in soup kitchens.

Or…people like May and Ben. People like me.

I could…I could help them. *Save* them, if something bad happened and I was there.

In a jarring flashback, I remembered one of the last things Officer Travis had said to me that night in Central Park: with a smile and a warning, he’d mentioned—and off-hand comment—“I just…want you to be careful, okay? New York at dark isn’t all that safe. Crime’s been on a rise lately.”

*Crime’s been on a rise.*

People like Officer Veromi, Officer Travis…they were just people, but they risked their lives every day and went out to help people like me. People like May and Ben, who saw violence beyond the human understanding.

People like my family, they risked their lives against forces of complete and total destruction and chaos, to save people who couldn’t save themselves.

Me…I had powers. I could…do something, couldn’t I?

I could do something.

Distractedly, I thanked Officer Travis as he walked away, my brain spinning on high and tossing every option around and around. Bucky slung an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. I leaned into him, still thinking.

“What’s on your mind?” He asked over the roaring of the Wakandan jet, whipping the wind around us, my hair flying every which way.

I gave him a half-smile, saying, “I don’t know yet.”

I didn’t, not really. I had no idea where this far-fetched idea of heroism would get me. All I knew what that it was idea. A hope.

My reason.

I looked up at him, smiling. “But I think it’s gonna be something good.”

Chapter End Notes
I had him relapse because recovering from a traumatic event, experiencing PTSD and everything, is a very unique process, and relapses are common. So that's why. Thanks. Hope you're enjoying! Thanks!
Having an idea was easy.

Implementing it, fleshing it out, getting anywhere beyond the idea…was really hard.

I couldn’t just…you know, go out in the city and tackle someone I thought might be a mugger. I mean, how would I even get there? The city was easily forty minutes by car. And how would I hide my identity if I did get out there? What would I do if I got hurt? Would FRIDAY think I was running away again, and contact the others? Did I want to tell them? Would they even let me do it, or would they say it was too dangerous?

And besides, I didn’t actually want to hurt anybody. And with my powers still so new, I might do it on accident. What would happen then? What if I—what if I accidentally killed someone?

Needless to say, I had a lot to think about.

The constant thinking and wondering and pondering and planning had led to less depression, but also to a different kind of isolation. I would spend a lot of time reading, hoping something would pop out at me as an idea to get around, to hide myself, that kind of thing.

The others seemed less worried. I spoke more, and went out more to do stuff, but my mind was always preoccupied.

I wanted to be like them. To help, to…to have a reason.

To have a reason to drag myself out of bed every morning, even though I felt like I didn’t deserve the life that had been coincidentally saved so many times.

I needed it.

In the end, one of my breakthroughs came not from books, or brainstorming, but from Clint.

He’d asked me to come help him on the range with some of the arrows Tony and I had invented for him over Christmas, which seemed like years ago, after everything. I was holding a StarkPad and logging the reaction time for each special effect after they came in contact with the target, seeing which ones had unacceptably long delays for a fast-paced battlefield situation.

“The Taser ones are good on reaction time,” I said absently, running numbers in my head as I considered any other battlefield factors that might affect any delays. “I want to test them against a few different types of armor and material to see if the electricity will conduct through anything, or just metal and skin. Can we try one of the webs for now?”

“Sure, Einstein,” Clint said. “I swear, between you and my kids, I feel stupid most of the time.”

I snorted, resetting the camera that would capture the arrow’s impact and replay it in slow motion with all the specs and numbers. “Not my fault you have feathers in your brain.”
He sent me a heatless glare, saying, “You’re around Sam and Tony way too much.”

I grinned shamelessly.

Clint nocked his bow, leveling one of the web arrows at the target several hundred meters down the range with practiced ease, his shoulders flexing naturally.

Unfortunately, though his form was perfect as always, execution was not.

Well, it wasn’t his fault. Tony and I must have miscalculated the amount of pressure it would take for the capsule housing the web fluid to detonate, because as soon as the string pulled too taut, the capsule exploded right in front of Clint’s face.

I flinched at the explosion, reflexively covering my ears with my hands. To a normal person, it would’ve just been a startling pop, but it sounded like a gunshot to me. I could feel the panic building steadily, the sound setting off a chain reaction—

But I was getting better. This was getting easier. I could do this.

Counting to five, taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes.

I…wasn’t expecting what I saw.

Clint was pinned to the floor, struggling like a madman. “Son of a bitch,” he hissed, jerking his arm around, trying to pry it out of the webbing nailing him firmly to the ground. “What the hell is this stuff, gorilla glue?” When I didn’t move, he looked up, saying, “You okay, little dude? Wanna help an old guy out?”

Detachedly, I nodded quickly, mumbling something about the solvent and rushing to Tony’s lab to grab a vial.

In my mind, my thoughts were moving a million miles a minute.

If I had a spider’s DNA, and…sticky hands, and stuff, I could theoretically climb walls and use webs to transport myself across spaces, and…and I had the upper body strength and body composition to do so.

And I had the formula for synthetic web fluid.

If I could craft it, perfect it, and create a housing for it that manipulated the fluid and made it a flexible, semisolid material that I could adjust to suit my needs…

…well, that would be a way to get to the city and around. I would just swing through the trees and the buildings.

The thought was mildly terrifying, but…well, no plan was perfect.

But it was a start.

Eventually, I got the solvent and released Clint from his captivity (not before a multitude of pictures and an amused visit from Natasha and Sam), but my mind wandered the rest of the day.

…

When I was finally alone for the day, I snuck into the lab and grabbed the web fluid we had and some of Tony’s spare parts, plus some tools to try to craft a housing that would suit my needs.
As I burglarized the decidedly off-limits workshop, FRIDAY cut in, chiding, “Peter, you are aware that you’re not allowed in the workshop without supervision. I’m alerting Boss.”

“Wait!” I said quickly, shoving a screwdriver into my bag. “Uh, I…I just…wanted to do something to help him! You know, he’s been so busy lately, with the PR on, uh…R-Ross, and everything…” I took a breath, pushing the name from my mind. “I just, uh…wanted to work on Clint’s web arrows since they exploded today. To help him not be…stressed.”

The lie was bitter on my tongue, but the truth was a shrouded in a thick cloak of doubt that I couldn’t handle voicing just yet.

FRIDAY contemplated for a moment as I sweat bullets beneath her (metaphorically? Anyways…), then conceded, “I suppose that’s okay. But I will be keeping an eye on you.”

I sighed in relief, grateful for FRIDAY’s gentle nature. “You’re the best, FRIDAY.”

“Thank you, Peter. I’m aware.”

I snorted, carting the contraband up to my room.

After hugging Stella (cause she was just so damn huggable) and playing with her for a few minutes, she got bored and stretched out on my bed, tired already. Which was stupid, because she always had so much energy. Oh well; I guess that meant I should start working.

I spent the better part of the night working on different housing and firing options for the web, working out different trigger responses and finding ways to manually and automatically adjust the circumference of the web strand for different situations. I hadn’t extensively tested my strength yet —my arm was still kind of sore, after all—so I needed to find the perfect balance. The web couldn’t be too thick that the housing couldn’t accommodate it, but it couldn’t be so thin that I’d snap it trying to propel myself around.

I finally settled on what I hoped was a happy medium, wiping my forehead with the sleeve of my sweatshirt before leaning back in my spinny chair (that Tony had finally let me take because I hogged it so fervently in the lab). It looked…good. Sleek, compact, and effective.

It looked usable.

Now I just had to…test it.

Which was going to be hard.

And I also needed to work on a costume or something. Something to hide my identity. And a name…? Which sounded really word, but all the Avengers had really badass codenames (except Thor, but…yeah).

Um…I mean, this was actually a lot harder than it looked…


I decided to write my thoughts down and figure things out. I liked it better when I could see things. So…not Captain Spider. God, I wanted to burn the idea just thinking about it.

Um…it couldn’t be like, an actual spider. That would be really tacky, with Natasha already being Black Widow. Maybe…The Spider? Like, with a capital t…mm, no. That just…sounded like a bad meme waiting to happen.
Man-Spider…Oh God, I was so bad at this…

Wait. Maybe Spider-Man…? That didn’t sound…too awful. But like, it was really simple and not really all that badass…and to be fair, I wasn’t really a man at all. Okay, maybe a little, but I was still like 80% a kid.

But Spider-Boy just sounded like…like the world’s worst teenage heavy-metal garage band, and I wanted to absolutely destroy any memory that I’d even considered it.

So…Spider-Man. Working title. That wasn’t too horrible. If I made my costume believable enough —

Wait.

Hyphen. Hyphen? Did I want the hyphen? Was that too tacky? Tony didn’t have a hyphen in Iron Man. Spider-Man made me kind of think of He-Man, which just…creeped me out a little. So…okay, not that one. I could do Spider Man or Spiderman, then.

Which one?

Spider Man sounded…I don’t know, kind of cool, like Iron Man. Like…it commanded authority, and it made you pay attention.

Which sounded…weird. I didn’t think I’d ever be qualified to have authority over anyone, so…yeah.

Spiderman…sounded good. I liked it. It sounded more…I don’t know, casual, like an actual name. Trustworthy, kind of.

Okay. Spiderman. I liked that. I liked that a lot.

Spiderman.

I grinned. It was coming together.

…

“You’ve seemed better,” Dr. Sanders said, smiling at me. I liked her office. It was cozy, and homey. I sat in the corner of a little two-person couch, curled up against the armrest. I usually liked to hug a pillow, too, and she let me. I wanted to bring Stella and hug her, but Dr. Sanders thought she’d be a distraction, unless I wanted to work on getting her registered as an Emotional Support Animal. I told her I’d think about it. She sat in an armchair across from me, legs crossed and posture relaxed.

She was pretty, with dark skin and wavy hair. She also had a gold nose ring, which I thought was kind of cool. I didn’t see facial jewelry in professionals all that much, but it looked good on her. She had kind brown eyes and long, detailed nails, which looked like they took a really long time. She laughed when I asked if she did them herself, and said if she had, she was in the wrong business.

“I’ve felt better,” I admitted, hugging the pillow a little tighter. “I still…um, hear Jason, sometimes, but it’s…quieter, and less frequent.”

She smiled encouragingly. “That’s good. That’s great progress.”
I nodded, fidgeting. “Um...so, patient-confidentiality...how does that, like...work?”

She tilted her head, but her facial expression didn’t change. “You mean, what do I keep private, and what do I share?”

“I guess?”

She nodded, adjusting her posture. “If you say anything that indicates you’re going to harm yourself or someone else, then I have to tell your legal guardians. In that case, Bucky, which I’m guessing translates to the other Avengers, right?” She asked with a smirk.

I laughed a little. “You’re not wrong, yeah.”

“In your special case, if you tell me something that’s worrying medically, that you haven’t shared with anyone yet, I have to share it with your legal guardian and Dr. Cho. Just so we can make sure you’re getting all the help you need.”

I nodded. That sounded reasonable.

“So...so if I tell you something I’ve been really thinking about, that I haven’t told anybody yet...that isn’t medical and that doesn’t hurt me or anybody else...could you...keep it a secret?” I asked hesitantly, not meeting her eyes.

I hadn’t told anybody about Spiderman yet. I didn’t really want to, but...I wanted to see if I was just...crazy for thinking I could do it. I wanted it, so badly I ached. I needed something to...to do, a purpose, a reason. I needed it. But if...it was just a stupid idea that wasn’t going to get anywhere...I needed someone to tell me now, before I invested anymore time and hope into it.

“I suppose,” she said carefully, her eyes narrowing in concern. “Where would you like to start?”

“Um...I guess...the beginning,” I said quietly, and I told her.

I told her about how my depression mostly stemmed from not having a purpose, when my life had been saved so many times. I felt like there was nothing I could do to repay those debts, for all the deaths I’d caused. And then how I thought I might be able to do something now that I had powers, like...like my family.

I told her about the web fluid incident with Clint, and how I’d decided on Spiderman as a name. I told her all the thoughts that had been rushing through my mind.

“And...” I continued hesitantly. “I mean, I just...it would be really small-time stuff, you know?” I rationalized as I continued. Her face remained impassive, and I couldn’t tell what she was thinking. “Like...stopping petty theft, or a convenience store robbery, or a break-in...you know, stuff like that. Um...yeah. That’s...that’s all right now, I...I can’t tell what you’re thinking, Dr. Sanders,” I said quietly, nervous.

She nodded, leaning back. “Well, first of all, I’m very glad you’ve found something productive to channel your energy,” she said with a genuine smile. “It’s good to find something worthwhile, especially for people with depression.”

I nodded, squeezing the pillow. “But...?”

“My concerns,” she said gently, leaning forward; I could see the worry in her eyes, “are that you don’t quite know what you’re getting into. Before you say anything, let me finish my thoughts,” she said, and I shut my mouth, my heart beating quickly. “ Petty theft, break-ins...it would be
wonderful if you could stop them, and I know you have the ability to do so. But…you’re going to be faced with guns, Peter. Lots of guns. And weapons of other kinds, maybe even alien tech that was never confiscated.”

She continued, and I felt my heart sink with each word. “You’re going to see things that are going to haunt you, and I don’t think you need that right now. You’re going to see…death, and rape, sexual assault, brutal robberies…things that will stick with you. And Peter…”

She leaned further forward, taking one of my hands in her own, and spoke gently, but seriously. “There are going to be people you can’t save, and I’m afraid that will send you in the wrong direction in terms of recovery. You’ve been making so much progress, Peter. And I’m very afraid that something of that magnitude will cause a lot of damage.”

As politely as I could, I took my hand back from her. “So…it’s a bad idea.”

She shook her head. “It’s a wonderful idea. But some wonderful ideas are very difficult to put into practice.”

I already knew that.

“My advice,” she said carefully, sympathetically, “is to talk to your family about it. You’re very young, Peter, and they may not even want you to be putting yourself in that kind of danger.”

“I can handle it, though,” I argued, terrified at the thought that it may be taken away before I could even try it. “I can. I know my limits, now.”

“I’m not the one you need to convince,” she admitted. “I’d really like you to bring this up with your family. Maybe they can help you find a way to put it into practice. My honest opinion, Peter, is that this isn’t the best idea, but you could very well prove me wrong. I just don’t want you to get too involved in it just yet.”

Too late, I thought.

“Can we…be done for today?” I asked quietly, putting the pillow down beside me and sitting up straight.

Her eyebrows furrowed in concern, and she glanced at the clock. “We can talk about something else, if you’d like—”

“Please?” I asked quietly, feeling…well, devastated. That sounded a little dramatic, even to my own ears, but it’s…how I felt. “I’m kind of tired.”

She sighed, watching me with worried eyes. “Alright. Our next appointment is Tuesday. Will you be alright to come?”

I nodded.

“I’m sorry, Peter,” she said genuinely, standing to open the door for me. “I really didn’t want to upset you. I just…don’t want to see you hurt anymore. You don’t deserve that.”

I paused. “I know. I…thanks.”

It wasn’t her fault. I just…hadn’t really…considered a lot of it that way. And now that it was out in the open…
God, I knew it was too good to be true.

...  

Bucky Barnes

“Okay. Okay, got it. Yeah, thank you,” I said to Andrea, Peter’s psychiatrist, as I hung up the phone. Apparently they’d had a rough session, and she wanted me to check on him.

I knew something was off. Peter went to his room as soon as he was done, brushing through the living room like a ghost. I’d asked him if he was okay, and he’d mumbled “Fine,” continuing on without even stopping. Steve, who’d with me, shot me a look and raised an eyebrow. I’d shrugged helplessly.

“Maybe he’s having a mood swing,” Sam suggested, setting a bowl of popcorn on the table. I’d just told him about the phone call. “He is a teenager going through puberty.”

“If mood swings were the only qualifications, I’d label every one of you teenagers,” Nat commented from the kitchen, switching on the blender.

“Well, that’s nothing compared to you during that time of the month,” Sam muttered under his breath. I could barely hear him over the blender, even with my enhanced hearing.

The blender stopped. “Wilson, if you’d like, I can introduce you to how it feels to have cramps once a month. All over your body.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “How the hell did you hear me?”

Nat sidled in with a milkshake in her hand, eyebrow raised. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Natasha Romanov.”

Sam pulled a face.

Nat handed me the milkshake, and I looked at her questioningly. “It’s Peter’s favorite. Go ask him what’s going on.”

I sent her a grateful smile and stood up, heading to Peter’s room.

This was…difficult. This whole parenting thing. I didn’t regret a second of it, not at all, but…parenting books weren’t really doing the trick.

I knew. I’d been reading them.

Rhodey walked in on me one day watching an educational video about kids going through puberty (which I never, ever wanted to hear about again) and had frozen. I’ll admit I felt like I’d been caught…I don’t know, doing something wrong, even though I was actually doing my job.

He just shook his head and walked out, trying not to laugh.

Well, geez, it’s not like I wanted to watch it. But I didn’t have any idea how to be a parent. I was taking all the help I could get.

I’d read a parenting book, and one of the chapters was Ten Tips to Get Your Teenage Son to Open Up to You. Which sounded…weird, in itself. I didn’t see Peter as a son. More like…a little brother, if I had to put a name on it. Just…someone very important to me. Family.
I’d never understood why families had to have labels. Some people were just family, and that was that.

But apparently that wasn’t “healthy”, so everything had labels. So parenting help from a book with a colorful cover and a bunch of lists was the best I could do.

Well, I figured the milkshake bribe would help. Peter hadn’t come out for dinner, so I knew something was bothering him, and he was bound to be hungry by now.

I got to his door and knocked twice, lightly.

“No,” came the muffled voice inside.

This was starting well.

“It’s me,” I tried gently. “Can we talk?”

A pause. “I’m not really up to talking right now, Bucky.”

Rule 1: Don’t take it personally. Well, that’s fine, I thought. I didn’t take a lot of things personally. “Can I sit with you, then?”

A longer pause. “You’re gonna try to get me to talk.”

“No, I’m not,” I said. “Promise. I even brought a peace offering.”

Rule 4: Give them some motivation.


He squinted at the cup in my hand. “Is that a milkshake?”

I smirked, handing it to him as he opened the door wider. “Nat made it.” I knew that would do the trick.

“Oh, that means it’s good,” he said, taking it from me and sipping. “Mm. She makes the best milkshakes. Don’t tell Sam.”

I snorted. “I won’t.”

I sat in that spinny chair he kidnapped from Tony and waited, as he sat on the bed. He eyed me suspiciously. “Why do you want to talk?”

“Well,” I said tonelessly. I leaned back and put my feet on his bed next to him. Stella nuzzled against them, precariously climbing my leg until she reached me, and I picked her up and set her against me, continuing, “because you didn’t come to dinner. And after your appointment with Dr. Sanders, you didn’t seem too good. She called me and asked me to check on you, too, so I know I’m right—”

“What did she say?” He asked quickly. Too quickly for it to be out of curiosity.

He was hiding something.

“Nothing.” I said carefully, eyeing him as he deflated. “Just that you had a rough session, and you may need some company.”
“I don’t need company,” he said, and by God, it sounded like he was sulking.

Peter didn’t sulk. He got upset, and depressed, and angry, but I’d never seen him sulk.

“I beg to differ,” I said. “I’m gonna wait right here. You can talk to me or not, but something’s on your mind. You know you can talk to me, kid.”

Peter picked at the fraying ends of his Avengers blanket, strewn over his bed. “I’m worried.”

“About what?”

He paused. “I had…an idea. That I was really proud of and that I really want to…do. It’s why I’ve been…better, because I’ve been putting literally all my energy into making it work, even though it’s going to be really hard, and I know that. And I didn’t tell anybody about it because I was…afraid you wouldn’t think it was a good idea. But I told Dr. Sanders, because I was just…excited, and…”

He heaved a sigh, sipping his milkshake and looking so dejected. I hated seeing Peter look like that. He should be smiling like always, beaming with a grin and his damn dimples that made me know that everything would be okay. “…and she listed all the reasons it wouldn’t work, and all the reasons I shouldn’t try it. And it just…really upset me, because…I was getting better. I was…able to, you know, focus on something good and positive, and now it’s…”

He rubbed his eyes, and I suddenly realized he was trying not to cry.

On instinct, I moved from the chair to sit beside him, setting Stella down beside him and taking the milkshake from his hands to set it on his nightstand. I took his shoulders and looked at him, saying, “First of all, I’m really glad you’re putting energy into something you’re passionate about.” That was something I’d read in a pamphlet somewhere, or something.

For some reason, that was the wrong thing to say. His face screwed up into a tight little mess, and tears filled his eyes as he looked away. “That’s what she said, right before she told me it wasn’t going to work.”

Oh. Well, shit.

“Well,” I said, tugging him into my side with one hand and threading my fingers through his hair with the other, knowing it calmed him down, “I don’t even know what your idea is. How can I shoot it down?”

He was tense under my hands, and I knew it was because he was trying not to cry. “Kiddo,” I said quietly, knowing if he cried I’d lose it. I hated it when he cried. “Come on, talk to me. Whatever it is, we can try to make it work.”

Slowly, he brought his arms up to hug me back, holding on tightly. “I wanted to be…like you guys,” he said quietly. “A…a hero.”

I was glad his face was currently buried in my shoulder, so he couldn’t see the look of surprise on my face. That wasn’t what I’d expected.

“Go on,” I encouraged, managing to keep the surprise out of my voice. “I’ll listen.”

He pulled back, wiping his face on his sleeve, and continued. “I kn-know…how it sounds. I do. I sound like a little kid who wants to be an astronaut because their mom or dad is one, or something.
It sounds stupid. But…but I have powers, just like any of you,” he said, talking fast. “And…a-and I could do it! I wouldn’t be fighting monsters, you know, I just…want to…to help. New York is so screwed up, with robbery and…and murder and theft and…things like, like what happened to May and Ben, they…they happen all the time. And I can stop it. At least some of it.

“I can…I can stop…another fourteen-year-old kid from losing the only family he has left. I can…stop someone from being murdered just because they were in the wrong place. I can stop at least some of that.” He shut his eyes, again wiping tears from his face. He refused to look at me. I put my hand on his head, tousling his hair before letting it fall on his shoulder. He wiped his nose on his sleeve. I used my thumb to wipe another tear from his face and let him continue. “I made…web fluid, a-and a housing for it…to help me get around. I’d be swinging from webs like a spider.”

He laughed humorlessly, and looked up at me. “It sounds…so stupid, saying it out loud. But I could do it. I know I could…I even came up with a name. Spiderman. Um, no hyphen, one word. I just…”

He crumbled again, sobbing once, then again. I pulled him in again, holding him tight. “It’s okay,” I whispered, tightening my grip as much as I could without hurting him. “It’s okay. You’re okay. Take a deep breath for me. In…” I breathed, deeply as I could manage, and felt him doing the same, albeit shakily. “And out. Good job. One more time, okay?”

We repeated the process a couple times until he’d calmed down enough that I felt comfortable letting him stop. “Okay. Keep going. What were you going to say?”

“I don’t deserve this,” he said quietly. “I don’t…deserve…”

I had to physically bite my lip to keep from responding immediately. Rule 6: Don’t interrupt. God, but I wanted to. Peter deserved the whole damn world. How could he even consider he couldn’t take what little we could offer him?

“I’ve been…saved…so many times. And I can’t…I haven’t been able to give anything back. Nothing. I have to do something, Bucky. Something that makes me feel…like I’m…I’m able to keep accepting all this. All this…this goodness and love and…a-and…”

He sniffed again, and I felt my heart crack in two. “Go on.”

He took a shuddering breath. “I just…what was I…saved for…? I don’t know what I’m supposed to do…if I can’t…” He sniffed again. “I don’t know. I-I don’t know.”

“Oh.” I said quietly, pressing my lips against his hair. “Okay. Calm down. Thank you for telling me.”

He didn’t respond, just held on tight.

“Can I talk?” I asked quietly.

He nodded.

“You deserve the world, Peter. No, don’t tell me I’m wrong,” I said as he started to shake his head. “You’re so good, Peter. You’re so kind and genuine. And so brave, and strong. I don’t know any other kid who could’ve survived everything you did and come out on the other side.”

“You don’t know any other kids,” he accused, his voice muffled.

I huffed a laugh, gently flicking his temple. “Shut up. I’m being nice.” He let out a wet laugh, and I
continued. “We could never give you everything you deserve. Not ever. You’ve been saved so many times because you should never have been in those situations in the first place. You’ve been saved to do something amazing.”

“Then why does it look like…like I can’t do anything?” He asked, and his voice was so broken, and so exposed. “I believe you, Bucky, but I…I need this. I n-need this.”

I sighed through my nose, pulling back from him and looking him in the eyes. “Look at me. I want you to be 100% honest with me. Is there nothing you can think of that will fill that void, other than what you just told me?”

He looked confused, his eyes red and puffy from crying, his cheeks wet. He thought for a moment, looking at his comforter, and shook his head. “I-I…I don’t think so. I think…” he took a breath, shaky and unsteady. “I think if I’m ever going to feel like…like I can get rid of this…this weight… I have to…save lives. For…May and Ben, my mom and dad…the SHIELD agents who’ve died to protect me and the information…I have to feel like it’s…balancing.” He looked at me with wet eyes, wide and pleading and helpless. “Please.”

I searched his face for a moment, then shook my head, sighing. I pulled his face in and kissed his forehead. “Okay.”

He jerked back, eyes even wider. “Wh-what?”

“You heard me. Okay.” I didn’t know how, or when, or where…but…I knew what it was like to have a void that couldn’t be filled. It was agonizing, and horrible, and…crushing. If there was a way to make that stop for Peter…I was willing to do almost anything. “Okay. I’ll talk to the others, though. This is dangerous, Peter, and you’re definitely not going to be allowed to do it alone. But…” I shrugged, smiling. “We’ll figure something out. Some way that you can do the things you want. Okay?”

He didn’t respond, just got to his knees and threw his arms around my neck, holding on. I hugged him back, and he said, “Thank you. Thank you, th-thank you.”

Squeezing the back of his neck, I smiled. “You’re welcome. Now go to bed. You’re always exhausted after these things.”

“They’re tiring,” he defended weakly. “And I want to finish my milkshake.”

“Fine. Finish your milkshake, brush your teeth, and go to bed. Enhanced immune systems don’t work on cavities.”

He laughed, wiping his eyes again and sipping his milkshake. “Watch something with me?”

“Sure,” I conceded, leaning against the wall with him. He leaned against my arm. “FRIDAY, TV on. What do you want?”

Another slurp. “A new episode of Prodigal Son came out Monday.”

I eyed him. “Isn’t that a little dark for you?”

He shrugged. “It’s good. Besides, it’s not like I’ve never seen anything dark.”

I sighed. Couldn’t argue. “Fine. If I don’t like it you’re not watching any more of it.”

He eyed me, cheeky little shit mode back in full force. “You’re trying to parent me now?”
“Mm-hm,” I said, stealing a sip of the shake. Damn, Nat made good milkshakes. “And if you don’t let me, I’m revoking milkshake privileges.”

He laughed. “Like you could. Nat would sneak them to me.”

“You forget Nat’s only been a spy for thirty-four years, and I’ve been doing under-cover ops for eighty-three.”

Peter made a face. “That’s not fair. Like, sixty of those years don’t count.”

“Sure they do.”

He shushed me as the intro was playing, and settled down, slurping his milkshake.

As I’d predicted, he fell asleep twenty minutes in.

Unfortunately, caught in the show and not realizing how tired I was myself, I fell asleep ten minutes after him.

Thirty minutes later, the credits rolled, both of us none-the-wiser. I slept better than I had in a long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

OMG SPIDERMAN
Thanks for reading!!! Please comment!
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WARNING: Mentions of suicide and suicidal ideation, but it doesn’t happen.

WARNING: Mentions of childhood sexual abuse, but it’s not any of the characters.

PS I almost made myself cryyyyyyyyyy happy reading!

James “Bucky” Barnes

“Absolutely not,” Steve said with all the righteous indignation his patriotic ass could muster up. He turned his incredulous eyes on me, and I had to physically fight not to roll my eyes. “Bucky, why would you promise him something like that? It’s too dangerous!”

“Unfortunately, I’m with Steve on this one,” Nat said, crossing her arms and sitting on the arm of the couch, looking displeased. “With everything he’s been through, I don’t think sending him out against criminals and the like is the best idea.”

I took a steadying breath. I knew there would be opposition, but I’d kind of hoped Nat would be on my side. She was good at talking people into things. “I promised him because this is something he needs. I know it’s dangerous, but…I told him there was no way he’d be allowed to go alone, at least not for a while. I’m not just going to send him out and say, ‘Good luck.’”

I’d explained Peter’s idea, his idea for a name, his web-shooters, and his reasoning, as best I could. I thought it would probably be better if he wasn’t here, because I knew there would be heavy opposition, and I didn’t want him getting discouraged and giving up before he’d even started, because that was a Peter thing to do. I’d temporarily banished him to the main yard, where he and Stella were getting some much needed exercise and sunlight.

“But it’s…it’s really dangerous out there,” Bruce said quietly, fidgeting with his glasses in his hands. Damn, if the quiet man was willing to speak out against it so quickly… “I don’t think he’s ready for that. He’s only fifteen, and most New York cops are traumatized by the time they’re thirty. Peter’s already traumatized.”

“In Asgard,” Thor weighed in, “warriors begin training at a young age, but they are kept from battle until they reach at least twenty.”

“You’re like 2,000 years old,” Tony commented. “You don’t count. If humans lived a hundred years, that would be sending one-year-olds in Huggies pullups to defend the world against aliens.”

“I’m…yeah, I’m against it,” Sam said. “I talked to Andrea, and she’s exactly right—witnessing the wrong thing, a murder, a rape…it could undo all the progress we’ve made, and I’m not sure I’m willing to risk that.”

“I’m with Sam,” Rhodey said, looking uncomfortable.

“Me, too.” Damn, I thought as Clint spoke up. They were dropping like flies. “I wouldn’t let my kids do it. Ever. So I don’t want to let Peter do it, either.”

I dragged a hand down my face, shaking my head. “It’s not just—just something he thinks might be
cool to try. It’s not exploring a hobby, it’s—he really, really needs this, guys. He said having this idea and working towards it is what pulled him out of his depression. He needs to feel like—like he’s giving back.”

“We can work out another way for him to do that,” Nat said, eyebrows creased in an uncharacteristic show of concern. “A much safer way.”

“No, it’s—you’re not getting it,” I said, frustrated. Peter explained it well, and I was trying to relay his thoughts, but it wasn’t getting me anywhere.

Tony dragged a hand through his hair, looking around. “Well, this is probably the first and last time this will ever happen, so snap a picture, but…I think it’s a good idea. Or, at least, I agree with Bucky that he should be allowed to do it.”

Eight pairs of eyes blinked in stunned confusion, regardless of their stance. “ Seriously?” I asked, just to confirm that I wasn’t hallucinating. “You agree?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, shrugging. “Well, yeah. From what you said earlier, I became Iron Man for the same reasons. Because a lot of people died for me, and because of me—the soldiers, and Yinsen, and…you know, the people my weapons killed when I wasn’t aware—and I thought that the only way I could really…move on, and feel like I deserved any of what I was getting was by saving people who needed it, and stopping more weapons from being used.” He looked away, sniffing like he did when he was uncomfortable. “Without Iron Man, or Yinsen…or you, of course, Honey Bear…” Rhodey snorted. “…I don’t know if I would’ve made it through all that.”

Tony looked uncomfortable with the admission, but I was happy to have an ally. “That’s exactly what Peter’s saying. He wants to feel like things are…balancing.” I had to think to remember the exact words he used, hoping it would sway the others like it had him. “I’m not entirely comfortable with it either, but…he really needs this. I’m telling you. He literally started crying when he even thought that it might not be possible.”

The other seven were looking thoughtful, and I locked eyes with Tony, who nodded. He still looked uncomfortable, but I was…glad we’d come far enough that he was able to do that.

“Well, so,” Tony started, getting up and walking around, hands in his pockets. He looked more like he was at a board presentation than a family meeting (which sounded weird to me, but…I didn’t hate it). “Obviously he wouldn’t be allowed to go alone, at least for the first few months until he got the hang of everything. One or two of us would go with him every night to make sure nothing was wrong, and we’d ease him into doing things alone. And I have some ideas for a suit…I’d design it, of course, with Pete’s help, so of course it’s going to be incredible and safe. And I’ve got to see these webshooters. Damn kid’s gonna be smarter than me one day.

“Anyway, continuing on, he’s surrounded by nine of the biggest superheroes in the world, and we all have our own experiences and expertise. We’ve already trained him on basic self-defense, and now that he has the aptitude and fortitude to hold up to super strength trainers, you could teach him more. Not to mention it would be a good way to build up his stamina and everything; Cho says he still feels kind of weak after long days, or when he exercises too much.”

Well. If I’d known Tony was going to create a whole briefing, I would’ve let him handle it from the start. He should’ve made a PowerPoint.

“And, of course,” he said, on a roll with no stop in sight, “probably not more than one or two hours at a time, until he really gets the hang of it. I’ll have a surveillance system and AI software running in his suit the whole time, and if he does anything we don’t like, or that isn’t safe, it’ll alert us
immediately, and do what it can to stop him.”

Tony paused, looking up at the pensive faces of his teammates, mine included. That was…a really detailed, well-thought out approach to what seemed like an impossible problem. “I have more points. I just thought I’d let you catch up.”

“That’s a really good plan, Tony,” I said, looking at the others for their reactions. I never thought I’d confirm that Tony Stark had a really good anything, least of all a plan or idea, but a lot had changed in the past six months.

Nat shook her head, sighing. “That’s…it sounds great, in theory, but we can’t protect him from everything out there, no matter how we handle it.”

“Nobody can protect anyone from everything,” Tony countered. “Especially not parents. That’s part of parenthood.” He paused, blinking, looking vaguely horrified. “Holy shit, I just said the word parenthood.”

“In any case,” Rhodey interjected, “everything you said is viable, Tones, but that doesn’t mean we’re happy about it.”

“Hell, I’m not happy about it,” I admitted, crossing my arms. “I’d never suggest it. And if I thought there was any alternative that would make him better, I’d take it in a heartbeat. But…I know you were just as scared as I was a few weeks ago.” I paused, letting it sink in, taking in the creased foreheads at just the memory.

Peter had been…horribly depressed, and it had gotten worse with every passing day. For brief days, days that scared the living shit out of me, I’d thought he was going to…try to hurt himself, or something worse. Andrea had also been concerned, and said to keep an eye out for any signs indicative of suicidal ideation, and I’d seen what might have been a couple. Days he didn’t get out of bed, days he didn’t feel like eating…things he said that didn’t point to any future.

Just thinking about it made my spine tingle. I didn’t want him to go back down that road.

“He doesn’t have any reason to feel like he needs to save people,” Tony started, shoving his hands in his pockets and looking out the back window. I followed his gaze to the main yard a couple stories below, where Peter was chasing Stella around the yard, a grin on his face. She weaved expertly between his legs, and even his enhanced speed and agility couldn’t keep up with her; his feet got tangled, and he fell onto the grass. Even form the distance, my enhanced eyesight caught his laughter as he lay there, splayed in the grass as Stella hopped on top of his chest and curled up, looking down at him with a little toy in her mouth.

“We know that,” Tony continued. “But until he knows that…this is something he needs. Trust me, I know.”

Tony’s quiet declaration was greeted with thoughtful silence and multiple headshakes, but I could tell he’d made some headway. I was hoping it would be enough to convince everyone to at least…accept the idea, if not support it.

“…I don’t like it,” Rhodey admitted after a moment, his braces whirring quietly as he propped his feet up on the ottoman. “But…Tony, you make some good points. And…it’s something you really think he needs, that will help him recover…I guess I’ll help.”

“Aye,” Thor said, smiling. “Peter has the heart of a fine warrior—I have no doubt that he will become an even finer hero. I will do whatever I can to help in this endeavor.”
Hesitantly, Bruce shrugged. “I guess…there isn’t much I can do to help, but you were surprisingly convincing, Tony.”

Tony blinked. “Did you think I ran a multi-billion dollar international industry with my good looks? I am a businessman, assholes.”

Okay. Okay, this was progress. This was really good. Five out of nine was really good.

I knew with some more pressure, Clint might cave. It would be tricky, but doable. Nat, Steve, and Sam were going to be hard to convince, but…not impossible.

“I am still very much against this,” Sam piped up, just as I knew he would. “Literally a therapist. Very much against it.”

“You and Andrea both agreed that it would be good for Peter to find a hobby, something to put his energy into,” Tony said, quirkling an eyebrow. “He found one. Now his whole little self is entirely invested. We can’t just rip the carpet out from under him. As a therapist,” he said pointedly, earning a scowl from Sam, “you should know he doesn’t need any more of that.”

“He also doesn’t need to be fighting muggers and robbers and murderers as a coping mechanism,” Steve argued, looking two seconds from a Captain America explosion of justice. They weren’t pretty. “He’s fifteen. Excluding Nat, none of us started doing this until at least twenty, and most of us were older. And we still have nightmares.”

“He already has nightmares!” Tony argued, finally done being patient. Yeah, I was waiting for that too. “Every night! I know you’re all afraid of it getting worse, but a few weeks ago? That was rock bottom, and this notion of an idea, barely developed, was the thing that pulled him out of it!”

Steve’s eyes were angry, his forehead pinched in frustration. He opened his mouth to respond, but another voice beat him to it.

“You’re not going to destroy the living room again, are you?” Peter asked from the doorway, Stella curled into his chest. “I like the new couch.”

All of us turned to look at him—none of us had heard him come up, and we didn’t know how much he’d heard. “I banished you,” I said pointedly.

“I got thirsty,” he defended, putting Stella down and coming in, face carefully neutral. “And I figured…it’s my idea. It’s what I want to do. I should at least be able to explain it to you guys.”

He stood uncertainly, picking at the edges of his sweatshirt. He wore sweatshirts all the time, now—he didn’t want anyone seeing the scars on his arm or chest. I hadn’t seen him in a t-shirt in months, even though it was late April, and it was warming up. That was a subject we hadn’t even thought about discussing yet—it was way too soon for that.

“Well, before we have another civil war,” Clint said pointedly, ignoring the dirty looks multiple attendees shot him, waving a hand, “you’ve got the floor, Peter.”

Peter took a deep breath, glancing at me. I gave him a smile and nodded for him to continue, hoping he’d do a better job of convincing them than I did. I never was good at public speaking.

“Well, before we have another civil war,” Clint said pointedly, ignoring the dirty looks multiple attendees shot him, waving a hand, “you’ve got the floor, Peter.”
of…of dead people. Of people I’ll never be able to see again or save.

“No, don’t…let me finish,” he pleaded, holding a hand up when Steve looked like he was about to interject. Steve relented, but his face remained pained. We all wore similar expressions. Peter, taking a shaky breath, continued. “You’re…amazing. All of you. You’ve saved the world, so many times, and I’m not—I’m not trying to undermine that, or belittle it, because we all owe you our lives. You saved the world. But…every day, even in New York…hundreds of people’s worlds are being just…ended. Like mine.

“My world was…completely shattered. I had just watched…really, the only family I knew, bleed out under my hands, and…and then I was shoved some papers and told to protect them with my life without even really knowing what I was fighting for, and I was constantly running and afraid, and the whole time…the whole time, I was alone. And then I found…I found Jason, who was like…I never admitted it, not to anybody, but for a while, he was kind of like a brother to me. The only person in the whole world who knew me or gave a damn what happened.

“And then I was unfortunate enough…or lucky enough, now…to have papers that led HYDRA to me, but led me to you. I got a second chance to make a new…a new world, for myself. To build a new life. With you. With the most amazing family. And that’s—that’s so rare, guys, it’s so rare. I’m—it’s not even that I’m lucky, it’s a miracle, because that doesn’t happen. And I’m so, so grateful, but I can’t sit here…and accept all the love and protection I’m getting when…when I know that hundreds of worlds are being destroyed every day just a few miles down the road.”

He shifted, looking down. His words were like knives cutting into me. God, I never wanted to hear him sound that…hopeless. He wasn’t crying—didn’t look anywhere near crying. His voice was small, and sure. He wasn’t making eye contact, but his hands were in fists at his sides, his shoulders hunched, his features confident in a contradictory show of vulnerability and determination.

He was quiet for a long few seconds, and I thought he was done. I opened my mouth to comfort him, to acknowledge his feelings, but he kept going, and my heart kept breaking. “I heard…a little bit. From the elevator and the hall. You’re worried…I’ll see a murder, or rape, or something horrible that will…that will set me back.”

He shifted again, his fists tightening. “You guys, I think…I think you forget sometimes that before you took me in, I was…basically alone, for eight months, in homeless shelters and in dark alleys and in abandoned structures with leaky roofs and…and really scary people, and I didn’t have powers then. I had the biggest secret in the world in my sock, and I was always scared. I saw…I saw a lot of things. I couldn’t avoid it. There was…this little girl named Carla, in one of the camps, who told me about how her dad beat her and her uncle…raped her, before she finally ran away and was taken in by the camp. She was eight.

“And…and there was this really nice guy who gave me a water bottle after I hadn’t been able to…to find anything to eat or drink for over a day. I think his name was Evan. It was his last one. He had cancer, and…he died that night. I was sleeping outside his tent. I went to wake him and…and he was just…gone.

“And I’ve seen people…killed, and beaten, and…and worse, because nobody was there to protect me from it, and every time I saw something, I hated myself just a little bit more because there was nothing I could do. And every time I thought about risking it, about trying to step in even though they were bigger and stronger and there were more of them…I remembered the stuff in my sock, the papers, and I had to put…put that above the person being hurt in front of me. It happened so many times.”
Peter had…never told us this. Not any of us. I knew this for a fact, because if he had, it probably would have been me first. It usually went like that—he shared things with me to work up the courage to tell the rest of them. But we’d never heard a word of any of this.

“If you’re trying to protect me from seeing horrible things…I saw them long before you met me,” he said quietly, “and I’m sure I’ll see a lot more. The difference is now…now I have…resources, and powers, and support. I can do it now. I can do what I couldn’t out there. I can save another Carla. I can help another Evan, and…and maybe save another May and Ben, and I can save another kid like me from having their world torn apart in front of them.”

Breathing slowly, blinking, and looking up, I’d never seen so much resolve in this kid’s eyes. I probably never would again. He’d gone through hell, come out on the other side, only to fall back in, and claw his way up again…and now, rather than dwell in it, his way of coping was to help the people around him and make sure he didn’t experience the same hells he did.

I didn’t think it was possible to love this kid more, but every day, he proved me wrong.

“Help me,” he said resolutely, looking at all of us. “Help me do this. Please. I…I need this.”

He stopped, looking at us with quiet desperation so palpable it filled the room. There was silence—utter, stunned silence—for several seconds after his declaration, but Peter didn’t move. He stood his ground, looking at all of us with pleading eyes and unwavering resolve.

In the end, Nat was the one to break the trance. With a heavy sigh, she said, “I don’t know of anyone who could go against that display, Peter.” She went to him immediately and pulled him into a hug, and if I knew her, she’d been wanting to do that the whole time. “I’m very, very proud of you right now, Малыш. All the time, but especially now.”

He hugged her tight, finally letting his shoulders slump and his face crease in relief. “Thanks, Tasha.”

Steve was next to cave, unsurprisingly. As soon as Nat let go, Steve was there, pulling Peter in.

“Every day, you find something new to do to amaze me. I’m…it makes me nervous, Peter, and it probably will for a long time. But…I’ll do whatever I can to help you. Ok?”

Peter nodded, Steve holding the back of his head, Peter’s face pressed against his shirt. “Ok.” His voice was muffled, but steady.

In the end, everyone agreed. There wasn’t really another option after Peter’s reveal.

“Can we…do something fun?” Peter asked, smiling slightly. “That was heavy, and I didn’t like it.”

I laughed, and Clint responded quickly, “Of course. It’s warm today, isn’t it?”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, it got kind of hot a while ago. Why?”

Clint grinned. “Who wants to introduce Peter to an Avengers style water-balloon fight?”

**Peter Parker**

I quickly discovered that Avengers prank wars were absolutely nothing compared to Avengers style water-balloon fights.

The entire Compound, with the exception of the offices and other places where non-Avengers personnel were working, was turned into a warzone. One different thing was that there
were no teams—it was everyone for themselves. We each picked a place around the Compound, far away from everyone else, and we had a backpack full of water balloons—everyone got thirty, and you had to make them last, because you weren’t allowed to fill anymore. You could, however, take whatever was left of anyone you “killed”.

Being “killed” meant you had to hit one of the others with a balloon, and it had to break on your body. You couldn’t just throw it on the ground by their feet, get them wet, and say they were dead. After that, they had to sit out the rest of the game; FRIDAY would announce throughout the Compound who was killed when and by whom, so everyone knew who was out and who was in. The game went until there was a final winner. As punishment for whoever was killed, if they were inside, they had to clean up the water themselves, since we didn’t want to make the janitorial staff do it. And after it was over we’d all help pick up balloon pieces out of the lawn.

Adjusting the big backpack on my shoulders, I’d elected to start in one of the hallways on the South side of the Compound, Stella secure in a little pouch under my shirt so she could travel with me without me having to use my hands. “What do you think, Stella?” I asked quietly, waiting for FRIDAY to give the start. “Think we’ve got a shot?”

She purred, nipping gently at my finger and meowing excitedly. I laughed quietly, excitement buzzing through my veins. “Yeah, me too.”

Any other day, I would have been absolutely outmatched. I probably would have just stuck with Bucky or something, and ridden his coattails to victory or defeat, whatever happened. But now, we were on a level playing field. Sure, they had a lot more experience with me, but I was good at hiding.

As FRIDAY gave the countdown, I grinned, a plan forming in my mind. This was going to be epic.

As soon as FRIDAY gave the start time, I took off my shoes and socks, tossing them into a janitor’s closet, and used my natural sticking ability to climb the wall, arming myself with a balloon. As soon as I’d realized that my sticking ability could be used to climb surfaces, I’d started practicing everywhere—in the gym, my room, the kitchen, everywhere. I’d given multiple members of the team heart attacks over the past few days.

They thought it was hilarious, until I’d gotten into my pranks.

I settled myself in a corner where the ceiling met the wall, adjusting myself to stick with my back facing the wall and my right hand free to throw. Unless it was Nat, or Bucky maybe, whoever came around the corner wouldn’t see me; I’d be in a blind spot. And the other end of the hallway was too far to throw a water balloon very accurately, so as long as I was keeping an eye out, I’d have the upper hand. Literally.

Luckily, weapons and suits weren’t allowed, so even though I was bummed about not getting to show off my new webshooters, I was happy I wouldn’t be obliterated in the first two minutes.

FRIDAY’s voice startled me so badly I nearly fell off the ceiling. “Clint Barton killed by Sam Wilson.”

I resisted the urge to laugh and give away my position. That was fast.

I heard distant shouting from what sounded like the yard, along with a few choice words Steve would have melted at.
I was shocked out of my musings when I heard footsteps echoing around the corner, holding my breath and winding my arm up.

Tony didn’t even know what hit him.

I threw the water balloon at his head with enough force to knock him down, wanting to get at least one person out before my inexperience inevitably caught up with me.

“Holy shit,” Tony yelled from the floor, a hand on his forehead, incredulous eyes staring up at me where I sat in the corner still, laughing like a maniac. “You little—oh, my God I’m done. I’m too old for this. I am human and I have a heart condition…shit, just…take the spoils of war and leave me to die, why don’t you.”

“Tony Stark killed by Peter Parker,” FRIDAY announced, sounding smug.

I laughed, doing one more scan of the area before dropping down, loading ten extra water balloons into my backpack. That was all I could comfortably fit without the bag overflowing. “You’ll be fine. Thanks for the boost of confidence!” I took off around the corner, trying to find another spot of cover before I ran into anyone else.

Okay. Eight people left in the game, and some of the others would knock each other out. I mean, I didn’t have any illusions about my ability to win—I totally wasn’t going to—but damn if I wasn’t gonna try.

I decided to move outside, crawling up one of the pillars that held the terrace and tucking myself away in the rafters to wait. I’d be visible to someone who looked out over the railing of the terrace and straight down, but hopefully firing from there, their aim would be off and I could dodge.

I waited a few minutes, but all I saw was Sam in the distance, slinking around a hallway corner behind one of the big glass windows. The Compound was really big, so it was gonna be a while before the game was over, but…this was actually really fun. It had been a while since I’d been…excited and had this much adrenaline going without…you know, running for my life.

“Gotcha!” A voice shouted above me, and I looked up just in time to see Rhodey chucking a water balloon right at my head. In what I can only credit as pure instinct, I threw myself off the rafter and onto a nearby pillar, sliding down a couple feet before I finally got control of my sticky limbs.

“Ha!” I shouted up at Rhodey, who looked downright cheated. “Gotta do better than that, old man!”

With a look of absolute offense, Rhodey reloaded, firing a couple at me, one after the other. “Old man my ass you little punk.”

He came really close to hitting me a couple times, but I scampered up the pillar in a weave, dodging all his projectiles, and using my momentum, I planted a foot on the chiseled decoration in the top of the pillar and propelled myself onto the terrace railing, scaring Rhodey enough that his next aim was off.

“This is not fair,” Rhodey shouted as I reloaded, Stella meowing happily as we soared through the air to land behind him, stopping him dead in his tracks as he raced for the glass door leading inside.

“What’s not fair?” I asked, innocently cocking my head to the side as I tossed a water balloon up
and down, walking towards him lazily. I grinned as he sighed, slowly raising his hands.

“Guess I have to surrender to superior forces,” he said with a smile, his eyes glinting. In a blur of movement fast enough that someone could have convinced me it came from Steve or Bucky or Thor, he whipped a balloon out and chucked it at me.

I was kind of reminded of the Wild West movies Clint liked to watch, because as soon as he reached for his bag, I was winding up to throw my own balloon—it reminded be of a quickdraw gunfight.

Unfortunately for Rhodey, I had much faster reflexes.

“Shit,” Rhodey said, not unlike Tony, as he wiped a hand down his face, picking a neon green balloon piece off his shoulder as I doubled over laughing at his expression. “I’m crippled, and you’re over here doing freaking acrobatics. This isn’t fair. Humans should get handicaps.”

I laughed as FRIDAY announced Rhodey’s “death”, taking a couple water balloons from his backpack. I didn’t really need anymore, but it was the principle of it. “That’s what Tony said. Have fun waiting for the winners!”

With that, ignoring his dumbfounded expression and his cry of alarm, I all but yeeted myself off the terrace after a running start, feeling more like a bird than a spider, and landed on one of the pillars, narrowly catching my balance as I stumbled on top of it. At Rhodey’s shouts of dismay and reprimand, I could only laugh.

I’d never felt so alive, and hopeful. Because of my dizzy spells, my asthma…I’d never been able to really do a lot of sports, or anything. I couldn’t’ run fast like the other kids, or participate much in PE. May and Ben hardly let me outside during allergy season because it made my asthma so bad.

Now…free of all that, from the physical limitations, and moving on past the horror that had been so intent on dragging me down…it felt like I could fly.

I felt free.

…

In the end, Tasha won, as everyone expected her too, but I made it to the last three. Thor was killed by Natasha, who caught him slinking through the kitchen trying to pin down Sam, who was around the corner. It ended up being a double murder, as the sound of Thor going down drew Sam that way, and Tasha was lying in wait for him.

On the other side of the Compound, Steve and Bucky engaged in some intense close-quarter combat (which I paused in my sneaking around to watch from the ceiling of the gym, because it was pretty cool). Steve had tried to catch Bucky unaware by slamming a balloon into his back, swinging himself around some of the gym equipment for momentum, but Bucky turned just in time, knocking it from his hand.

The two basically engaged in a hand-to-hand fight with water balloons in their hands, trying to slam it on each other. The best part was that they knew each other so well, they anticipated each other’s moves every time. I was awestruck by how well they were both doing, so much so that I almost missed Bucky’s victory.

He’d gotten in a lucky hit to Steve’s side, catching him off guard enough to slam the bright blue water balloon into his chest, sending Steve stumbling back a couple steps, where he stopped. Giving a rueful sigh, he shrugged. “You win, Buck. I surrender.”
“Course you do, punk,” Bucky said with a grin, shouldering the offered backpack. “I always win.”

“That was awesome!” I shouted from the rafters, clapping. They both looked up, obviously startled by my presence. “That was super cool to watch!”

Bucky smirked as Steve laughed. “I’m glad you think so. You’re still in, aren’t you?”

“Yep,” I grinned, running along one of the rafters and leaping down, grabbing one of the higher bars on the obstacle course and doing a flip off it, feeling incredibly nimble. I usually had trouble walking in a straight line. I landed on top of the climbing wall, standing with my hands on my hips.

“You joining gymnastics?” Bucky asked with a raised eyebrow, tossing his water balloon up and down. I had one in my hand, too, waiting for an opening.

“Maybe,” I shrugged, walking around on top, pleased that I didn’t have to work to keep my balance. “Haven’t decided yet. Might go to the Olympics.”

He smirked as Steve backed away, watching with interest. “You gonna come down so we can do this?”

I laughed. “And give up my high ground? No way!”

He grinned, slowly approaching the obstacle course. “Okay, kiddo. I’ll come to you.”

In the end, he caught me pretty quickly. I might have been a little bit cocky thanks to my new abilities, and I may have overshot one of my leaps and landed on one of the mats spread-eagle, looking up at the ceiling as I caught my breath from where I’d landed. Stella yowled unhappily at the treatment, wiggling out of the pouch and shaking herself, stretching. She bounded over to Steve, who scooped her up without preamble.

Bucky’s face came into my line of vision as he stood above me, balloon in hand, eyebrow raised. “You good?”

I gave a thumbs up, and that’s all it took for him to drop the balloon on my face.

“You suck,” I said through the water dripping though my hair, trying to get it out of my nose.

“And you got cocky, kid,” he said, grinning, holding out a hand to help me up. “Don’t let a little agility go to your head.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I huffed.

Tasha got Bucky across the Compound a half hour later in a sneak attack to end all sneak attacks. After that, Sam and Steve cooked a big dinner of a bunch of different foods, and we all ate in the living room and played a couple board games. Playing Monopoly was pretty fun with so many people, but Tony won before anybody could even get started, buying up property left and right. I think we sometimes forgot that he did kind of have a job other than being an Avenger, and he was good at it.

Later that night, as the day caught up with me, we all started going to bed. Being stubborn, not wanting such an awesome day to end, I stayed up, but Bucky caught me as soon as I started yawning.

“Bed?” He asked, ruffling my hair.
“Yeah,” I conceded, figuring I should get some sleep. Only Bucky, Bruce, Clint, and I were left in the living room, so I wished them goodnight and tugged Bucky’s sleeve, signaling him to follow me.

In the hallway, away from them, I turned to him. “Um…I just…wanted to say thanks, Bucky. For…supporting me, and for helping me, and trying to convince them for me. I know…I know they’re all nervous, and I know you’re nervous. I’m nervous, too. But…but I think this is going to be a really, really good thing.”

I risked a smile up at him, and he scoffed, smiling despite himself. “You’re welcome, kid. Of course. I’m always going to support you.” He hugged me, and I’d been waiting for it, and hoping for it. I hugged him back, relishing the feeling of safety.

“Peter,” he said quietly, his voice becoming more serious. He didn’t let go. “Why didn’t you ever…tell us any of that? You know we would’ve listened.”

Ah. Yeah…that. I shrugged, and he tightened his arms around me just as the memories filled my vision. I closed my eyes. “I…wanted to forget. It was…those eight months were really horrible, and I saw so much more than just Carla and Evan. There’s this guy at…at the camp Jason was at, named Benny. He’s so nice. He’s a veteran. But he’s older, and…I don’t even know if he’s still alive. It’s just easier not to think about it.

“And then…I feel so guilty, because…that’s so disrespectful to them. To the people who helped me and confided in me. And I just…I want to help them. To do something for them, now that I can. And…if you guys were going to really understand how much I needed it…I had to force myself to think about it.”

Bucky nodded, his chin on top of my head. “Thanks for telling us.”

Feeling a lump in my throat at how lucky I was, how utterly blessed I was to have him and them and this, I hugged him tighter. “Thanks for listening. And being here.”

I felt him smile. “I’ll always be here, Peter.”

And I believed him, with my whole heart. I knew, without a doubt, that he would always be behind me. That they would always be behind me.

I didn’t have to be alone anymore. I wouldn’t have to be alone ever again.

Chapter End Notes

Water balloons!!!! And some more angst because it's me, but...ya know. Thank you so much! Please comment, and I hope you're still enjoying.
Peter Parker

“Tony,” I said slowly, eyes wide as I stared in the mirror, “you’re my new favorite Avenger.”

“Take that, Robo-Cop,” Tony shouted across the lab at Bucky, who was lounging on one of the couches reading a book. Stella, lounging beside him, raised her head and yawned wide at the shout, resuming her lax position when she realized it wasn’t directed at her. Without looking up, Bucky flipped him off. “I’m glad you like it, Pete.”

I did. I did like it. I loved it. I stared at the suit tight on my body, the elastic fabric stretchy enough to accommodate my newfound acrobatics, but durable enough to protect against basic attacks or acrobatic mishaps (which had happened a lot, as gymnastics was a new thing for me). It was blue and red (my two favorite colors) with a spider emblem on the chest, which I originally thought was going to be a little too flashy, but that actually looked really cool.

Tony and I had been working nonstop on my suit and on enhancing my webshooters for like a week, and we’d finally 3-D printed an acceptable suit. The fit was perfect, and Tony said it was some experimental material that was supposed to be somewhat impact-absorbent in case I took any big hits, and somewhat bulletproof.

At those words, I kind of thought Bucky was going to have an aneurysm, but we luckily avoided that.

“Can I take it to the gym to try it out?” I asked excitedly, marveling at how good it had turned out. “Since it has a high ceiling? I want to try out my webshooters, too.”

“Sure, go nuts,” Tony said, waving a hand. “Oh, but first. Say hi to your new AI.”

Wait. No way. He could not actually mean that.

“Oh my God,” I said, staring at him, the lenses over my eyes blown wide. “You did not give my own Artificial Intelligence system.”

“He did,” a feminine voice said inside my mask, and I almost jumped four feet in the air at the unfamiliar voice resonating in my head. “It’s very nice to meet you, Peter. I’m here to help you regulate your suit, provide advice and assistance when needed, and transmit information like your vitals and whereabouts to FRIDAY and Mr. Stark.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered, because FRIDAY was awesome, but…did I seriously have one of my own? “Tony. Forget favorite Avenger. Favorite person. Favorite everything. Dude, this is so cool…hi AI! Do you have a name, or do I get to name you?”

“I have no pre-programmed name,” the voice said, sounding pretty pleasant. Her accent was American, unlike FRIDAY’s Irish lilt, and she sounded kind of like the answering machine to most stores, but more…human. “You can call me whatever you’d like.”

“Can I think about it? I want to give you a good name and get to know you a little bit,” I
said excitedly, bouncing on the balls of my feet. Holy shit, this was actually happening. I was actually like…getting to do all this stuff. “Going to the gym! Me and my new AI are going to get to know each other!”

Bucky raised a hand in farewell, smiling, and Tony laughed. “Have fun. Don’t destroy anything, please.”

I raced to the gym in my new suit with a backwards shout of, “No promises!” I used my web fluid to swing down the hallways (which was really hard since the ceilings were pretty low) but I was so anxious to try everything out that I couldn’t wait. I knew Nat and Clint were probably waiting for me; they’d been helping me with my self-defense training, getting me ready to go out into the field (holy shit I was actually doing this) and I’d been making a lot of progress.

Sure enough, they were sparring when I crashed into the room with a shout of exuberance, shooting a web at the ceiling and yeeting myself up to one of the lower crossbeams. “Hey, guys! Check out my new suit!”

Interrupted, they glanced at me as I swung to the beam, landing in a nimble crouch that most definitely went straight to my head. Clint grinned, cupping his hands and shouting, “Throw some white in, and you’d look like Steve’s sidekick!”

I laughed, sitting on the beam and letting my legs dangle. “Okay, but this color scheme is awesome and I love it, so you don’t get to make fun of it. What do you think, Nat?”

She smiled, eyes crinkling in humor. “Looks good, маленький паук.”

I blinked, mentally translating. “Did you just call me little spider? Because I don’t hate it.”

She laughed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Good for you; you’re learning quickly. I’m proud of you.”

I grinned, warmth fluttering in my chest. “Thanks! Can we try some hand to hand moves? I want to see how the new suit does in motion.”

“Yes,” Clint said, hands on his hips. “Go easy on us. We’re only human.”

Nat rolled her eyes, patting him on the shoulder. “Don’t listen to the old man. Go easy and you’ll get pinned in ten seconds, if that.”

I laughed, attaching a web to the beam and lowering myself to the mat, dropping onto it quietly. “Let’s go. I’ve been practicing.”

I had been—really hard, with everyone who would spar with me. Bucky and Steve were normally my opponents, since they could keep up with me without risking hurting me. Thor was worried he wouldn’t be able to control his strength (which, obviously, made sense) and Bruce didn’t really fight anyways. The others were only human, and I wasn’t too confident in my ability to restrain my powers just yet.

I’d improved a lot thanks to my newfound reflexes and agility, as well as all the extra time I’d been putting in, I had no illusions of beating either of them. They had so much experience on me, but I’d been working really hard to earn their approval for the field, so I hoped I’d at least get kind of lucky and maybe last a while against them.

“Good luck, Peter,” the AI said, her voice pleasant and reassuring. “Would you like me to help you analyze their fighting patterns?”
I blinked in surprise, turning my head on instinct before I remembered there was no one there. “Oh, uh…you can do that?”

“Of course,” she said as I dropped to the mat from the beam, using a web to slow my descent. I blinked, and suddenly my lenses were filled with holographic statistics and data points overlaying Nat’s and Clint’s bodies, tracking their movements. “I’ll start now.”

I grinned, whispering a thanks and squaring up with Nat. My AI’s confidence in me and her helpful little graphics might have been…a little ego-boosting. “I think I’ll surprise you!”

She raised an eyebrow, smiling slightly. “Someone’s confident. Okay, let’s see what you’ve got.”

After a few tense seconds, during which Clint wisely removed himself from the mat, Tasha sprang at me with a soft grunt, aiming a pulled punch for my solar plexus. I’d seen it coming from a mile away, my AI’s systems alerting me on my lens, and I dodged, returning with a spinning kick to her side. I pulled the power on the kick as much as I could without leaving it ineffective, but she deflected it easily, swinging her body with her momentum.

She landed a kick on my forearm that I was sure would bruise—I guess she wasn’t holding back as much now that I had powers and super-healing—but before she could dart away, I used my super reflexes (which were so freaking awesome) and grabbed her ankle, mentally willing my sticky fingers to work reliably for once.

They did, and her eyebrows shot into her hairline when she realized she couldn’t get her ankle out of my hand.

I grinned, though she probably couldn’t see. Well, she probably knew anyways. She knew everything.

I wasn’t expecting her to smile, too.

“Looks like I can have a little more fun with you now, Peter,” she said with a smile, and then she exploded into motion.

With the grace of a ballerina, she vaulted herself towards me, using my sticky fingers against me and planting her free foot on my shoulder, twisting her body around and dropping behind me. I felt my arm pull up and behind my body, my shoulder twisting in the socket before I finally forced my sticky fingers to disengage.

Oh, that was cool. I’d have to tell Steve I was getting better at controlling it.

The momentary distraction let Nat get a shot into my back, and I stumbled forward from the force, slamming into the ring’s corded walls. I wheezed a laugh, turning back to face her. “Warn a guy before you go into assassin mode,” I joked, preparing for her next attack.

During the short lull, my AI buzzed quietly in my ear, multiple specs and notes appearing in dull green text on my lenses. “I’ve partially analyzed her fighting pattern, though hers is somewhat difficult to accurately predict. My advice is to watch her shoulders above everything—they twitch slightly when she’s about to throw a punch.”

I blink, surprised by the new information. I knew to watch her hips, because they’d give her away if she was going for a kick, but the shoulders were new. “Wow, thanks, AI lady. “You’re super nice and helpful.”
Natasha cocked her head, narrowing her eyes. “AI lady? Is FRIDAY helping you?”

“Oh, no, actually,” I say, relaxing my posture and taking off my mask, grinning. “Tony made me an AI to go with my suit! I haven’t decided what to name her yet, but she was helping me analyze your fighting style. To help me know what to do and stuff. She’s really nice so far—she kind of reminds me of you. When you’re not, you know, kicking the crap out of me.”

Tasha raised an eyebrow, smiling. “Really. Did the analysis help?”

“Kind of,” I shrugged, the mask still in my hands. It feels really awesome to be holding a mask knowing it’s mine. “She said to watch your shoulders because they twitch when you’re about to punch.”

Tasha’s smile fell, eyes narrowed in concentration. “You don’t say.”

“Thank you, little dude,” Clint said with a grin, leaning his chin against one of the lower cords of the ring, waggling his eyebrows at Tasha. “I think I’m going to have a great time during our next sparring session, Nat.”

She flipped him off. “I’ll break that habit before then, Barton. Don’t you worry.” She turned back to me, hands on her hips. “I’m inclined to label that cheating.”

“What? But I’ll have her in the field!”

“Will you still have her if you get hit by an electromagnetic shockwave? Or a signal jammer, or something similar?”

“Um…” I scratched my ear, blushing. “I guess not.”


I sighed, handing my mask to Clint. “Fine, fine.”

We practiced for a bit longer, and I held my own pretty well, all things considered. The AI was right—Nat’s shoulders did twitch, though I could tell she was trying to make herself keep still before she threw her punches. I was so close to pinning her, too, but then Steve came in and said it was time for dinner. His entrance and shout was enough to distract me, and Nat pinned me in two seconds.

“Seriously?” I yelled at him and I scrambled up, and he blinked in surprise at my indignance. “I almost had her! I was this close.” I put a millimeter of space between my thumb and index finger to dramatize just how badly he’d botched my imminent victory.

“Keep dreaming, squirt,” Tasha said as she ruffled my hair in passing. “You are getting much better, though. Proud of you.”

Natasha was always supportive and encouraging, but she didn’t hand out compliments unless she meant them, and she’d just told me she was proud of me twice in one day. I guess I really was getting better.

I might have glowed a little. I couldn’t be entirely sure.

I slipped my mask back on before I followed the others to the kitchen, to tell my AI goodbye for the day. “Thanks for your help!”
“You’re very welcome, Peter,” she said. “I’m glad I could be of assistance. Can I do anything for you before you log off?”

“Um, I don’t think so,” I say, making my way to the door and following the familiar hallways towards the smell of food. “You’re really nice. How did Tony program you?”

“Well,” she said thoughtfully, “he programmed me to provide you with any assistance and encouragement you may require. He programmed me also to be kind, and compassionate, and caring.”

“Oh, you’re definitely all of those things,” I said in agreement, stopping outside the dining room to finish my conversation. “Oh, I’ve got it! What about Karen, for your name? Cause you’re, you know. Carin’.”

That was totally perfect for her. I saw a bunch of videos online making fun of “Karen Energy” but I also knew a lot of really nice Karens, and my AI definitely qualified.

“I like that very much, Peter,” Karen said, sounding pleased. “Thank you for the name.”

“Of course!” I said with a grin. “Nice to meet you, Karen. I’ll see you tomorrow. Thanks again!”

“Goodbye, Peter.”

I took my mask off, then, pleased to find that it didn’t leave me sweaty or anything—the whole suit actually felt really, really good. Not clingy or gross or anything, even after I’d been moving around so much. Tony was awesome.

I walked into the room kind of feeling like a million bucks (probably because I was wearing a multimillion suit) and was excited to see what everyone else thought of it.

“There’s another American flag in the mix,” Sam said as soon as he laid eyes on me, munching on a pretzel as he put plates on the table.

I faltered, sighing in exasperation. “You’re supposed to be in awe. Be astounded. And impressed. Tony and I spent days on this thing.”

“And it looks great,” Steve said with a smile, ruffling my hair as he passed me. “Sam’s just picky when it comes to color schemes. He even got pissed when he realized both he and Nat had red and black costumes.”

I shot Sam a look as he blushed, flipping Steve off with a curse under his breath.

“Seriously?”

“It bothers me when there are color doubles, okay?” He said, shrugging. “You have a million and sixty quirks I could list right now, kid, so don’t act smug.”

I laughed, going to the kitchen to grab the silverware, and got much more satisfying reactions from Rhodey and Thor and Bruce. Bruce was especially impressed, as he’d been helping Tony and I some with the composition of the material. We’d taken from notes from my stretchy pants to help with my agility, and Bruce had experimented in melting a small amount of vibranium and coating the threads in a fine layer to help with the durability. Which was super cool in itself.

Whatever was for dinner smelled amazing, and I all but skipped to the dining room with the salad and utensils in hand as everyone filed in from their various places in the Compound. Rhodey
dragged Tony in a couple minutes late, having had to pull him bodily from his lab, but that was normal.

I mixed up some wet food for Stella, who had ridden Bucky’s shoulders from the lab to the living room and then to the kitchen, her tail flicking lazily against his neck as she rested there. I took her when he handed her to me and hugged her (because as I said, she’s so freaking huggable) and then let her down, where she immediately pounced on her dish.

“Hey,” Steve said when I was about to sit down, eyebrows narrowed. “No suits at the table. Go throw on a sweatshirt or something.”

I stopped, blinking, and looked around. “Is he serious?”

I got a couple exasperated nods. “Yep. When have you literally ever seen us in the dining room with our suits on?” Rhodey asked, shrugging. “He likes to keep work and this separate, and we agree. As a mini superhero, you have to follow all the rules.”

“Aye, Peter,” Thor affirmed, his face serious. “Only trouble comes from mixing work and one’s personal life. This is a small boundary we respect to keep the balance.”

Well, that was…insightful. “Um…okay,” I conceded, quickly grabbing a sweatshirt from my room and stuffing myself into it before sitting back down. “That was weird. I need, like…a list of random superhero rules or something.”

“Haven’t you learned anything from watching us flail?” Tony asked with a grin, digging into the Indian food Bruce had made. “There’s no list. We’ll help you, bud, but in the hero business, you get thrown in the deep end without a floatie and wing it.”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. “That’s…not it at all.”

I laughed as everyone began to throw in their two cents, accompanied with a lot of funny stories about their first adventures as heroes. Including how Tony had almost been shot down in a US no-fly zone, which was kind of funny after the whole almost-getting-shot-down thing. And of course, hearing about Budapest was a great time.

Even as the heroes around me recounts their failures, I couldn’t feel nervous, or unsettled. I just grinned and listened, feeling lucky to have such awesome mentors to help me with all this.

It was going to take a while, and I knew that, but I was getting stronger. Faster. And I think, a little…braver, too.

With every day, I was feeling more like I was earning my place here, surrounded by these amazing people who loved me so much. I hadn’t done anything yet, but I could feel the day coming. It was a buzzing in my fingertips, an energy in my blood. I was becoming a better person.

I was…becoming a hero, I think, and it was all thanks to them.

Chapter End Notes

So…I’m thinking three more chapters, around that. I can’t even tell you how much that freaks me out, but NOT TO FEAR! Moving on to another announcement…
My imagination went, um, WILD the other night, and I kept thinking of more and more things I could do with these characters I love so much and this universe I’ve made by changing so many important things…so…yeah. As of now, this is story #1 of…seven. Yeah. Wow. I’m really hoping they’ll all happen. I have concepts for each of them and I’ve picked the villains, and I’m really excited!!!

These are the titles in order (they’re all song titles): Whispers in the Dark, Smells Like Teen Spirit, Arms of the Angel, Everybody’s Somebody’s Fool, A Place for My Head, The Times They Are A’Changin, and Stand by Me. What I’ll do is provide the summary for each at the end of the preceding story, and post on the preceding story when the sequel is up. Probably.

Also, I PRAY they’re not all as long as this one. This one has taken me almost two and a half years, and yeah, I don’t have time for that XD but I hope you’ll stick around regardless :)}
Chapter 48

Peter Parker

My palms were sweaty, and I constantly wiped them on my suit, staring down from the elevated platform. I checked my web fluid again, making sure I had a full capsule in each one.

This was it. My final test.

If I could complete this obstacle course, they’d let me out into the field. Into the city. To… to really save people.

All I had to do was get through this obstacle course.

Which was…really long. With a lot of checkpoints. And tests. And Avengers. And…yeah.

“How’re you feeling?” Bucky asked quietly, bumping me with his elbow as I stood atop the platform two hundred feet in the air, looking out over the expanse of wilderness partially converted to my personal jungle gym. “Any soreness in your arm, or ribs?”

I’d been long-since cleared health-wise, but Bucky still asked at least three times a day. “No, I’m good,” I assured, shaking out my hands to release some of the adrenaline. “Just nervous, you know?”

Bucky smiled. “I know. But you’ll do fine. You’ve been preparing for this for a while now, kid; don’t psych yourself out.”

I nodded, breathing deeply in an effort to calm myself down. “So…first test is to swing to the next platform, right? Just using my webshooters?”

Bucky nodded. “We’re going to make sure you can easily navigate structurally dense areas with just your webshooters; buildings will be a lot easier to move through than a dense forest like this, so if you can pass this, you’re golden. Sam and Tony will be flying around you to catch you if you fall, so no worries.”

“Psh. I’m not gonna fall,” I said, hoping I didn’t regret the confident statement. “I got this. I’m ready. Also, you sounded like Tony for a second. Lots of big words.”

Bucky smirked, lightly whacking the back of my head. “Don’t get cocky, trust your gut, and you’ll be fine. Ready?”

I took another breath, steadying myself. This was everything I’d been preparing for. They wouldn’t have set this course up for me if they didn’t think I was ready to go out into the field, so…I must be ready.

“Ready, Peter,” she said, sounding a little excited. “Best of luck.”

“Thanks.”

I shifted to the very front of the platform, letting my toes hang over the edge, and looked down. I wasn’t scared of heights, but looking down two hundred feet and knowing I was going to yeet myself into the air was a little disconcerting.

“We don’t have to do this today,” Bucky said after a few seconds of hesitation.

“No, I’m okay,” I countered immediately, steeling myself. “I’m good. I just need to…you know. Overpower my natural instinct to not throw myself off of tall things.”

Bucky laughed. “Need a push?”

“Absolutely not,” I yelled, throwing him an incredulous look, unfortunately hidden by the mask. I saw Tony fly into view several feet below the platform, looking up at us. I sent him a thumbs up, letting him know that everything was all good, because it was.

“Okay,” I said, closing my eyes. “Okay. I got this. I got this. Just…step off. Just, you know…pretend like it’s the gym.” I paused, taking a deep breath, and opened my eyes. I’d overcome too damn much adversity to be stopped by a little fall.

“Okay.” I said, nodding at Bucky. “I’m ready now.”

He nodded, giving me an encouraging smile. I turned back to face the trees, squaring my shoulders and straightening my spine. Closing my eyes again, I inhaled slowly, letting my senses slowly acclimate to the chaos of the forest. I let myself absorb all the sounds of the birds and critters, the smells of the wet earth and the nearby river, and the feel of the wind ripping at my suit. The feel of the sun through my suit.

Opening my eyes, I didn’t let myself think any further. I just stepped forward off the platform.

I’d never been a huge fan of roller coasters, but…well. This was pretty awesome.

I shot a web at the nearest tree trunk after a hundred feet of falling, letting myself adjust to the way the rushing air tore at me, feeling exhilarated as the ground rushed up to meet me. The familiar sensation of my stomach dropping was unpleasant, but quickly swallowed by the adrenaline coursing through me.

The web pulled taut, and I felt my body arc downward, loose branches snapping as my body plummeted past them. I felt the timing as best I could, waiting until the momentum from the first swing had expired before propelling myself forward with another web, swinging through the trees. I felt like Tarzan. It was…

God, this was so hella awesome.

I couldn’t stop the laughter that bubbled up inside me as I got the hang of it. I hadn’t been allowed to swing so freely through the trees like this—everyone had always been a little nervous that I’d turn into a Peter pancake on a tree or the ground, but…this was incredible.

I saw Tony flying beside me out of the corner of my eye, Sam hovering above us as Redwing tracked my movements. It was nice to know they were there if I needed them, but I was feeling amazing. I didn’t think I’d need rescuing anytime soon.
The end of the trail I was on came all too soon, and I was actually disappointed when I leapt onto the next tower, scaling the metal railing to the platform, where Steve was waiting. I immediately felt kind of like I’d been on a boat too long, and I hadn’t gotten my land legs back, but I covered well enough.

“That was awesome,” I yelled, ripping off my mask to expose my probably-flushed face, grinning like a maniac. “That was so much fun, oh my God…I felt like a bird. Or like a dragon flying. Holy shit.”

Steve laughed, raising an eyebrow at my language choices. “Well…I’m glad you liked it, Peter. You did really well.”

“You did, half-pint,” Sam said, landing on his feet as his wings retracted behind him. “That was awesome to watch once you got the hang of it. Looks like one hell of a ride.”

“It is,” I agreed, pulling my mask back on. “Karen, did you have fun? I’m so psyched right now.”

Karen laughed slightly, and though I knew it was an automated reaction, the little twinkle of her laugh sounded almost human. “I did, Peter. It was very exhilarating to ride with you.”

I laughed, still enjoying the high from the adrenaline rush. “Okay, I’m totally ready now. What’s my next test?”

“See the door behind me?” Steve asked, jerking a thumb to the door in the back, which opened to a ladder leading down from the platform. This platform was bigger than the other one, and the door was probably fifteen feet behind Steve.

“Yeah.”

“You have to get to it.”

I blinked, not quite understanding the challenge. “I just…have to go to the door?” I was almost insulted by the mundane nature of the task.

“Yes,” Sam said, shrugging off the exoskeleton of his suit, hanging his wings on the railing on the side of the platform. “But you have to get past both of us to do it.”

My eyes widened. “Oh.” Yeah. That sounded more like a challenge.

“Um…okay,” I said quietly, my previous adrenaline rush amping back up. I’d done well in one-to-one combat, and even against two un-powered Avengers, but…Sam was really capable, and Steve was enhanced. This wasn’t going to be as easy as swinging had been.

“Okay, cool,” I said, jumping up and down to get my blood flowing some more. “Cool, yeah. I totally got this. Karen, we’ve got this.”

“We do indeed, Peter,” she assured. “I’ll be with you the whole time.”

Karen said that a lot, and I really appreciated it, because it was usually exactly what I needed to hear. I smiled under my mask. “I know.”

“I’m ready,” I said to Steve and Sam, who fell into stance before me.

“Come at us, pipsqueak,” Sam taunted with a grin.
So I did.

I’d been hoping to evade completely, and I almost did. I feinted left towards Steve, and he reacted exactly how I knew he would—he surged towards me, concentration wiping all emotion from his face, and went to put me in an armlock.

Unfortunately for him, my newfound agility and nimbleness (which didn’t actually sound like a word, but whatever) allowed me to change course just before he reached me, and I pushed off my left foot with the force of a train, barreling towards Sam.

Sam, bless his unpowered heart, barely saw me coming. His eyes widened just in time for me to steamroll over him (as gently as I could), knocking him to the floor and darting for the door.

I could literally taste freedom when an unyielding hand grabbed my bicep, and I was sent lurching back to the front of the platform.

Damn. Steve’s strength was no joke.

“Oh, come on,” I complained, catching my breath from the brief spurt of exertion to see Steve helping Sam up. “That should count. I think I might have even touched the knob.”

Steve laughed, not looking tired in the slightest. Well, he didn’t just propel himself across half a mile of wilderness, either. “Way too early for you to win, kiddo. This is meant to teach you patience, and thinking outside the box. You can’t beat both of us in hand-to-hand just yet, and you can’t get past us, so…what should you do?”

I paused. “But…those are…my only options.”

Sam laughed. “So you have to make another option. It’s important to know that you can improvise under pressure in the field.”

I blinked, knowing that lenses on my mask were probably at their widest. “Karen?” I asked quietly, hoping the AI would be a little smarter than me.

“May I suggest utilizing your webshooters?” She said, some information popping up on my screen about the different options for my webshooters. “You could try the net feature.” A holographic image of the net and its function popped up on my screen, and I examined it quickly, aware that Sam and Steve were waiting.

“Awesome,” I grinned, quickly pointing my webshooter at Sam. “Sorry not sorry.”

Sam didn’t even have time to move before he was encased in the net, wrapped securely and fastened to the side rail.

“Oh hell no,” Sam yelled, tugging at the stuff as I sprinted towards Steve. “Son of a bitch—don’t you dare tell me this stuff damages clothes, Peter! I swear”—

I laughed even as Steve intercepted me, Sam’s profanities growing in severity as he continued to pull futilely at the net. Even Steve smirked at Sam’s predicament, but he was still doing a good job of blocking my way. He even dodged another web net I shot at him, which stuck uselessly to the wall by the door.

“Gonna have to do better than that,” Steve smirked, grabbing my arm and putting me in a light chokehold. I flipped him almost immediately, but he landed on his feet, and the high-paced fight continued. Even Sam had stopped struggling and was watching intently.
I had to admit I was impressed with my growth. I was a couple steps behind, and my fighting style was still kind of clumsy and primarily reactive, but I was keeping up with Steve really well for how recently I started training. I missed some cues and took hits I shouldn’t have, but I also gave some back, and even started going on the offensive a little bit, once I got into a rhythm.

Unfortunately, the workout wasn’t getting me any closer to the door, which was my objective.

Sam helpfully pointed that out after another couple minutes of the exchange, when I felt myself starting to tire. “You know, you’re supposed to be trying to get to the door,” Sam yelled with a raised eyebrow. “And getting me the hell out of this fly trap.”

“It’ll dissolve in an hour,” I shouted with a grin, laughing lightly at the expletives that followed.

“Front and center, Peter,” Steve admonished, punctuating the statement with a sigh when I barely dodged the fist he sent my way.

I stumbled back, regrouping and catching my breath, but he followed me. He sent a sweeping kick to my ankles, and I made the smart decision to jump out of the way, landing nimbly on the railing beside him. The platform was tall, but I engaged my sticky hands and feet, sticking to the rail so I wouldn’t fall.

“Oh.” I said out loud when the realization came to me, feeling like my IQ had just been slashed in half. Why hadn’t I thought of this sooner? “Oh damn. Later.”

I had just enough time to see Steve’s reaction of horror before I jumped backwards, plummeting.

I heard his distant shout of dismay, but I’d already attached my web to the bottom of the platform and was scaling it like a rope in gym class. I quickly reached the bottom of the platform, crawling along the bottom, hanging upside down.

Was this what spiders felt like all the time? I didn’t hate them so much anymore. They were really out there living their best lives. This was awesome.

I finally got to the edge of the platform, crawling up along the outside of the wall and opening the door from the outside, hanging from the top of the doorjamb. My feet hovered above the platform, and I threw up a peace sign as Sam and Steve’s heads whipped towards me in surprise.

“Does this work?”

Steve blinked, looking at Sam for help, who shrugged helplessly. “I mean, we told him to think outside the box.”

“Excellent work, Peter,” Karen congratulated.

I grinned dropping to the platform to stand normally and putting my hands on my hips. “Go ahead. Tell me how awesome I am. I’m waiting.”

Steve laughed under his breath. Sam, still well and truly stuck, said, “I’m not telling you a damn thing until you get me out of this.”
“You’ve only got like…I don’t know, forty minutes left? Maybe a little more? You’ll be fine.”

Sam grumbled something under his breath, but I could hear it over the sound of Tony’s thrusters as he landed on the platform. That was probably for the best.

“Smart thinking, kid,” Tony admitted, his voice tinny through the mask. “Ready for the next part?”

“I’m so ready,” I confirmed, feeling pretty pleased with myself. I remembered Bucky’s words about not getting cocky, but I figured a little bit of pride in my accomplishments couldn’t be that bad.

Tony patted my head with a gauntleted hand, pointing into the forest. “Cool. You’re gonna swing there. It’s about three quarters of a mile due East, and all you have to do is reach the next platform in one piece.”

I paused. “In one piece?”

“Yes. There are booby traps.”

I blinked, unsure of how to take that. “Did New York City become an Indiana Jones movie set since the last time I was there?”

I could practically hear Tony smirk behind his mask. “No, but you may encounter obstacles you’ve never seen before. If you go after a mugger who turns out to be, say, part of a gang, or the mafia, or an underground operation, and you’re too focused on your one target, you may not realize that other people are gunning for you from behind and the sides. So this is to make sure you can be aware of all of your surroundings.”

I made my way to the edge of the platform, feeling a little less confident. “You know, I kind of feel like I’m being thrown into an experimental situation with absolutely no theoretical training.”

Tony snorted. “Happy trails, half-pint.” With that encouraging sentiment, he took off, hovering a little ways out, waiting for me to continue my course.

Steve patted my shoulder and smiled. “Don’t worry. Just pay attention to your surroundings and keep an eye out in the back of your head. Sound okay?”

“Yes,” I assured, jumping up onto the railing and looking out over the expanse of trees, wondering what kind of booby traps they’d set up. They were…undoubtedly creative, and I was a little antsy. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Have fun,” Sam grumbled, still stuck. “I’ll just be here. Plotting my revenge.”

I laughed, waving to him before leaping off the platform and swinging through the trees.

As I swung, I gave myself like ten seconds to enjoy the euphoric feeling of freedom, and then I started paying attention. Knowing them, they’d have snipers set up along the route as well as some manually triggered traps, so I needed to keep an eye out for both.

The snipers would probably at least include Clint, but I wouldn’t be surprised if Natasha was waiting, too. I could only assume all of them would play at least some kind of role in the course, so I could eliminate Sam, Steve, Bucky, and Tony, who seemed to be my eternal lookout.
So…I could probably expect Clint and at least one other Avenger on this course. Cool. I could be observant. Totally.

In that moment, simultaneous with my naïve thought that I could, in fact, focus on my surroundings, there was this…really weird buzz in the base of my neck. Almost like my hair was standing on end, like I was being watched, or something. I realized this just as I snagged a trip wire. With my face.

“Ow!” I screamed on instinct, clutching my forehead as I swung to the nearest sturdy branch, wondering if I was going to have a perfectly straight line across my forehead when I took my mask off. It stung.

“You alright?” Tony asked from above me, his voice dampened by the leaves and branches between us.

“I’m good,” I yelled, rubbing my forehead one more time. I also rubbed the base of my neck, which was still tingling slightly. What was that?

Shaking it off, standing, I held out my arm. I was getting ready to fire off a web and continue down the course.

The buzzing in my head became violent, bordering on painful, and in an instinctual move that could only be described as animalistic, I threw myself to the next tree.

The bark where I’d been standing was immediately splattered with neon pink paint.

Oh. So this was how it was going to be.

“Nice, kid!” Rhodey’s dim voice reached me from what I assumed was several yards away, and I assumed he was the one who’d fired the shot. “But don’t just stand there! I’ve still got a lot of ammo!”

Still reeling from the alien feeling in my neck, I took his advice and took off.

If Rhodey was the other sniper, chances were they had two different vantage points, both from areas high up where they could track me long-distance. Rhodey’s shots had come from the left and slightly behind me, so I could only assume that Clint was somewhere on the right in a similar position.

“Are you alright, Peter?” Karen asked, her voice concerned.

“Y-yeah,” I managed, a little winded. I dodged a paintball from the opposite direction, my neck flaring up again. Clint was making an appearance now, too. “Karen, is my neck okay?”

“Scanning,” she said. At the last minute, I saw another trip wire in the distance, and I dropped a few feet, swinging underneath it and shooting another web when mine caught on the wire, giving me a little extra forward momentum. “Nothing that I can detect. Are you feeling alright? Would you like me to alert FRIDAY?”

“Uh, no, I’m fine,” I said, landing on a tree branch and scaling it to hide among the denser branches, out of sight of Rhodey and Clint. I needed to catch my breath. “Just…had a really weird feeling, s’all.”

“I’ll keep an eye on it,” she assured. “The platform is about a third of a mile away. Can you make it?”
That was good. That was closer than I thought I was. I was moving quickly. “Yeah. I can make it.”

I felt my former confidence returning, now that I knew there was nothing physically wrong with me. I’d tell the others about it after the test was over. Knowing them, they’d make me stop halfway through, and then I’d have to go through all of this again…no way. I was finishing this today. I’d worked too hard.

“I can make it,” I repeated, steeling myself.

Taking a deep breath, preparing to leave the covers of the branches, I closed my eyes.

I could do this.

Opening them again, I focused my mind like Sam and Dr. Sanders had taught me, and threw myself forward towards the platform.

Almost immediately, a barrage of neon green and pink paintballs soared past me and into the bark of the trees, barely missing my swinging form. I increased my pace, feeling the strain from the unfamiliar motion on my arms, but my newfound strength and endurance was a big help.

That alien feeling was back, so I decided to listen to it and swing to the left, just barely dodging more paintballs.

So…did I have…an alarm system, or something? Because while it was an awfully disconcerting feeling, and it made me feel kind of weird and creeped out…it was coming in handy today. I kind of hoped—once I made sure it wasn’t, like, an alien parasite waiting to take over me—it stuck around.

The platform came into view sooner rather than later, after a few more trip wires and a couple motion-triggered barrages of blunt rubber arrows. By the time I swung up onto it to greet Bruce and Thor, my neck was tingling on the brink of pain, but it had saved me from a lot of embarrassment.

“Howdy,” I greeted, trying to appear normal as I swung up onto the platform, a little out of breath. “I did it.”

Bruce smiled in encouragement, nodding. “You did. Nice job, Peter.”

“Aye, Peter,” Thor agreed, clapping a heavy hand on my shoulder and momentarily lifting me in the air with a triumphant yell, which had to make me laugh. “You will make a noble warrior yet! Asgard would be delighted!”

I laughed again as he set me down, grinning. “Thanks, Thor.”

He patted me on the head with a gentle hand, returning the smile as Tony touched down. “Way to go, Spider boy.” He gave me a high five.

The affirmations were nice to receive, and I had to admit I was pretty happy about it. “Thanks! What’s my next test?”

“Last one,” Bruce said, turning and hefting up a metal suitcase, handing it to me. “You have to transport this to safety. Safety is the Compound.”

I blinked, looking around at my surroundings. This platform was lower than the others, and
I couldn’t see over the tallest trees in most directions. “Which way is that?”

“That’s what you have to figure out, mister,” Tony said unapologetically. “There are a couple kickers, kiddo.”

I resisted the urge to complain. I was already pretty tired, but I couldn’t stop now, not when I was this close. “What kickers?”

“You will be pursued by a fearsome opponent,” Thor said gravely. “Lady Natasha will be attempting to get the suitcase back from you for the duration of the trial.”

“Oh, shit,” I said on reflex, eyes widening.

I’d never heard a single time Natasha failed a mission.

Bruce chuckled, looking amused. “And you can’t use your webshooters.”

“What?” I asked incredulously, turning to him in surprise. “This isn’t a test, you’re trying to kill me!”

Tony laughed. “Nat’ll go easy on you. Maybe. Look, as soon as you even touch the Compound lawn, you’re done, and you’re cleared for duty. Your time starts when you hit the forest floor. And no scaling trees to figure out where you are. Have fun!”

He blasted into the sky without another word, and I looked helplessly at Thor and Bruce.

Bruce shrugged, smiling slightly. “I’ll give you a hint. Use the sun, figure out which direction the Compound is from that. It’s not too cloudy. You remember how to do it?”

Looking up, squinting into the sun, I looked around, trying to orient myself. I was smart, sure, but for some reason, using the sun to tell direction and time had always kind of confused me. “I think so.”

“Away with you, now, Peter,” Thor prompted, gesturing towards the ladder as he smiled. “I sincerely hope you break both of your legs.”

I…didn’t know what to say to that.

“Oh my God,” Bruce snorted, cackling as I blinked in surprise, glancing at Thor. I didn’t think I’d ever seen Bruce laugh so hard. “He meant—he meant—oh my God. He meant ‘break a leg.’”

I blinked again. “Oh. Um…thanks.”

Bruce was still laughing, which made me laugh, honestly, because Bruce never smiled like that. I didn’t think Thor really got the joke, but he was laughing, too. It was kind of what I needed to put my mind at ease for this next part. The last part.

I laughed again, making my way to the ladder. “Well…thanks. See you on the flip side!”

With that, I descended the ladder with the suitcase in hand and began, ready to begin the final phase. I was ready.

…I was not okay with this!” I shouted into the forest, fully aware that I was giving away my
position to Russian superspy Natasha Romanov. “I’m not okay with it at all!”

I cursed as I tripped over a root, my agility apparently doing nothing to cancel out my clumsiness. The suitcase wasn’t heavy, but it was getting annoying to carry, and I was getting really tired. Plus, the sun as high in the sky, now, and I thought I was going in the right direction, but I couldn’t be sure.

And Nat was obviously watching me, and had obviously been doing so this entire time, but even with my new little warning bell, I could barely detect when she was planning an attack.

“You’re doing a great job, Peter,” Karen encouraged. “I’m not allowed to tell you what direction the Compound is in, but I can tell you that you’re doing very well so far.”

Well, I sure hoped that was covert AI speak for “on the right track,” because I was two seconds away from throwing in the towel.

I was exhausted and sweaty even with the sweat-resistant material, and I’d been walking for an hour. Besides that, I’d barely evaded all of Natasha’s sneak attacks, including but not limited to a diluted tear gas, more paintballs, some tripwires (one of which almost got me flattened by a falling tree branch that had not been expected by me or Natasha, and warranted a frantic time-out), and a multitude of powerful heart attacks that I wasn’t sure I actually survived.

But I still had the damn suitcase, and I was still carrying on, so I had to be doing something right.

“Thanks, Karen,” I said, heaving a deep breath. “Can you tell me how much farther?”

“Unfortunately, no. I can tell you that you should try moving in a stealthier manner. You’re making quite the spectacle for Ms. Romanov.”

In a childish response that even I would admit was a little over the top, I cupped my hands around my mouth and yelled, “I hope you’re having fun, Nat!”

“You’re trying to kill me,” I said, scuttling further up the tree to keep the suitcase out of her reach. “Seriously. Heart attack. Now I know why Tony gets so mad at me when I scare him.”

Nat chuckled, looking entirely too pleased with the situation. “Peter, you realize this is supposed to simulate an actual exercise, don’t you? One in which you’re transporting something important away from the enemy and to a safe location, and in which you can’t rely on your technology.”

“Yeah, but when would I have to take stuff places?” I asked, actually curious to hear the answer. “I was just…you know, planning on saving people from stuff. If I wanted to transport stuff I would’ve gotten a job with FedEx.”

Nat nodded, crossing her arms and leaning against the bottom of the tree, looking up at me. “Well, what if you discovered a smuggling ring of some kind? Human trafficking, drug smuggling, that kind of thing, and you found documents or information that could be used as evidence against them? Would you leave them, or would you get them to the police?”

I frowned, my shoulders slumping. “I’d take them to the police,” I mumbled reluctantly.
She laughed lightly, eyes twinkling. “Then get down here, маленький паук. I’ll give you a thirty second head start.”

I sighed, resigning myself to my fate, and dropped to the ground. “Thanks for helping me.”

“You’re welcome,” she said with a smiled. “Now get going. You’re down to twenty-three seconds.”

I snorted, turning around and breaking into a run, rejuvenated by the brief respite. “See you later!”

She waved, and I turned back around, continuing to run.

Okay. So, in terms of speed, I was definitely faster. However, Nat had always been a lot better at navigating tough terrain than me, so I needed to think of a way to throw her off. She’d no doubt track me by sound and by my footprints, so…how could I throw her off my trail?

I started running in a wide zig-zag pattern and doubling back some, looping around trees and deliberately disturbing branches or bushes I shouldn’t have trampled, trying to confuse her a bit. I also made a lot of noise once I knew my thirty-second break was up.

Then, I picked a direction and started slinking quietly, ducking behind thick trunks and keeping an eye out for the flash of bright red, the only thing that would give her away on this landscape.

“You’re doing much better, Peter,” Karen congratulated. “Keep doing what you’re doing.”

I assumed that meant stay on course, so I did, moving a little faster. I covered ground faster than I thought I would, honestly, and soon, I could tell the trees were starting to thin. I was reaching the edge of the dense forest.

“Thank God,” I breathed, stumbling towards the break in the trees, ready to be done so I could finally go out in the city.

I was almost to the edge of the clearing when my neck buzzed in frantic warning, and I narrowly escaped Natasha’s roundhouse kick that might have decapitated me.

“Oh, for the love of all things sacred,” I muttered, familiar adrenaline buzzing through me as I turned to face her, still creeping backwards towards the edge of the clearing.

“I’ll take the suitcase now,” she said with a smirk, waiting expectantly.

“Nope.” I didn’t have a plan, but at least I sounded confident. “I’m just gonna…you know…take this and run.”

And I did. Unfortunately, thanks to my clumsy nature and Nat’s graceful bounds, she caught up to me, and I had to stumble backwards when she slammed to a halt in front of me. “Suitcase.”

“No.”

She came at me again, leading with a kick to my head (which probably wouldn’t have hurt, knowing her, but still looked incredibly lethal) which I ducked under, using the second of limbo to get in close and grab her other leg in an attempt to throw her off balance. Unfortunately, she just adjusted her position and rolled over my shoulders, twisting my arm that held the suitcase.
Luckily, I was a star pupil, and I paid attention in my hand-to-hand lessons. I rolled with her to avoid her locking my arm, using my strength to jump and propel myself off of a tree, wrenching my arm out of her grip and stumbling to a halt, this time closer to the clearing.

“Let bygones be bygones?” I suggested weakly, holding up my hands as she advanced on me again, looking disconcertingly confident.

“No can do, Peter,” she said with a smile, lunging again.

I abandoned all hope and ran.

“Excellent choice, Peter,” Karen commended over my racing heart.

I knew quite well that I wouldn’t be able to beat her—I never had before. So my best bet was to take the opening while I was this close to the clearing and just take my chances with fate.

I stumbled a couple times over upturned roots, and thought of how much easier it would be to swing, but then I broke through the tree line and sprinted over the finally-flat ground towards the gathered group of Avengers.

I ran, and ran, and finally broke the threshold of what was actually considered the Compound’s yard, earning a collective cheer from the rest of the Avengers waiting for me, Natasha hot on my heels.

“Oh my God, I’m saved,” I heaved as my family cheered around me, clapping me on the back with grins and affirmations.

I heard Nat run up behind me, slowing to a stop and putting her hands on her knees, smiling despite herself. “You run fast, kiddo.”

I breathed a laugh, dropping to the grass and laying spread-eagle, content to just breathe and appreciate my victory. “That’s my…only saving grace…from you.”

She laughed, sitting down beside me and ruffling my hair. “Proud of you, Peter. So proud.”

Though my eyes were closed, I grinned, hearing her chuckle.

“I have to ask,” I heard Clint say, opening my eyes to look at him as he nudged the fallen suitcase with his foot. His tone sounded a little weird, like he was exaggerating something. “What’s in here?”

“I thought it was empty,” I said, sitting up, my interest piqued. “It didn’t feel heavy.”

“Well,” Bucky said, sitting down beside me and unbuckling the suitcase, revealing nothing but a manila envelope. With a smile, he handed it to me. “Not entirely empty.”

Confused, I took the envelope, a wave of apprehensive déjà vu crashing over me as I tore it open, unfolding the letter inside.

I skimmed the first page, which was a bunch of legal jargon that I didn’t really understand, and then flipped to the next page, where big, bolded words stared up at me, and for the second time in my life, I was left completely, utterly speechless by the sheer amount of luck that had wandered into my life.

The adoption was final. I was officially Bucky Barnes’ adopted kid. Which basically meant
I was the Avengers’ adopted kid.

“Peter?” Bucky asked after a minute, nudging my shoulder. “You okay?”

I laughed under my breath, rubbing a fist under my nose and blinking quickly, swallowing. “Yeah. Yeah. Okay is…no, I’m great. I…” I breathed deeply, folding the papers and putting them carefully back into the envelope, holding it carefully.

I looked up at the heroes surrounding me and smiled, feeling so, so blessed. “Thanks.”

“No getting rid of us now,” Rhodey said with a grin. “Too bad. All purchases are final.”

I laughed, wiping my sleeve across my eyes, and nodded. “Yeah. I think I’m okay with that.”

We stayed like that, in the grass under the sun, for the next hour, talking and laughing and being. The euphoria soaring through my veins when I’d first swung through the trees earlier was nothing compared to this feeling, and…it was amazing.

They were just so amazing.

When it finally got a little too hot, we made our way towards the Compound, and Bucky slung an arm over my shoulder, Tony coming up beside him.

“Ready for the second part of your big day?” Bucky asked me, smiling as he nudged Tony.

Tony rolled his eyes, but smiled anyways, looking away. “Yeah, yeah. Excited to blow all my money, I know.”

I grinned anyways, excited for the plan I’d begged Tony to help me create. “You have plenty. Besides, they need it more.”

“I know, squirt. I’m messing with you.” Tony smiled, and it looked a lot more genuine. Nothing like the flashy smile he reserved for the media. “Go shower, then we’ll all get ready.”

I nodded eagerly, all but running to my room to change.

I’d worked really hard to plan this with the other Avengers, and I couldn’t wait to see it happen.

…

“Benny!” I shouted as soon as I caught sight of him, breaking out in a huge grin as I ran to him, almost knocking him over with the force of my hug. “You’re here!”

Benny was obviously surprised by not only my presence, but my enthusiastic greeting, and hesitantly hugged me back. “Peter? Is that you, boy?”

I pulled back, still smiling, kind of resisting the urge to cry in relief. He was so sick the last time I was here, and—and I honestly wasn’t sure he’d still be here when I came. “Yeah, it’s me. It’s so good to see you. You look great!”

Benny grinned wide, toothless smile still bright as always, and laughed quietly. “You’re gonna make an old man blush. I don’t look that good.”

I laughed with him, looking around as the commotion attracted the attention of others in the
I recognized several of them, but a lot of them were new faces, as well.

“What’re you doing back here?” Benny asked, smile dropping in concern. “I thought you’d finally gotten out of this dump. Don’t tell me you’re back.”

I smiled, shaking my head. “No. I found an awesome family. I came to introduce them and bring you guys some stuff.”

“Where should we drop the treasure?” Tony yelled from his Iron Man suit, touching down with a pile of wooden beams in his arms.

“Oh, uh…” I scanned the yard, looking around at the tents and the residents, finding an empty patch of grass a little ways off. “Over there is fine.”

“What’s goin’ on here?” Benny asked, raising an eyebrow. “Since when do you have Tony Stark takin’ orders from you, boy?”

I laughed, glancing behind me as the rest of my family disembarked from the freshly-landed Quinjet, unloading some more materials. “Not just Tony. The Avengers. They’re who took me in.”

Benny’s jaw couldn’t had dropped any lower had it fallen off.

“Anyways,” I said quickly in a gush of excitement, glancing around again. “I talked to Tony and he said since taking me in and hearing about…you know, everything that goes on here, he wanted to direct more SI Aid funding to the New York homeless population, and…” I shrugged, looking around. “You guys were always so good to me, so I asked if we could build something here, and he said yes.”

Benny looked properly surprised, glancing around the little clearing in awe. “You want…to build somethin’ here? What, like a office a’ some kind?”

I smiled again, barely suppressing my excitement. “No. Like…a whole shelter, for everyone living here. And Tony even hired some people to help run it and an adjoining soup kitchen.”

I’d drawn up the plans with Tony, whose engineering skills had really come in handy. He’d gotten a building permit from the city and checked with a couple geologists about the integrity of the soil, and they’d assured us that as long as we used a simple foundation and didn’t use materials that were too heavy, the land would be fine to build on.

“The Avengers and you r’gonna build two whole buildings?” Benny asked dubiously, but the old man’s eyes were lit up at the prospect. “That’ll be a sight.”

I laughed again, feeling ecstatic that this was finally, actually happening. “No, actually; we’re gonna have some more help. They should be here any minute…”

As if on cue, several squad cars pulled up to the edge of the clearing and parked on a nearby street, twenty or so officers exiting the cars and coming over.

I squeezed Benny’s shoulder and jogged towards them, meeting Officer Travis first. “I’m glad you could make it!”

Officer Travis, Officer Veromi at his side, smiled, shaking my hand. “Me too, Peter. You look a lot better. How’re you feeling?”
“Good,” I said honestly, shrugging with a little smile. “A whole lot better. Thanks so much for doing this.”

“Anytime, kiddo,” Officer Veromi assured me with a pat on the shoulder. “Let’s get to work, boys and girls! These buildings aren’t going to build themselves!”

The officers followed her towards the camp, the homeless population exiting their tents and staring in awe as the force made their way towards the Avengers, and I smiled when some of them stopped to interact with the residents, introducing themselves. Veromi even stopped to play a little soccer with some kids before proceeding.

“This was a great idea, and I’m glad you reached out to the NYPD,” Officer Travis said, and I turned back to him. “What made you think of it?”

I shrugged a little self-consciously, glancing back. I had…some horrible memories here, for sure. After all, Jason had kidnapped me here, and betrayed me here. But I’d also been cared for and protected by several of the residents, even when no one else had my back. It was bittersweet place for me, and I wanted to do something to make it better.

“I stayed here a lot when I was…running, at first,” I supplied, aware that, despite their help, Officers Travis and Veromi didn’t know the whole story. “A lot of people here helped me out, and…I wanted to do what you said, you know? Focus my energy on helping the people I can right now.”

Officer Travis’ eyebrows went to his hairline, and he looked lost for words for a moment. Finally, he settled on a disbelieving little laugh, looking at his force as they shed some of their gear and started helping lay the foundation and nailing the wood planks together for the frame.

“You’re going to be an amazing man someday,” he said, patting me on the shoulder.

I blushed, unprepared for the sincere comment, but smiled, happy that he was nice enough to think so. “Thanks. I…that means a lot.”

He put an arm around my shoulders, and we started towards the camp. “So…what should I do? Damage control, frame, foundation…?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Just pick something and help out, I guess.”

Benny snagged my arm as I passed, Officer Travis rolling up his sleeves and going to help out with the foundation.

Benny initiated the hug this time, and I hugged him back. I’d missed him. “You’re a good boy, Peter,” he said, his words thick and wavering. I pulled back to see tears in his eyes as he watched the force work, and his hands shook. “You’re a good boy. Don’t you forget it.”

I could only smile. “Thanks, Benny.”

I’d been utterly betrayed and terrified just a few dozen feet away from where I stood, and the memories here reminded me of times I never wanted to remember. Of months of anguish and solitude that had no place in a child’s life.

But as I turned to look at the group of heroes behind me, enhanced and normal alike, I found myself making new memories, of helping people I knew and loved and cherished, and doing so with my family and some of the heroes who’d helped save me when I needed it.
When I thought about all this, the bad ones didn’t seem to matter so much, anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Eeeeee! I’m very happy. I very much like this chapter. Hope you did too. Thanks so much for reading!!! Hope you're enjoying, and please, please comment!
Tony Stark

“Ah, son of a bitch,” I muttered as I scanned the headline, throwing the magazine cover up to the holographic screen behind me, swiveling in my chair to inspect it. “Here we go.”

I’d known without a doubt that the Avengers and the NYPD cooperating to build a homeless shelter in the middle of Queens would attract some media attention, and I was right. The process had taken a full week (and was surprisingly satisfying, though I wouldn’t admit it to anyone). By the third day, all the major channels, local and national, were camped on the edge of the premises, filming the movement and asking for comments from residents and builders.

Steve had fed them some lines about the importance of helping in the local community as well as around the world, and they’d eaten it up with the tact of hungry wolves. Peter’s friend Benny had given a statement, too, expressing his gratitude and surprise that we would do this for them. That had been actually somewhat moving; even I’d admit that.

I’d heard from one of the other residents that Benny had advanced prostate cancer, and had immediately given him a card for a local clinic and worked it out with the receptionist to put all future treatment for him on his tab. Benny had been reluctant to accept, but I pulled the Peter card and got a promise to at least go for a visit.

Even Officer Travis had given a statement from the NYPD, explaining that they were honored to be included in the task, and to “serve and protect” stretched beyond their regular jobs in and around New York.

That wasn’t what worried me. In fact, the positive press, though an unintended side effect, was pretty nice.

What worried me was the fact that some of the media vultures were actually quite intelligent, and had no trouble putting two and two together.

Avengers Mystery Kid?

Below it was a photo of the Avengers taking a break from building, water bottles in hand, a laughing Peter smack at the center of them. Bucky had his arm around the kid’s shoulders, and Rhodey was sitting beside him, grinning. It wasn’t a good photo, but unfortunately, some variation of it was on the cover of every newspaper, magazine, and tabloid in the city and surrounding areas. I had no doubt it would go national by tomorrow.

At least the editor had been smart enough to blur Peter’s face a little. Maybe I wouldn’t sue them. I’d see how I felt tomorrow.

I personally thought the headline was lacking, but the article gave plenty. They’d been able to gather, from Peter’s interactions with us, and the fact that he left on the Quinjet with us, that he was ours. They just didn’t know the relationship.

I’d known this would happen, as Peter requested we not make an official statement until people found out, but I hoped he wasn’t reading the comments. Some of the rumors, especially from
people who didn’t exactly approve of us or our methods, were cruel and ridiculous, even for me.

“FRIDAY,” I said after a moment of deliberation, throwing the headline back on the computer screen instead of the holograph. “Can you make sure Peter doesn’t have access to the comments sections of these articles?”

“Sure thing, boss,” she assured. “You may want to inform him, though.”

I sighed. “Yeah, you’re right. I just don’t want to give the kid anything else to worry about.”

“What would I worry about?”

I jumped, spinning in my chair and fastening my hand firmly over my chest. “I have told you to quit doing that! Do you want me to die? Seriously?”

Peter laughed, putting Stella down and letting her pounce around the office, pawing at Dummy. Stella, for some reason, was fascinated with Dummy. She loved riding around on his head when he rolled around the office.

“Sorry. But what would I worry about?”

“Nothing.”

Peter raised an eyebrow, plopping down on a stool next to me. “What is it? Now I’m not going to leave you alone until you tell me.” I sent him a look, but he just shrugged, getting comfortable. “I can annoy you for hours. Let’s do this.”

I sighed, ruffling his hair. “Yeah, I know. I’m glad.”

He shook his head, looking a little more certain of himself. “No, it’s okay. I’ll tell them, just so they know, but… I guess it’s time.” He smiled, glancing at me. “It’s not like it’s something to be embarrassed about. I’m happy.”

I snorted, patting him on the shoulder and standing to retrieve the cat, who’d somehow wormed her way into one of my partially open toolboxes and was clanking around for all
she was worth. “You’re hilarious. There’s no way I could hold a press conference on something like this, even I know that.”

Peter looked confused, watching me as I wrestled the cat away from the screwdriver she’d claimed. “But who’s gonna do it? I thought you were kind of the face for the Avengers?”

I smirked, putting Stella on his head, where she slid precariously until Peter finally grabbed her. “Poor boy. Don’t know a thing. No. For something like this, you need to call in the big guns.”

“Who’s that?” He asked, looking a little apprehensive.

“You’ll see.”

…

Pepper Potts

“Man, it’s good to be home,” I mumbled to myself, descending the steps of the jet and pushing the hair from my eyes. The last few months had been absolutely exhausting. I’d been hopping from Tokyo to Cairo to London to Beijing to St. Petersburg and back again, hosting an international tour of SI seminars on some of our newest medical technology.

The hours were long and trying, and my crash courses on foreign languages were tested astoundingly, but it was fulfilling work. Tony had come to see me a few times, too, so it wasn’t like I hadn’t seen him in six months.

I finally reached the tarmac, folding up my sunglasses and putting them in my purse. Tony was waiting for me.

“Good morning, Mr. Stark,” I greeted with a teasing smile, excited to see him after so long.

“And good morning to you, Ms. Potts,” he replied, wrapping his arms around me as soon as I was in reach. I took a deep breath, warm memories flooding my mind as I breathed in his unique scent—always a mixture of some stupidly expensive cologne and the permanent residue of oil and grease that he could never quite cover.

“I missed you,” I admitted, kissing him quickly as he put an arm around my shoulders, taking my purse. “If you’d sign the things I give you and do the things I ask you to do, you know, I could be home more often.”

“Well that’s why I made you CEO,” he argued, holding the door open for me. “Because you’re infinitely more responsible than me.”

I laughed, unable to stay mad at him. “So, give me the basics. How much damage control have we done?”

Tony had called me yesterday and asked me to leave the rest of the tour (which was only two more stops) to some of the higher-level Board members and executives who had accompanied me. He’d been keeping me updated on Peter’s situation since they took him in, and some of what he’d told me made my heart ache for the poor boy. I had no trouble abandoning the rest of the tour to come help him and the others with the press release for his adoption.

Tony shrugged, calling up some holographs of the nastier articles on his phone. “Well, we might be suing TMZ and Lifestyle Magazine for revealing Peter’s face, since he’s a minor, and I’ve already deleted the comments that I deemed stupid and childish. Most of the articles are
speculative and respectful, but the tabloids are having a field day. I told our agents to wait for you.”

“Of course you did,” I said with a sigh, examining the situation. This was going to be a tricky one, but at least I didn’t have to spin any ridiculous lies. “We’re just telling a watered-down version of the truth, right?”

“Right. No mention of any powers or his parents or HYDRA. Just the fact that he was being attacked, we saved him and took him into protective custody because of classified circumstances, he grew on us, we adopted him. With a little more eloquence.”

I laughed. “Right. I’ll get right on that. And after that…”

I grabbed his tie and pulled him in for another kiss, smiling at him. “I’m going to show you just how much I missed you.”

A slow smile spread over Tony’s face, and he kissed me again, letting go reluctantly as I sat down in the living room, getting to work. “Yes, ma’am.”

…

Peter Parker

I knocked on the door of Bruce’s lab, leaning against the doorframe. He was behind a wall of glass to prevent any spilled chemicals or anything from escaping through fumes, but he could still hear me. “Bruce?”

“Hm?” He said, looking up and squinting through his goggles, wheeling his stool back from the microscope when he saw it was me. “Hey, Peter. What’s up?”

“Do you have a second?” I asked, watching him carefully remove a tray of slides from under the microscope.

“Sure, just let me sanitize everything,” he said absently, beginning the process.

Bruce did some research for a couple universities and for the CDC on occasion, and he’d been asked to collaborate with from CDC scientists to look at a new strain of flu that had popped up in Brazil. He entered the little sanitation stall and stripped out of his suit, leaving him in his regular clothes, then let the disinfectant spray do its work.

“Everything okay?” He asked, washing his hands in the sink at the front of his lab when he was finished.

“Yeah, I just had a question about my powers, and Tony’s busy,” I said, fidgeting a little. I hoped my weird sense thing wasn’t anything bad. “It happened during my test a week ago. With the homeless shelter and the adoption and everything, I kind of forgot about it until now.”

Bruce nodded outside the door and into the hallway, and I moved to let him pass. We made our way towards the living room and kitchen; it was nearing dinnertime, but a couple of the others were on assignment, so we were fending for ourselves for dinner. “Okay. What is it?”

“Well,” I started, rubbing the base of my neck as a phantom feeling buzzed there, “it’s kind of like the base of my neck starts tingling or buzzing when I’m about to get hit by something.”

Bruce paused, glancing at me. “You mean like a sixth sense of some kind?”
“Maybe? It kind of happened out of the blue the other day. I hit one of the wires because I didn’t see it coming, and after that whenever something was about to hit me, or vice versa, my neck would buzz. Kind of like an alarm system, or something.”

Bruce hummed pensively, continuing on. “That’s very interesting. There’s a lot research that suggests that spiders have an augmented sixth sense that pertains to the world around them. For example, they can sense the difference between a blade of grass and an insect becoming caught in their web. That might work differently with you, and allow you to sense your surroundings at a more specific level.”

Damn. That was…halfway awesome. “Seriously? I can like…sense things around me without trying?”

Bruce smiled, laughing a little. “Well, from what you’ve told me, it pertains more to danger and threats, but I suppose. We’ll do some tests later to figure out the parameters and everything.”

“Sounds good,” I conceded, beelining to the fridge. “Are there any leftovers from pizza night?”

“I don’t think so,” Bruce called, making his way to the living room. I was eyeballing Sam’s leftover spaghetti when I heard a pause, then Bruce said, “Pepper! Wow, it’s great to see you!”

My head perked up, and I carefully extracted myself from the fridge, slinking towards the doorway. A woman’s voice replied, “Bruce, I haven’t seen you in so long! You look great. How are you?”

From there it was more small talk, but she sounded nice. Kind of like Laura. I looked slowly around the doorframe, catching sight of a tall woman in an impressive pantsuit and pumps, with long strawberry-blond hair and a kind, freckled face. She had a pretty smile.

I was doing a lot better being out in public and interacting with others, but meeting strangers was still kind of intimidating to me, which was more than a little embarrassing. Nevertheless, I swallowed once, walking a little into her line of sight and coming up beside Bruce.

She saw me first, breaking into a motherly smile. “Hi, sweetie; you must be Peter. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Well, I’d finally met her, and so far, she lived up to the hype.

“Hi,” I said, giving her an awkward smile. Out of habit, I tugged at my left sleeve, fisting the edge in my hand to make doubly sure my scar was completely covered. “You’re Ms. Potts? I’ve heard a lot about you too.”

Luckily, she didn’t seem to notice any discomfort, or if she did, she was good at hiding it. “You can call me Pepper. It’s nice to finally meet you. Actually, you’re right on time; I was just drafting a statement for the press release tomorrow.”

Bruce glanced at me at the same time my eyes went wide. “To…tomorrow? You’re announcing it so soon?” It seemed to be happening a lot faster than I’d thought. I’d only talked with Tony about it yesterday.

She nodded, giving me a concerned glance as she picked up her StarkPad. “That’s what I was planning, but we can hold off, if you’re uncomfortable. It’s just better to get a jump on these things; the longer we wait, the more we risk someone running with a rumor and convincing half the nation it’s true, and by then we’ll be doing damage control instead of releasing an
I nodded absently, shifting on my feet. “No, that… that makes sense. Sorry, it’s just happening kind of fast. I didn’t think the whole world would find out so quickly, you know?”

Pepper smiled again. I liked it when she smiled. It reminded me of May. “Of course, honey. I completely understand. If it makes you feel any better, the only things about you I’ll be releasing are your name and age. I won’t say they won’t find out more about you—the media can be very thorough information gatherers—but you should have a bit more time to settle down before the story really blows up.”

That made me feel better. Bruce put a hand on my shoulder, and I relaxed slightly. “Okay. Um, thanks a lot for doing all this, and coming all the way here. I know you’re really busy.”

Pepper snorted, laughing under her breath. “Trust me, sweetie. You have nothing to worry about. I blame Tony Stark for keeping me away from home six months out of the year.”

“You’re killing me, Pep,” Tony said suddenly, appearing in the living room doorway. “Most years it’s four, max.”

“Hm,” she said with a raised eyebrow, a small smile decorating her face. “And that makes it so much better.”

He kissed her cheek, looking over her shoulder at the draft. “Peter, do you want to be at the press release? You don’t have to be, but I’m giving you the option in case.”

“Definitely not,” I said immediately, the thought nearly sending me into a panic. That was definitely not a decision I had to think about. “I don’t want to be anywhere near there.”

Bruce chuckled, sitting down on one of the armchairs and flicking on the TV. “Point taken.”

Tony nodded. “I figured. No worries, you don’t have to be. You can chill here. I guess you’ll be too tired out to go, anyways,” he said with a smile, winking. “When do you leave?”

His words immediately sent adrenaline rushing through me, and I couldn’t help but grin. “As soon as Bucky gets back. Steve said the mission went well and they should be home in a couple hours, so then we’ll drive into the city and set up and everything.”

Tonight, I was finally going on my first patrol. I’d spent a while with Steve, Bucky, Sam, and Nat, working on a map of where I’d go tonight, and what streets I could patrol and everything. Nat was going to be meandering on the ground in a disguise in case I needed backup, and Sam would be watching from the roofs, doing the same thing. Steve and Bucky would be running comms from a spot in the middle of the area in one of the Avengers’ disguised vans, ready in case I needed backup.

I’d told them that I really thought four Avengers as immediate backup was kind of overkill, but I was also happy that they all wanted to come help out, too. In fact, all nine of them had wanted to come at some point (even Bruce, who really hated leaving the Compound), but we’d whittled it down to just the four of them.

I glanced at Pepper; I knew Tony had given her the basics, but I didn’t know her very well yet, and I didn’t want to say anything too personal about Spiderman until I’d gotten to know her some. Keeping it vague, I said, “I’m really excited. We’re going to go to Queens, near Astoria, I think.”
Bruce smiled at my excitement, and Tony snorted, holding Pepper’s hand and sitting her down as she typed quickly with her free fingers, looking focused. “You’ll be great, Pete. We can all fly in if you need us for anything.”

I laughed. ‘Yep. I’m gonna yell ‘Avengers, Assemble’ for a thirty-something year old mugger stealing an old lady’s purse. Pepper would have a great time cleaning that up with the press.”

Pepper laughed, glancing at me. “That would be interesting, for sure.”

Bruce nudged me with his foot, looking pointedly at the kitchen. “You know, you’re not going anywhere unless you eat first. Remember your metabolism, kiddo.”

I blushed, smiling a little as my stomach verbally agreed, and went to the kitchen.

“You think Sam will sabotage my night if I eat his spaghetti?” I yelled, already dumping it on a plate to reheat.

“He’ll do more than that,” Tony yelled. “He’s still mad at you for webbing him to the wall during your test.”

I snorted. Well, he’d get over it.

“You ate my spaghetti,” Sam said, eyes dark as he crossed his arms over his chest from the back of the van, which was parked in a darkened alley on the edge of the zone we’d approved for my patrol tonight. “If you fall from your webs, I’m not saving you. I was looking forward to that all day.”

I grinned sheepishly, shrugging. “Sorry? I’ll make you some more.”

“Peter, you couldn’t boil water without supervision. The only thing you can make by yourself is hot chocolate.”

Bucky snorted, and I blushed, getting defensive. “Okay, but my hot chocolate rocks. A lot of people say that instead of working on your weaknesses, you should focus on making your strengths better. And you know what? I’ve done that with hot chocolate. So you can keep your cooking skills. I’ll subsist off hot chocolate for the rest of my life if I need to.”

“You absolutely won’t,” Steve said decidedly, raising an eyebrow. “I’ll show you how to make spaghetti sauce this weekend. Sam, you get first dibs.”

“You’re the favorite, Steve,” Sam said, opening the back of the van and hopping out, letting his wings spread. He pointed at me. “And you’re not getting a single bite.”

I laughed. “I’m making it. I’ll just take some before I tell you it’s ready.”

“I’d be careful,” Nat said from the driver’s seat, wrapping a tattered coat around her shoulders and mussing her hair. “Steve’s a neurotic cook.”

“Hey,” Steve defended as I laughed. “I’m disciplined. There’s a difference.”

I knew the banter was engineered to calm my nerves, but that didn’t make me any less grateful for it. I could feel adrenaline buzzing through me, accompanied by a wave of nervousness
and self-consciousness every few minutes.

What if something went wrong? What if I did something wrong? What if I hurt someone on accident? What if I didn’t get there in time?

These thoughts had been racing through my head on repeat for the past few days, but I knew I’d have to push past them if I wanted this to work. And I did. I really, really wanted this to work.

“I think I’m ready,” I said quietly.

The banter was broken, and the spell of levity and humor followed. I clutched my mask tightly, looking up. “I’m ready,” I said again, stronger this time.

Steve broke the silence first, smiling and ruffling my hair. “Of course you are. We’ll be with you the whole time.”

I smiled back, feeling a little better. “Thanks.”

“I’m gonna hit the roofs,” Sam said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “I’ll let you know if I see anything. You got this, squirt!” With that, his wings unfurled and he shot into the sky, disappearing in the shadows between the buildings.

“Guess that’s my cue,” Natasha said, throwing me one last encouraging smile. “I’ve said it a lot lately, but you’ve earned it: I’m proud of you, Pyotr.”

“Thanks, Tasha,” I said quietly, smiling as she slipped from the van, Steve following behind. Then it was just me and Bucky.

He came to sit in the back beside me, nudging my shoulder as I clutched my mask. “Penny for your thoughts?”

I smiled slightly, taking a deep breath. “I think I’m just nervous. I keep thinking about what will happen if something goes wrong, you know?”

Bucky nodded, looking out the window into the alley. His eyes suddenly seemed really far away.

“When I first got back to New York after Wakanda helped unscramble my brain,” he said quietly, his words uncertain, “I felt like I’d stepped into someone else’s body.”

I looked up, sitting up straighter. He’d given me the facts about his brainwashing and subsequent treatment in Wakanda, but he’d never gotten very deep into it, and I hadn’t pushed. “What do you mean?”

Bucky shifted, shrugging a little bit before continuing. “I was…well, you know. Decades had passed, and the Winter Soldier experienced the passing of time, not…Bucky. Not me, you know? I was thrown into a whole new world, and then the whole thing with Steve and Tony happened, and I went back into cryo until they finally got the words out of my head…and then I had to relearn how to navigate the world again, as an Avenger, with the weight of everything I’d done.

“I…hurt a lot of people, Peter, you know that. And I’ve come to accept that it wasn’t me, and there was nothing I could’ve done, but…it’s still hard to walk around with that weight every day, sometimes. And when I was just starting out as an Avenger, it felt like every single one of my
flaws and failures was highlighted every time I messed up. Even if one little thing went wrong, if I made the tiniest mistake, it felt like I had a neon sign above my head flashing to the world to let them know. Especially after Sokovia and Siberia."

He took a deep breath, looking away again, and I listened with rapt attention, my mind processing the information as quickly as I could. "What I’m saying is…in the beginning, it’s going to feel like every mistake is the end of the world. Every mishap and slip is going to feel like a failure that you’re never going to get rid of. I’m telling you that you’ve got us behind you, just like the team was there for me when I was getting back on my feet after everything. It helps having people at your back, and we’re never going to leave you hanging. Okay?"

He finally looked back at me, trying to keep his eyes clear, but I could see the pain the memories had dredged up. "Okay,” I said quietly, leaning over to hug him.

“Proud of you,” he said, giving my back a squeeze.

“Proud of you, too,” I said quickly, hoping he knew how much I meant it. “Seriously.”

He chuckled under his breath, letting go and tousling my hair. “Get out there, Spiderman. Go save some old ladies.”

I laughed, feeling a lot better, and slipped me mask on. “Will do. Hey, Karen.”

“Hello, Peter. Congratulations on being allowed to patrol.”

“Thanks,” I said, slipping from the van and waving at Bucky and Steve once more before shooting a web at a nearby building, jerking myself up a little before swinging around to a warehouse, crouching on top of it and scanning the area. “Can you let me know if you find any disturbances in a five-block radius?”

“Certainly,” she assured.

“Quiet on my end,” Sam said into the comm. “I thought I heard a fight, but I think Stella cousin-in-law twice removed was trying to eat a frog.”

I snorted as Tasha came in and said, “Quiet here, too. I’d bet stuff will really start happening in an hour or so, when most people have gone to bed.”

It was eleven now, so…midnight, I supposed. That sounded reasonable for a spike-in-crime time. “I can wait.”

Well, I guess it had been too much to assume I’d slip out of the van and immediately stop a bank robbery, or something. I’d just have to wait.

…”

“I’m so bored,” I yawned into the comm, sitting cross-legged on the roof, still scanning for any suspicious activity. It was 12:43 am, and the only eventful scenario had been Sam sneezing into the comm and jolting Steve, who had nodded off, violently back to the world of the living.

“Did you purposefully pick the most low-traffic area in Queens that you could?” I asked, resting my chin on my hand.

“Yes,” Steve and Sam said together. Steve continued, “We wanted to ease you into it.”
“No more easing,” I said, peering into the darkness at the streets below, watching a newspaper tumbleweed weave along the street. “I’m eased enough. You said we had to stop at one no matter what and I want to do something.”

“Sorry, kiddo,” Tasha said, sounding anything but. “We can come back tomorrow and try again if nothing happens.”

I tapped my knee impatiently. I didn’t want to come back tomorrow and try again just because nothing happened tonight. I wanted to leave my first night on the job feeling like I accomplished something. Like this ridiculous idea I’d thought up in the middle of my depression had amounted to something.

I’d been so much better. I still had bad days, but they’d rapidly decreased in frequency once I had something positive to focus on, and I was going to be so upset if my first night out ended up a failure.

“Hey,” Bucky said over the comm. I swore he was psychic sometimes, because he had an uncanny ability to know when my thoughts were spiraling. “If nothing happens tonight, we’ll move on to a more populated area tomorrow. No big deal.”

I sighed, yawning again. “Okay,” I conceded. I supposed that would be okay, but I’d still feel like a failure tonight.

I was honestly about to throw in the towel and call it a night when I heard a shout, quickly and roughly cut off.

My head whipped in the direction of the scream, and I was on my feet before I knew it. “Did you hear that?” I asked, already swinging that way, ears straining for any further sign of their location.

“Yeah, I’m on my way to you,” Sam said. “Next building on your right.”

But I’d already figured that out, my neck buzzing softly as I swung towards a building and landed a few floors above the ground level, sticking to the side in the shadows. I looked down and saw a young man in his twenties in a corner, his hands up by his head, shaking violently. In front of him was another, older man, with greying hair and hard eyes, holding a handgun.

“You’ve gotta have more than nineteen dollars on ya,” the man said, waving the gun in frustration. “Unless you want your brain splattered on the wall behind you, you better cough up some more green, you bastard!”

I inched slowly down the side of the building, Sam keeping a close eye on the situation from his perch. He was going to let me try to diffuse the situation on my own, but as soon as he saw something he didn’t like, he’d come back me up. I was grateful knowing he was there.

I dropped silently to the ground in a crouch when I reached the floor, easing up behind the gunman, out of view of both of them. “I-I-I swear,” the younger man stammered, his voice wavering in terror. “I d-don’t have anything else…I…just spent it o-on groceries…” It was then that I noticed some ripped bags that had fallen from his arms, the food contents strewn all over the dirty alley.

The gunman glanced at the bags too, cursing under his breath as he threw the handful of crinkled ones in a fit of anger, watching them crumple to the ground. “Dammit. This was a waste.”

Something in his tone reminded me of the times I was stared down with a gun—both on the street
and by HYDRA whack-jobs, on multiple occasions—and I instinctually knew that if I didn’t do something right then, he was going to pull the trigger.

I knew it wasn’t the time to be thinking about it, but I also knew that first impressions mattered. I’d been toying with Spiderman and his personality, wondering who I wanted him to be. I was pretty shy around new people especially, and kids my age. With my family, I was open and I could be funny and sarcastic, but that was because I was so comfortable with them.

Otherwise, I was way too shy to be myself, and…I kind of wanted the Avengers’ peter to be Spiderman. He was a lot more confident than any other version of myself, and I wanted the mask to be someone who put people at ease.

“Hey!” I shouted, watching as the gunman whipped around in surprise, panic coloring his features. Before he could even raise the gun again, I’d webbed it right out of his hand and securely into the wall twelve feet above the ground, leaving time only for the man to blink. “Careful where you’re pointing that thing! You could hurt someone with that.”

The man looked me up and down, his eyes wide as saucers. “Who… the hell…”

“Oh, my bad,” I said, jumping on top of a dumpster in a crouch, resting my chin on my hand, my elbows on my knees. “I’m Spiderman. Hey. I’m new. I’m here to stop bad guys who’ve obviously never taken a gun safety class.”

The victim, still cowering in the corner, was now watching with piqued interest, not shaking so much anymore.

“You…” the bad guy started again, licking his lips before continuing, “so you… think you can just come in here…and scare me off Is that it?”

I cocked my head, feeling myself gain confidence as he went on. I’d obviously rattled him, and his weapon was out of reach. “Yeah. Is it working? Should I turn it up a little?”

The man’s eyes narrowed in anger as he finally seemed to grasp the situation, and he stalked towards me, hands balled into fists. “I’m gonna kick your ass so hard you’ll land in Brooklyn,” he growled, reaching for me. I assumed he was going to drag me off the dumpster.

Heh. Poor guy.

I vaulted over him in a somersault, sticking the landing behind him and dead-legging him before he could turn around. “Whoa, totally my bad, man. Sorry about that.”

The guy righted himself, whipping around in absolute fury and throwing a punch at my head. I almost laughed. This guy had nothing on Tasha.

I caught his wrist and, minding my strength, webbed it to the wall, where he was jerked back to stick there. Watching him flail against the webbing and yell obscenities was a little funnier than it should have been, and I laughed a little under my breath.

“Poor bastard,” Sam muttered through the comm. “I don’t care if he is a mugger, that stuff sucks.”

Chuckling again, I turned to the victim, blinking in surprise when I came face-to-face with a phone.

“Holy shit, man, that was so awesome!” The guy said, looking remarkably recovered as he shoved his phone in my face. I guessed he’d been recording the fight. Which was… disconcerting,
considering his life had just been threatened and he really should have run away.

I tried for a laugh, rubbing my neck a little in embarrassment. “Uh, th…thanks. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine now,” he said, still recording. He turned to the villain still struggling with the webbing and zoomed in, laughing. “Holy crap. You just got your ass handed to you! That’s karma, bitch!”

I snorted, despite myself, adjusting my webshooter to shoot a smaller version of the web-net, beginning to load the guy’s groceries into it. “Hey, you should call the police. The webbing will dissolve in an hour.”

“Oh crap, dude, thanks,” the guy said, his face lighting in realization like he hadn’t considered before that he should call the cops. He finally stopped recording, and I felt infinitely more comfortable. “Hey, but seriously, man…thanks a lot. It wasn’t a lot, but every dollar counts for me right now.”

I looked up when I heard the sincerity in his voice, watching him pick up the discarded ones and fold them carefully before putting them in his pocket, coming to help me with his food.

“You’re welcome,” I said honestly, a little sad that I couldn’t give him a smile, so I settled for a nod. I guessed a nod was more hero-like anyways. “Can I do anything for you? Are you okay to call the police by yourself?”

“Yeah, for sure,” he said with a smile. “Thanks! Are you new, or something? I’ve heard about the Daredevil, but he was only in Hell’s Kitchen, I thought.”

I’d heard about him. “Yeah, kind of! But…not as intense, you know?” I clarified with a little laugh. “I don’t think I could do half the stuff he does. I’m just more like…a friendly neighborhood spiderman, you know? Just here to look out for the little guy.”

The guy grinned, holding out his hand. “Well…this little guy thanks you. That was the last part of my rent I need to pay tomorrow. I guess…see you around?”

I shook his hand, and something inside me…I don’t know. Something changed. I felt…

I felt like the balance was shifting. Like the lives lost around me were finally shifting to a better direction.

“You bet,” I assured. I shot a web at a nearby building, sticking to it and looking down as he stared up with huge eyes, jaw dropped. “Be careful walking home, and call the cops, okay? And you! Mr. Mugger!” The mugger, who’d watched the interaction with detached contempt, looked at me with blazing eyes. “If you’re low on cash, there’s a soup kitchen a few blocks away, on the edge of Queens. They’ll help you out if you need it, til you can find a job.”

That…obviously wasn’t what he’d been expecting. He didn’t acknowledge me, but the fire in his eyes died down a little, and he looked away, scoffing. But his posture relaxed.

That was enough for me.

I swung to the top of the building where Sam was waiting. “How’d I do?”

For a second, he just looked at me, then he shook his head and smiled. “Awesome, kid. It was awesome.”
I laughed, high-fiving him. “Thanks. It was…it was really cool.” It was. To know that the guy was going home safe with all his money, and I’d given a bad guy another option, if he chose to take it.

“Nice work, Spiderman,” Bucky said quietly over the line, and I could practically see a small, proud smile on his face.

I blushed in the warm night, shrugging almost to myself as I turned and started swinging back towards the van to go home, Sam flying above me. “Thanks.”

As I swung, I grinned, and eventually laughed.

I was right. This was exactly what I needed.

Entertainment Tonight

“Yeah so just keep it tuned here for more updates on the Kardashian feud,” Nancy O’Dell said with a dazzling smile, turning back to the camera. “Kevin, we have a special segment next, don’t we?”

“We do indeed, Nancy,” Kevin Frazier said, eyes widening in manufactured excitement as he turned to look at the screen behind him, where a candid shot of Pepper Potts at a podium rested. “Earlier today, Pepper Potts, CEO of Start Industries and the press liaison for the Avengers, released a statement that the Avengers actually adopted a kid!”

“Seriously?” Nancy asked, turning to the camera with a look of awe. “I never thought that could happen. What are the legalities of that?”

Kevin laughed. “That’s for their lawyers to figure out, Nan, we’re just the gossip train.”

Nancy grinned, pointing at the picture behind her. “Well, we have the recorded press release, so let’s take a look at that and then see what’s what.”

The image behind them transitioned to fill the screen, characteristic chaos of flashing lights and noisy reporters taking the stage until Pepper Potts began speaking, commanding the attention of everyone in the room.

“Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Pepper Potts. Many of you know me as the CEO of Stark Industries, but right now I am acting as the press liaison for the Avengers, and have a statement to release to the public. Over the last few days, several pictures of the Avengers accompanied by a teenage boy have been circulating the media and tabloid industry, and I know many of you have questions about the nature of the relationship, so I’m here to answer those questions.

“The boy in question is fifteen-year-old Peter Parker, a native of Queens. He has consented to having his identity revealed, but elected not to release the statement himself. He was found by the Avengers approximately six months ago and taken into protective custody by them and the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division, or SHIELD, until the threat to his well-being had been neutralized.

“During his time with the Avengers, it was discovered that he did not have any living family to take him in after protective custody was no longer needed, and the Avengers decided to formally adopt Peter. Sergeant James Barnes, or the Winter Soldier, officially holds guardianship of Peter Parker, who lives with all of them in Avengers Compound, the location of which remains classified.
Pepper Potts had maintained a calm, professional countenance thus far, which was quickly replaced with slightly darkened eyes and a firmer tone. “This being said, Peter is still a minor, and his time and privacy is to be maintained. You are not to follow him around or hound him to interviews or questions. This is considered stalking and will be treated as such. Should you see him on the street, you are welcome to ask him questions, but if he decides not to comment, you are to leave it as that and move on. You are not to bother or aggravate him unnecessarily under any circumstances.”

Pepper smiled again, leaving the room tense from her uncompromising statement. “Now, I’ll take some questions.” She scanned the room of suddenly flying hands, pointing to a woman in a blue blouse.

“Ms. Potts, how was the decision of which Avenger would hold guardianship of the child made? I thought that the Winter Soldier had a former HYDRA affiliation and was a danger to society for several decades.”

“Sergeant Barnes has proven himself time and again a hero to this country and the world, and the decades of his HYDRA affiliation were brought about by torture, brainwashing, and memory alteration. After being rescued, he has since been cleared by several renowned psychologists, and is perfectly fit to hold guardianship of Peter. Next?” She chose a man with thinning hair and a small mustache.

“Ms. Potts, what was the nature of the situation in which Peter was taken into protective custody? I find it highly unlikely that the Avengers themselves would be tasked with looking after a child for an extended period of time with no outside supervision.”

“A joint decision was made by SHIELD and the Avengers themselves, who offered to take Peter in. Though the nature of the situation is and will remain confidential, both to respect Peter’s privacy and to protect the national and international confidentiality of the situation, the threat was deemed grave enough to require around-the-clock protection at a secure base, and the Avengers Compound provided both. It was decided that a SHIELD jet or base would be too easily accessed by their enemies, since the Avengers Compound has much less foot traffic, and conducts more thorough checks on any visitors. I’ll take one more question.”

She chose a small woman in a sweater with a notepad, who looked calculating and pensive as she asked, “A few weeks ago, former General Thaddeus Ross was arrested by the Avengers and tried by the United Nations and by a federal court for several counts of terrorism, murder, and the kidnapping of a fifteen-year-old boy who was never named. The Avengers were heavily involved in his conviction and sentencing, which is unusual, as they’ve captured war criminals before and left the legalities completely up to the government. Due to the personal nature of their involvement, I have to ask—is Peter Parker the boy who was kidnapped, and if so, did HYDRA and the former General have something to do with his need of protective custody?”

The room fell silent at the question, and curious glances were split between the woman and Pepper Potts, who remained confident and professional. “That is all confidential information that I’m not at liberty to share at this time. Thank you all for your questions.”

Pepper gave a final professional smile and stepped down from the podium, escorted off the stage and through the clamoring reporters by several imposing bodyguards.

The image panned back out to Nancy and Kevin, who were looking at each other with interest. On the screen behind them appeared a collage of pictures from the magazines that had published stories, all depicting candid photos of Peter Parker with the Avengers. “Well, that was informative,” Kevin said, turning back to the camera.
“Yeah, and that last question? I never would have put that together,” Nancy admitted. “We talked about the sentencing of Thaddeus Ross a few weeks ago, but I never thought they’d be connected. Ms. Potts sure didn’t seem to expect that.”

“Right?” Kevin agreed, holding a coffee mug in his hand, sipping quickly. “And she didn’t even deny any of it! I’ll bet money everything that reporter said was true. Poor kid, getting taken like that, though.”

“Well, I bet we’ll have a lot of interesting stories in the future,” Nancy said, rerouting the track to the positive for the audience. “I wonder if they’ll go to his school functions. Wait, is he in school? Man, those are going to be some lucky classmates. Can you imagine parent-teacher conference day?”

Kevin laughed. “I’d kill to be in that kid’s class. I can’t wait to see where this goes.”

According to the subsequent explosion on social media, the whole of America agreed.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Helloooooo! OMG OMG OMG ONE CHAPTER LEFT OMG I CAN’T I CANNOT WITH THIS.

The last chapter is actually already written, but I’m going to give it a day or two so a) you guys can let this one sink in and ANTICIPATE, and b) to give myself more time to mentally prepare.

Nosy reporters. Gotta love ‘em. P.S. I have literally never in my entire life seen Entertainment Tonight and I wasn’t about to do half an hour of research watching a show on celebs I don’t care about for a fanfiction, so…sorry if it’s just…totally inaccurate, or something.

So. A little foreshadowing for the next and final chapter: we will have one more new character, and it’s one that several of you have mentioned, though not the one I think you’ll expect. Tee-hee. I’m so excited. You guys are gonna lose your minds.

Prepare yourselves. Next chapter will be the epic conclusion that I hope does this huge thing justice. :D Thanks for sticking around, and I hope to see you next chapter!
A/N: Oh. My. Goodness. The last chapter!!! I’m crying, I’m literally sobbing over here. Please enjoy :) I’ve lowkey had this written for over a year and I’m so excited to finally publish it!

I swung through the chilly night, making a mental note to ask Tony if there was a heater in this thing. The suit was amazing, but geez, spandex sucked for keeping warm, especially with how high up I was. Spring’s final burst of chill before summer finally began was really going all out.

“Got anything for me, Karen?” I asked, landing on a rooftop in a crouch and stretching, marveling at how light and agile I felt. It really was a complete turnaround from the klutz I’d been not too long ago. Granted, I was still a klutz, just…a more acrobatic one, now.

“Nothing that I—wait, CCTV’s picking up some suspicious activity, probably a mugging, two streets over. Suspect armed, one victim, a teenager.” Karen’s voice came over my comm, and I sprinted to the edge of the roof and shot a web, swinging between skyscrapers like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Thanks,” I huffed, landing on a low roof next to the aforementioned alley, slinking quietly to the edge.

“Let me know if you need backup, kid,” Clint said through the earpiece, munching on popcorn or chips or something else super noisy. He was my on-call babysitter for the night. I’d graduated from having four Avengers present to two Avengers, and finally just one, over the last couple weeks. On the strict condition that I never put myself in a situation that was more than I could handle, and if I thought one might be developing I’d tell Karen to inform them immediately, they’d been giving me more freedom, and I was really developing my own style as Spiderman.

I loved it, and I’d been right—I needed this.

“I can handle a mugging, Clint,” I retorted quietly, peering over the edge of the roof.

“Just checking,” he said, sounding a little preoccupied. I rolled my eyes, even though he couldn’t see me. He’d developed a recent fascination with Prodigal Son after I’d made him re-watch the pilot with me and had since been binging the series, which I was sure he was doing in the van now.

Recollecting myself, I peered over the edge, taking stock of the situation. A lone figure clad all in black was brandishing a four-inch hunting knife against a teenage girl, standing against the wall of the alley. I noticed, absently, that she had to be about my age. She was a tall-ish, thin girl with frizzy brown hair and a take-no-prisoners bitch face.

In other circumstances I’d feel kind of mean describing her like that, but in this instance, I really couldn’t give a better description. I mean, it was freaking perfect.

The girl stood stock still, arms crossed, looking…bored.

Well. I was flexible. I could deal with this.
“For the last time, kid, give me everything on you,” the crook threatened, gravelly voice echoing between the walls of the alley. His Jersey accent really was kind of annoying. Granted, I was probably biased, as a Queens native. “Including your phone.”

“Do you realize how many laws you’re breaking?” The girl asked, cocking her head and narrowing her eyes like a disappointed older sibling. “Attempted theft. Aggravated assault. Use of an unregistered weapon. I can go on.” I didn’t think that last one was real, but it sounded cool, especially with how seriously she said it. “And I was talking to my friend. You interrupted my conversation.”

“I don’t care,” he spat, moving forward, obviously having lost patience with the girl. “If you’re going to be a bitch, I can just as easily take it.”

“Hey—” She didn’t look scared, per se, but her face had become nervous, and she shuffled back a step or two.

Okay. Cue the friendly neighborhood Spiderman.

“Is this really how you like to spend your nights?” I shouted, vaulting over the fire escape and landing in a crouch on a Dumpster, hearing a hollow clang. Both of their heads whipped towards me in surprise, and I was glad to get the man’s attention off of her. “Mugging high schoolers? Really? Don’t you have any ambition, sir? You could do so much more.”

“Hah?” He asked, turning his weapon on me. “Who the hell you think you’re talking to, freak?”

Feigning fear and placing myself between him and the girl, I shrunk down a bit, cowering close to the asphalt. “Whoa, is that a real knife, man?”

Seeming slightly surprised, and pleased, the man cockily waved it in front of me, saying, “Yes, it’s a real knife. Just let me go, man. It’s a real knife.”

I crouched dramatically on the ground, whining in a high-pitched voice, “You’ve found my weakness. It’s small knives.” I shrunk even more, pressing low to the ground. “Anything but knives!”

On the last word, I webbed the hand holding the knife to the brick wall, letting out a short laugh at his shocked look.

“Wh-what the hell is this stuff, man?”

“It’s web fluid. Designed it myself. It would take way too long to explain.”

Pretending to sneeze, I webbed his other hand to the wall as well. “Come on, man, this isn’t funny!” He shouted, struggling in vain. Pfft. He wasn’t going anywhere in that stuff. This was kind of fun.

“It’s a little funny,” I said, putting my hands on my hips in accomplishment and glancing back at the girl, who was watching interestedly. “C’mon, don’t you think it’s funny?”

I’d kind of expected some awe, maybe a dropped jaw and some hero-worship (just a little, though, which I’d probably shut down really quickly), maybe a “That was awesome!” to wrap things up. Instead, she raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms over her chest. “And you are?”

Oh. Well, that was fine, too. I guessed I needed to get used to dealing with different people
and their reactions, anyways. “I, ah, well, I’m a little new to the crime-fighting world,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck in embarrassment. Then I realized that was a very Peter Parker thing to do and straightened up. “But, uh, I’m Spiderman. One word, no hyphen or anything. I try to help out around New York, you know? Help out where the police can’t. Especially in Queens. But in other places too. Yeah, just…wherever.” Smooth, Parker.

Again, stupidly, I expected her to look at least a little grateful.

The girl was not impressed.

“I’m Michelle, and you just broke more laws than this guy,” she said, nodding her chin at the still-struggling mugger. “Vigilantism. Unauthorized use of restraint. I doubt you’re filing for a citizen’s arrest, so you’re acting as an unsupervised policeman, as well. I can go on.”

Again, I didn’t know if all those were real, but…well, her confidence kind of made me want to invest in a good lawyer.

“Uh…” I stuttered, debating whether to say You’re welcome or I’m sorry. “I…saved you…?” I didn’t sound very confident.

She scoffed. “Hardly. The guy wouldn’t have used the knife. It’s for show.”

The poor mugger made an indignant sound in the background, but we ignored him. I wasn’t sure how true that was, either, but the girl—Michelle—seemed confident in that fact.

“Anyways. You may wanna be careful, Spiderboy.” Michelle said, passing me with a smile (finally) and making her way to the mouth of the alley. “You keep doing this and the police will be after you. I get that you wanna help people, and that’s cool, but watch your back.”

Unable to form an eloquent retort, I opted for a weak, “It’s Spiderman.”

She smirked, and I realized for the first time that when she didn’t look like she wanted to kill me, she was actually…really pretty. “Not with that voice it’s not.” I didn’t even have the presence of mind to respond to that, gaping at her. “Nice to meet you, Spider-Kid. I’ll call the police for you.” With that, she was gone.

I stood still for a few seconds, in complete and utter shock at what had just transpired.

“Karen, what just happened?”

“Well,” Karen said, sounding a bit confused herself, “I’m not quite able to explain. Those were…conflicting reactions.”

I stared at the mugger with what would have been a shocked expression, if he could see my face, and threw my hands up in the air. “I don’t know, man. Was it the jokes? Were they too much?”

The man looked at me like I was crazy. From the girl’s reaction, maybe I was.

I sighed, shooting a web and propelling myself up over the building, starting to swing to the street where Clint was waiting with the car. “Clint, I’m on my way to you.”

Clint didn’t hear me. He was too busy cackling and whispering “Spider-Kid” under his breath.
Saying goodbye to Karen and logging offline, I stripped out of my suit and threw it in the hamper before getting dressed, pausing to stare at the scars on my torso and arm in the bathroom mirror.

The scars had faded considerably with time, but they were still clear and visible. The flat, white scar on my arm was jagged, running from my wrist to my elbow along the pale flesh of my forearm. Unconsciously I rubbed my wrist, tucking my arm against my stomach protectively. It was a nervous habit I’d picked up.

My chest had straight, thin, white lines forming crude letters, the line running vertically up my chest. The H started just above my belly button, the letters climbing up my body like a macabre staircase until the A reached the middle of my sternum.

I sighed through my nose, looking them up and down. They’d never go away, but…I was making my peace with them. Slowly, but surely. Maybe one day, I’d have the courage to get them removed…I doubted that would be for a long time. My family had mentioned the option, but I’d quickly shot it down, and they hadn’t pushed me on it. I wanted to be able to accept them before finally getting them removed.

Anything less, and I thought maybe I’d…I didn’t know. I’d feel like I lost to Jason. Like I couldn’t accept what he’d done to me. So I promised myself that I’d have to accept them and everything that had happened before I could let myself remove them.

Blinking quickly, I tugged on a sweatshirt and some warm sweatpants before going to the kitchen.

Bucky was already there. He smiled when I came in. “Hey, kiddo,” he said softly, ruffling my hair as I hopped up onto one of the barstools. “The others went to bed early; Nat has Stella. Clint said patrol was okay. Heard you had an interesting mugging, though.”

I groaned and put my head on my arms. “Bucky, it was so weird. The girl actually seemed…I don’t know, mad! I saved her! And she was my age, too, which was also kind of weird.”

Bucky chuckled, sipping from a soda can. “Sounds like you need some hot chocolate.”

“And of course I do.”

Bucky made me the hot chocolate, piling it with whipped cream, the way I liked it. We kept up a steady stream of conversation, talking and laughing quietly over the bar. He passed me the steaming mug and I took it, taking a tentative sip. Damn, he made some good hot chocolate. I guessed I gave him lots of practice, with as much as I drank it.

Bucky glanced over and laughed just as he took a sip of soda, doing half a spit-take on accident. I grinned despite myself. Seeing Bucky laugh always made me happy, since it was a little rare. “What?”

“Kid, you have the world’s best whipped cream mustache,” he laughed, grabbing a paper towel and handing it to me. Changing his mind as I reached for it, he snatched it back. “Wait. First. FRIDAY?”

“Already snapped the picture, Sergeant Barnes,” she said, sounding amused.

“Good.” With that, he handed me the paper towel.

“Blackmail?” I asked, taking another sip of the steaming liquid, careful to avoid the whipped cream.
“Of course,” he grinned. He took my shoulder and pulled me gently from my stool, towards the elevator. “Come on. Bring that.”

I obeyed, following behind him with my mug in hand. “Roof, FRIDAY,” he said, leaning against the wall. I didn’t question him as the elevator smoothly ascended.

We stopped with a ding, coming to rest on the roof of the Compound. The balcony extended well over the edge, providing a little bit of roof to lounge around, if we wanted. A glass cover automatically lifted over the furniture when it started raining, so we never had to worry about that. The Compound was in the middle of nowhere, so the stars were exposed and beautiful, not hidden by the glare of New York City lights.

“Wow,” I said, sitting down on one of the fluffy couches Tony had put up here. “It’s a nice night.”

Bucky nodded, sitting next to me with an arm around my shoulders, pulling me against his side. I melted against him. It was a habit I doubted I would ever break. Going so long with so little physical comfort, I doubted I’d ever be embarrassed by it, especially with my family.

We sat there in silence for a few minutes as I sipped my hot chocolate, looking at the sky. I really liked constellations, and finding them was kind of fun—the Big and Little Dippers, Pegasus, Cassiopeia…May and Ben and I used to go to the roof of the apartment buildings on clear nights and struggle to find the constellations through the smoggy haze blanketing the city.

I sighed and closed my eyes at the memory, wrapping myself in the love and comfort I finally felt like I could accept. “Thanks.”

It wasn’t one of those moments where Bucky said, “For what?” and I got into this big long speech about everything he and the others had done for me. That was something I loved. I knew, and he knew.

“You’re welcome, kid,” he said, turning his head and pressing a light kiss to my hair, squeezing my shoulder. I liked it when he did that. It reminded me of May and Ben. “You’ve come a long way, Peter.”

I smiled. It was true. “Yeah. Thanks to you guys.”

“Nah,” he denied, tightening his arm around me. “We just helped you along. You were already well on your way, and you’ll…hell, you’re going great places, kid.” He paused. “We’ll always be there, you know. We’ll be there to support you every step of the way, no matter what.”

“I know.” No hesitation. No stuttering. It wasn’t even a promise, anymore, just a fact.

“I’m proud of you.”

I felt tears threaten to blind me, but I downed the last of my hot chocolate and swiped them away, staring up at the sky. “Thanks. I hope I’ll make you prouder, one day.”

“You will.”

It was a moment that I never wanted to end. Bucky and I lounged on the roof of our home in the chilly night with the remnants of hot chocolate and warm memories. After everything that had happened, after everything that life had dragged me through, dragged us through, it was finally worth it. Not for everything that had happened, or everything that would, but for this moment right here. This moment of utter peace and security and comfort. Of knowing I was loved and safe and
protected and wanted.

Of knowing that Bucky, my guardian and brother, was always going to be there. Of knowing that I had eight other family members at my back to support me whenever I needed them, and to laugh with and talk with and go through life with.

Of knowing I would always, always have a family to fall back on.

A family of superheroes, no less.

I knew that no matter what the future brought, no matter how bad things got…I wouldn’t have to face it alone.

I closed my eyes and eventually dozed off against Bucky’s shoulder, content.

Sometime later, Bucky shook me gently away. “By the way,” he said, taking my mug and going ahead of me to the elevator, hiding his face. “A bunch of us are all going to brand Spider-Kid on every single thing you own. Fair warning.”

“Bucky!”

He had the nerve to laugh as he slipped into the elevator, away from my wrath.

Laughing, I followed him inside, to the waiting warmth of home. Behind me, the whispers of my past faded into the light of the stars.

... ... ... ... ...

A/N: Aw. You didn’t think it would be that easy, did you?

You know the drill: bolded text means mega-gore. Skip if you don’t like it ;)

... ... ... ... ...

After Credits Scene
Thaddeus Jason Ross II didn’t think people gave him nearly enough credit when comparing him to his father.

His father was a cruel, manipulative man who used every trick in the book. He experimented on children and he used defenseless victims against people who loved them to get what he wanted. No corner was too cruel to cut. He would stoop to any level to get what he was after, and in the end, he’d rise right back up. He was clever, cold, calculating, and calm. Jason’s father was a force to be reckoned with.

Jason was far, far worse.

Ross used means to ends. Granted, he really didn’t care what means he used, as long as he got results. Jason was just like him in that respect: he’d use anything.

The difference between father and son was that Jason whole-heartedly, thoroughly enjoyed it. And he knew it, too. Jason took pride in how twisted he was, how clever, how shrewd. He knew how sharp he was, how just a few words, a couple well placed thoughts of doubt, could demolish even the strongest structures from within.

He loved every second of it.

So when a couple of surviving HYDRA agents and scientists had managed to drag him and their research from the burning building and barely save his life, and he realized he could still fulfill his ultimate goal, he was damn pleased with himself.

It had been close. From what the scientists told him, the bullet had barely missed his aorta. That damn red-headed bitch had done a number on him. Healing, however, had taken much less time than they’d expected, with their prior research to speed the lengthy process along. They’d already started injecting him with diluted solutions of their experimental formulas to make the cell mutation easier on his body; his healing had been augmented considerably. That was probably what saved his life.

While recuperating, he’d been informed that the Avengers had yet to examine the wreckage of the base—too preoccupied with a certain injured teenager, he presumed. His scientists took imprints of his teeth and used their technology—an advanced graphics system coupled with a 3D printer that replicated synthetic human tissue—to create an entirely new set of his teeth. They created a femur and jawbone with similar technology. They were then charred by a similar, controlled explosion, and planted underneath the wreckage. They took the surviving recordings from the base to pinpoint the location where the bitch had gunned him down to make sure the evidence was placed accordingly.

When the Avengers finally got around to scoping out the base, all they’d find of him would be a handful of his teeth and a couple bones, the rest of him having been unfortunately incinerated by the blast, too close in proximity to leave anything else behind.

He was quite happy with his plan. It gave him as much time as he needed to prepare himself while the world remained oblivious.

Once he was functional again, after murdering the scientists who’d inconvenienced him with mandatory bed-rest, he used his father’s remaining assets to set up an untraceable account, which was filled with money by a colleague inside the pathetic remains of HYDRA every two weeks. He found a remote HYDRA bunker in Russia that hadn’t been used in a while and put the
scientists to work, presiding over them all with an iron fist and a stone heart.

Unfortunately, his father had been captured and was in the process of being tried for—well, the list was a bit too tedious to completely remember, but Jason knew that his father was as good as dead. The man had raised him and had been a good father. It was a shame the way things had ended, but Jason knew this day would come. He’d been two steps away from a coup d’état, anyhow. His father’s dire need for secrecy infuriated him.

Under new rule, change was slow to come. It took months. He knew it would, but patience had really never been his forte. All those months living in that homeless shelter, with the destitute of society when he should have been treated like a king, had tested the little patience he’d had. But watching little Peter suffer and squirm, struggling to survive, had been worth every second.

Jason’s head jerked angrily, a tic he’d recently acquired whenever he thought of Peter Parker. His hatred was palpable. That—that child, that kid with nothing but a cat and a bit of an attitude, had taken his future from him. His power. His empire. Everything.

A grin split his face.

Well. Almost everything.

He held up the vial of blood in front of his face, staring at his salvation with nothing short of crazed awe. The mass of blood cells seemed to be alive, moving, slithering around inside the tempered glass tube sickeningly. It had taken on a greenish hue from the effects of the testing, and the alterations, but it was still what he needed: Peter Parker’s blood.

The scientists, after weeks of grueling work, had isolated and extracted the improved super soldier serum—now, they all knew, actually a combination of human and spider DNA, with several extra features—from his blood. They couldn’t unwind it from the DNA strands, but they’d made it visible and prominent when looking at the cells rather than simply part of the DNA itself.

Jason grinned. That was all he needed.

“My friends,” he said, spreading his arms from the balcony he stood upon, looking over the scientists cowering in the lab, suffering from malnutrition and exhaustion. Most of them were leaning against counters, sitting in chairs heavily, some even on their knees on the floor. Jason found it exhilarating, the grin splitting his face widening. “Today marks the beginning: the rebuilding of the HYDRA regime, under Thaddeus Jason Ross—the second. I will be officially taking over for my father, as of now. You are privileged to be my first followers.” Jason was puzzled as to why none of them looked nearly as honored as they should have, but he was too drunk on power and excitement to care much.

“Thanks to your fruitful efforts, I now possess the serum sought after for so many decades, and with it, I will become the most powerful being on this planet. I will grapple with Captain America like a gladiator with a child. I will obliterate Thor, a god, and the Hulk will cower before me. I will rip Iron Man’s suit apart and kill him with my bare hands. I will slay Hawkeye with his own arrows, Black Widow with her own bullets—after paying her back dearly for her part in our delay.

“I will rip the Falcon’s wings from his shoulders and watch him plummet to his death. War Machine will fall once more, but this time, it will be fatal. The Winter Soldier will see just what happens when he crosses HYDRA. He’ll kill hundreds, thousands, and I’ll force him to beat Peter Parker to the edge of death, and he will kill himself after the guilt drives him mad. And Peter Parker…” Jason felt himself tingling with excitement. “Peter Parker will watch it all before I finally show him the mercy that is death.”
With that, Jason opened his lips just enough to down the contents of the vial, the writhing mass slipping down his throat, burning with icy fire that settled in his stomach like a boulder.

The effects were instantaneous.

His body writhed and convulsed. The vial shattered as he dropped it, the sound drowned out by his feral screams echoing off the steel walls of the bunker. The exhausted scientists watched with a mixture of awe and horror as Jason’s body broke itself in its attempt to bond with the foreign substance. Jason’s hands tore at his hair, bloody clumps of scalp littering the ground around him.

Slowly, his screams became hitched, separated, until the scientists recognized it for what it was.

Laughter.

The next hour of Jason’s existence was a mixture of pain and feral delight. He moved like he’d never moved before, with deadly grace and precision, slithering around like a snake in the underbrush only to strike with the unbridled ferocity of a rabid monster. If asked, he’d only be able to recall screams—not his own—and a portrait of red-stained tile, body parts littered around in quaint little puddles, like debris stuck in pockets of rain after a heavy storm.

After coming back to himself, he looked around the bloodbath. The thirty odd scientists he’d brought with him to this hellhole were scattered around the room, torn apart. It was an absolute massacre. Curious, Jason looked down at his blood covered hands, sharpened, blood-stained teeth bared in a savage grin as he observed his skin. It was...green, with tough scales. The red blood on his skin, he noticed absently, reminded him of Christmas. Jason was confident the scales would be fairly impenetrable to most attacks. He was faster, stronger, more agile. He was better.

He was superior.

A broken mirror lay a few feet away, shards haphazardly reflecting his grisly frame. He stared with no small amount of admiration, his green, disfigured face splitting into that horrible, gruesome smile. The name came to him in a glorious epiphany, and he tipped his head back, letting the shuddering, high-pitched laugh echo through the death-shrouded room.

“Be ready, Peter,” he spat to himself, grabbing one of the scientists’ latest projects—a flying board with foot-straps to keep the rider secure—and lumbering towards the entrance, his already impressive frame having been augmented to over seven feet in height, powerful, deadly muscles and strength enlarging his body. He opened the thick door, revealing the snow-filled landscape, the battering, freezing wind not even fazing him. The board sputtered to life and he hopped on, staring over the snowy expanse in absolute glee. “The Green Goblin is coming for you.”

His laughter ricocheted off the snow-covered mountains for miles.

FIN

END OF WHISPERS IN THE DARK

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Here we are. At the end of Whispers in the Dark. Man, what a ride, huh?

I won’t lie, I’ve lain awake in my dark room at night cackling to myself when I thought about you guys’ reactions to this last chapter, and I have absolutely no shame at all. :D Let me know how you reacted to that little plot twist ;) A lot of you were like “wow I’m so glad that son of a bitch is dead” and I’m very sorry that I played you for so long cause LOL he’s not.

And then a lot of you were like “hmmmmmmmm *scrutinizing glares* I don’t think he’s dead hoss” and I was like “Hehehehe I’m not gonna tell you (but you’re totally right)”

SO no matter what category you fell in, I hope this gets you excited for the sequel ;)

I’d like to hop on my soap box for a second: I just cranked out over 200k words of content, so it would mean the world if you left a few words in a review to let me know what you thought of the whole story, as it’s the first multi-story fic I’ve finished. Please. Please very much.

Literally begging you to tell me what you thought. It can be as simple as “Good.” “Meh.” “Cool.” Literally just that. It would mean the world to me :) thank you.

Thank yous

Guys. Writing this fic has been incredible. Thank you so very much to every single one of you, from the bottom of my heart. If you favorited this story, I adore you for liking this story enough to want others to see that. If you followed this story, I can’t express how much it means that you wanted to know when there was a new chapter. It means you were invested! And for all of my reviewers, I tried to reply to every review, because I wanted to thank you personally for taking the time to tell me what you thought. I’ll never be able to express how much that means to me. Finally, to those of you who read, but didn’t do any of the above—thank you for your dedication to this fic, thank you for making it to the end, and thank you for reading!

In Other News…

I have a lot of ideas for some other stories—in this little universe I’ve created, and in others—so I’ll be working on those. If you have any requests, please message me! If you haven’t already, go read my other stories! I’ve dappled in the Avengers, Supernatural, Alex Rider (which I’m SO proud of and is going so well!!!!!), and Criminal Minds, so far. Please check them out if you’re interested! (Shameless self-advertising is real).

A Challenge…

I’ve got a challenge for this challenge. Can you tell me what movie I took some of the dialogue from when Peter was talking to the mugger? It’s word for word scripted XD

A Request…

AGAIN, in case you missed my begging, please review and let me know what you thought of this final chapter and the story! I’d love to know what you thought of the overall thing now that it’s finally come to an end, if you feel like it :) but most importantly, I hope you’ve enjoyed reading it.

The Sequel……!!!!!!
The sequel will probably be titled Smells Like Teen Spirit, and will be published after I’ve written some of it and actually planned it XD it’ll have a LOT of different dynamics to it, so please be excited!!! I’m not married to the title, so let me know if you have recs. Here’s the synopsis:

As Peter Parker starts his junior year at Midtown High, navigating his new life in the limelight as the Avengers' kid and in the shadows as Spiderman, new challenges, friends, and rivals await him. Unfortunately, an old enemy lurks, and he's making friends of his own. With the Sinister Six looming, can the Avengers keep Peter and themselves safe?
I’ll post an announcement here when I post the sequel, too!

I will say this: I hope you’ve noticed, because I definitely have, but my writing has improved a lot over the past two and a half years, so the beginning chapters are a little choppy for my taste. I’m going to be editing the first few chapters (maybe like the first half of the story) and THEN I’ll really dive into the sequel, but I already have the first few chapters planned, and I’m so excited! I hope you are too!

A Final Thank-You…
Again, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. So. Much. This has been a breathtaking journey, and I couldn’t have done it without you.

I’ll see you in the sequel :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!