In the new world of the future, Steve and Bucky are as deliriously in love as ever, living with their chosen family of the Avengers and being disgustingly domestic when not saving lives. They couldn't ask for anything more.

In the same old world as always, Ryan is an outcast, but she's finally feeling okay with her lot in life. She has abilities greater than anyone could ever dream of; she would never ask for anything more.

When their paths cross, the result is nothing anyone ever expected. A love story, an origin story, and the story of a danger greater than any the Avengers have ever faced when what was black and white is muddled into gray.
“Stop.”

The single syllable resonated through space, reverberating off walls and drumming itself into the asset’s mind. It shook the floors violently and wrestled with his swirling, panicked thoughts, shocking them into silence. The asset was frozen in place, capable only of staccato breaths. Her left arm mirrored his right, held straight out, practically touching the gun trained on her heart. His wide eyes glared back into the icy glow of hers.

“You name is James Buchanan Barnes. You are a son, brother, and Beta to the Alpha Steve Rogers. You were born in Brooklyn in 1917, fought in World War II, and were captured alive and kept as a prisoner of war. HYDRA tried to warp your mind, and used you for terrible things. You fought back every time, and you’ve finally found your freedom again.”

The asset’s-no, I’m Bucky, I’m not him, stop-breath was coming heavily now, on the verge of hyperventilation. His mind began to clear, his vision no longer seemingly tinged with red. Her speech still echoed in his head, but less painfully now, and the calming floral scent of omega tasted sweet on his tongue. He found himself capable of movement and collapsed to his knees, the gun clattering to the right and skidding across the hard floor of the common room to rest at a couch’s foot. Kneeling in front of him, the girl gently took his chin and pointed his face towards hers again.

“You are not what you have been forced to be, Bucky. You are a good man.” She paused a moment, the hand holding his chin trembling slightly as she used the other to gently stop the trailing tears on his cheek. “You are a good man, and one we all love very much,” she finished softly, her voice no longer ringing with power but whispering gently as a confession. Bucky dropped his head to her left shoulder, tears streaming and breath shuddering in earnest now. She wrapped both arms around him and tugged him flush against her, tucking his head into the crook of her neck and looking up at Steve across the room. “Oh, sorry,” she mumbled, and the glimmering blue light outlining his body dissipated immediately. The next second, she and Bucky were enveloped in his strong grasp, keeping their shaking bones from shattering apart just as he always did. The other now-freed Avengers left the room quietly. The threat was neutralized, and the little family and the outsider girl needed time to mend their frayed edges again.

Bucky chuckled low in his chest, and she felt the vibrations rather than hear the sound. “I don’t know what we’d do without you,” he muttered, almost to himself. She felt him pulling back, and she sat down on her heels to look him in the face again. He swiped the back of one hand across his eyes, the other reaching to entangle with Steve’s behind him.

“I’m so sorry-“ he began, but the girl cut him off, shaking her head firmly.

“You know I hate it when you apologize like that. It’s shit, and you know it. The only people who should be sorry are the few sick bastards left who hurt you.” Her anger smelled like sun-scorched pavement and cinnamon red hots, tickling Bucky’s nose when he sniffed back the last of his tears. He knew her feelings were directed at HYDRA, not him. The girl got to her feet and turned toward the door, away from Steve and Bucky. “No one should have the power to control peoples’ minds.” With an all-too-familiar pang of self-loathing that sharpened her scent to bitter poison, the girl began to walk away.

“Ryan, wait.” Steve used his Captain America voice, the one that brought all attention to him if it wasn’t already there. The girl stopped a moment, turning half back around to face the common room wall. “You just helped Bucky out of his worst flashback in months before anyone was hurt. I wasn’t
even enough to do that,” he continued, his voice thankful and scent tinged with a note of regret. She knew it was directed at himself, but her guilt remained, sour and biting. “You kept everyone safe, and brought Buck back to us. We can never thank you enough.”

Bucky burrowed his face into his Alpha’s chest, unable to feel embarrassed about his breakdown in Steve’s arms. He still hated himself, the fact that he was responsible for the danger and worry and pain he put them all through, and shame clouded his scent. The smell of warm cinnamon countered, enveloped him in peaceful sanctuary. Steve’s arms remained his solid ground.

Ryan smiled weakly, her azure eyes still pointed at the floor. “That doesn’t change facts, Steve. Wrong actions with good intentions might be pretty common, but they’re still a few shades grayer than I can justify. At least, in my case.” She turned around and walked out of the room, staring resolutely ahead. Bucky felt Steve’s arms tighten around him further.

“Steve?” he said quietly.

“Yeah, Buck?”

“I want her to join the family.”

“Yeah. Me too.”
In Which Steve Hates the Future and Bucky Makes a New Friend

9 Months Earlier

Steve really hated the future sometimes. Mostly when it involved random evil scientists attacking New York City *War of the Worlds*-style, only with robots instead of aliens. He preferred the Orson Welles version, himself.

“Clint, Bucky, be our eyes and shots above; we need to keep this contained to the current perimeter. Tony, pick off stragglers and get JARVIS to hack their systems; hopefully we can shut them down remotely. Thor, Bruce, Sam, keep damage to a minimum, please. Natasha - “

“Already on the source. 10-4, Cap.”

“Wow, Cap, look at you getting with the 21st century,” Tony said in his ear. “Tomorrow, we learn the difference between a real wall and your Facebook wall.”

*One damn moment of confusion*, Steve thought, rolling his eyes. He ducked under a laser blast and smashed across the weak joints of the robot's arms with his shield. He had to finish getting civilians out of harm’s way before joining Sam, Thor, and Bruce - or, rather, the Hulk - tearing into bulk of the machines. Until then, he’d let his Beta watch his six.

Bucky, naturally, was watching Steve’s six, crouched with his rifle atop an apartment complex. He exhaled slowly, then shot three bots in a row at the neck joint JARVIS had pointed out as weak. Honestly. What pathetic moron wastes their time trying to take over New York when an advanced alien civilization couldn't manage it? He hated the future sometimes.

The Hulk roared, followed by a horrible metallic grinding. Then Barton shot off some explosive arrows, shaking his building, and Bucky scowled at him across the way. How the hell was he supposed to snipe when the ground kept pounding -

“Hey, watch out!”

Bucky threw himself to the side. The next second, where he was just kneeling over the scope blasted apart, debris flying everywhere. In a flash, he drew his handgun - only to find the robot frozen in place, outlined with a blue glow. The next second, metal screeched and groaned, and the robot was a pile of scrap on the ground.

“The fuck - “

Bucky turned to his right, searching for the voice from before. What he saw was a girl, maybe mid-twenties, standing on the roof by the fire escape. “Who the hell are you?”

“You’re welcome,” she said, raising an eyebrow and smiling. She hadn't moved from the edge of the roof, where she was clutching the stair railing in a death grip. “You might want to keep an eye on Major ‘Murica down there, he seems to find trouble like it's his job.”

Bucky whipped back around, surveying the scene for his Alpha. It had gone quiet, though, and JARVIS must’ve finally hacked the systems successfully. Sam had landed, Thor was simply pushing over the remaining robots, and the Hulk was sitting in his meditative pose. He turned back to the girl, quickly memorizing her face. She still hadn't moved.

“Hey, come on, man. No need to go all super spy assassin on me,” the girl remarked. “I did just
“Who are you?” Bucky repeated, voice lowered to a growl. He surreptitiously sniffed the air, but she appeared to have no scent; a Beta on birth control, then.

“My name’s Ryan, and I’m no one important. Just happened to be in the neighborhood, thought I’d help out.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes. The girl - Ryan - seemed normal. Auburn, shoulder-length hair with a slight curl, bright blue eyes, pale skin, black combat boots and a blue plaid flannel over a gray t-shirt. Nothing out of the ordinary - except crushing robots without touching them, apparently, Bucky finished cataloguing in his mind. Her smile seemed a little nervous, but friendly, the kind passing strangers might give each other.

“Aw, thank you. I bet your smile is nice, too,” she said lightly, and Bucky stiffened, eyes going wide. Did she just -

Her eyes widened too, like she'd realized her mistake. “Shit - I'm sorry, I know it's an invasion of privacy. By-product of turning on the other powers. I swear I'm not rooting around for state secrets up there, though.” Ryan put one hand up in the air by her shoulders, the epitome of innocence. “Yeah. I should probably get out of here before you decide to arrest me, so… have a good day?”

He didn't respond, and she hesitated only a moment before hurrying back down the stairs. Bucky stood motionless for a minute longer, listening to her descent until the sound disappeared.

He turned back to where his rifle had been, now a blackened crater. Whoever the hell Ryan was, she'd saved him. But if the two-hundred-pound ball of scrap metal by the stairs was any indication, she could be the real danger.

“Bucky? I can’t see you, report.” Steve’s voice was calm, but Bucky heard the worry beneath.

“I’m fine, Steve. We might have a problem, though.”

“What kind of problem?”

“There’s a new player in town.”

*** *** ***

“There she is, some diner on 45th and 11th in Hell’s Kitchen. Bit of ways from Soho, why did you let her go in the first place, Barnes?” Tony asked, leaning back from the computer screen. It’d only taken JARVIS minutes to find the girl from Steve’s sketch, but it took a few hours to clean up the robots and get the sketch from Bucky’s description in the first place.

“She smashed a robot from 30 feet away and can apparently read minds. I wasn’t about to go after her without a plan,” Bucky snapped. “I don’t exactly appreciate people messing with my head.”

Steve gently squeezed Bucky to his side in support, left arm around his waist.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Regardless, she’s your new friend, so go play nice. Can’t exactly leave a girl that powerful off the index, and I’m not going within 500 feet of a telepath.”

“Buck, you don’t gotta do this. It’s Coulson’s job to deal with powered people, you don’t have to be anywhere near her again,” Steve said gently. His protective instincts always came out when Bucky felt threatened, but especially with a threat like this.
Bucky shook his head. “I’m fine. No one’s better equipped to deal with someone with her abilities, anyway.”

“That’s not true, Nat could - ”

“I’m not sending Natasha to do my job cause I’m too chicken, Rogers,” Bucky said, pushing away from Steve. "Besides, right now she’s not a critical threat; she did save my life.” He studied the video feed for a moment, then straightened up and squared his shoulders. “I’ll be back later.”

“Nope,” Steve stated firmly, grabbing Bucky by the arm. “No way you’re doing this without backup.”

Bucky sighed through his nose. He loved Steve more than anything, but the stubbornness wasn’t a selling point. “I’d argue all the usual stuff with you, but it wouldn’t do any good, right?”

“None at all. Come on, jerk. Our date's waiting.”

*** *** *** ***

Ryan was sitting in her favorite booth in the back corner of her favorite greasy diner, eating her favorite cheeseburger with sautéed mushrooms and her favorite onion rings with ketchup. She’d only destroyed her entire life today. What was a heart attack after that?

“Hey, Linda, could you grab me an Oreo milkshake when you’ve got a minute?” she yelled back into the kitchen.

Come to the same diner enough times, you should eventually get perks from the staff, she decided. The obscene tips she left didn’t hurt either.

“You got it, babe,” Linda smiled as she walked by with a platter piled with french fries. The front door jingled, and Ryan's stomach did a funny jolt. She'd figured they'd come sooner rather than later.

“Two in your party, sir?” Linda greeted. "There's a free booth by the windows - "

“They’re with me, Linda,” Ryan yelled up front. The two men turned simultaneously, and she sniggered despite herself. Did they really think baseball caps were good disguises? Their huge biceps alone gave them away.

She waved them over, watched them approach. “Saved you some onion rings,” Ryan smiled, pushing the basket towards them. Neither of them looked away from her as they sat down, Steve sliding in first.

“How did you know we were coming?” he asked, his voice low enough not to carry.

Alright, girl. Showtime. “Cause George Orwell anticipated Big Brother being a thing, like, 70 years ago, and I’m not an idiot. Give Stark a Hitler ‘stache and he looks just like him. Although I doubt Orwell ever guessed the scary government agents would be this handsome.” Ryan winked at Bucky, stretching her arms across the back of the booth.

Bucky raised an eyebrow, almost smiling. “Not exactly hard on the eyes yourself, doll.”

Steve gave him a slightly surprised look, then turned back to Ryan. "Look, we need to talk - “

“Yeah, I figured,” Ryan interrupted. “Look, I get what I just signed myself up for. Even more
surveillance than the average citizen, my name on a list no one wants to be on, scary government agents after me if I take a step out of line.” She purposely left out the human experimentation, and probably waterboarding, or something. She was trying to cooperate - maybe she’d get lucky, and it would just be a five-by-five padded room.

“Then why did you do it?” Steve said, and her heart sank. It wasn't a denial. “You’re a civilian, you had no obligation to help.”

She took a deep breath. “Sure I did. Doing the right thing is an obligation, at least to me,” she said, staring straight back at him. “Especially with what I can do.”

It was the right answer, apparently. Steve raised his eyebrows a little, but not in surprise. He almost looked impressed.

“What can you do, exactly?” Bucky asked. His face was neutral, but he was sitting stiff as a board.

“Well, you saw the telekinesis and figured out the telepathy. Don’t worry, I swear on everything I’m not in anyone’s head right now,” Ryan said quickly. “I can and do shut it off. Like I want to hear the creepy shit that goes on in most peoples’ brains,” she said, frowning a little.

“Anything else?”

Ryan went silent as Linda brought her milkshake, taking a sip to wait for her to walk far enough away. Not bad for a last meal. “If I tell you, you promise not to kill me in my sleep tonight?”

“What?” Steve exclaimed, and she looked up in surprise. He sounded shocked, his eyes wide. “Of course not - you’re not in any trouble, miss, we just - “

“R-Ryan,” she interrupted, stumbling over her own name in her surprise. Were they actually not there to read her the riot act? “Sorry, I can’t believe I didn’t introduce myself properly. My mother would have slapped me upside the head for that.”

Steve smiled at that, though still looking a little wary. “Mine would have, too. Steve Rogers, Bucky Barnes,” he said, gesturing at himself and Bucky in turn.

“Yeah, I think I’ve heard of you guys, are you famous or something?” Ryan sighed then, dropping her eyes back to her milkshake. If she didn't tell them now, there'd be ten times the hell to pay later.

“One other thing.” She gulped, then closed her eyes. “Mind control.”

A small thud, and Ryan jolted back. Someone had just bumped the table, but she saw Steve give Bucky a sharp look, his left hand clamped around Bucky's wrist, and her heart plummeted.

“Yeah, I figured you wouldn’t like that,” she muttered darkly, running an anxious hand through her hair. “Would you believe me if I told you I never, ever use it unless it's life or death? And sometimes not even then?”

Steve remained silent for a moment, eyes still locked on Bucky's. Finally, Bucky gave him the tiniest nod, and Steve slowly let him go.

“Everyone is innocent until proven guilty,” he said, turning back to Ryan. “And you're not on trial for anything.”

Ryan chuckled wryly. “That’s very PC of you. But it doesn’t change the fact that the Winter Soldier looks like he wants to come out to play.” Bucky’s face remained impassive, brown eyes as cold as ice.
“You're in no danger from us,” Steve repeated, shifting slightly closer to Bucky. To her surprise, he blinked once or twice, relaxing imperceptibly. “It would be poor repayment for what you did earlier, at any rate.”

“I would’ve done the same for anyone. I swear, I’m one of the good guys.” She put her hands on the table, palms upward in supplication. It was a pathetic argument, but she had nothing else to give. "Please.”

Slow, horrible seconds passed as she waited, her life suddenly in the hands of two strangers. They were supposed to be the good guys, though. She'd saved one of their lives. Maybe they'd...

At last, Steve straightened up. “I believe you,” he said, and she almost collapsed with relief. "But… SHIELD might not be comfortable leaving you unsupervised from now on."

Ryan took in a slow breath, trying to calm her racing heart before responding. “Did you watch any footage of me from before today? Did you look up any further information about me?” she asked, as evenly as she could. “Cause I’ve only been in the city for the past year, and have used my powers a grand total of three times in that period before today. All three were to stop Alphas that were cornering unmated Omegas.”

Bucky’s eyes widened slightly, then narrowed again. “What did you do when stopping them?”

“It was pretty much the same each time. Heard the commotion down an alley or something similar, investigated, saw girl Omegas backed against the wall with male Alphas saying shit. ‘Come on baby, you know you want my knot. Bitch like you would be lucky to have an Alpha like me, it’s a compliment.’”

She paused, disgust curling in her stomach. “One or two even tried using Alpha voice on them. I almost lost it when that happened. Yelled at the Alphas, distracted them to let the girl get away. If they tried to touch me, I knocked them out.”

“Using your powers?”

“Yeah. You know in The Princess Bride, how Fezzik knocks out Buttercup with a hand on pressure points in her neck? Same deal - it’s real easy if you know what you’re doing.” Then she chuckled to herself, shaking her head. "Sorry, you might not know The Princess Bride. That was dumb of me.”

Steve chuckled too, then said, “It was the first movie we watched after we moved into Avengers Tower.”

“It is a classic,” Ryan smiled back. “So, yeah. That’s the gist of it.” And she was still alive. Today was just full of surprises. “Your next question is probably ‘where did they come from’, right?”

“Among others.”

“I was born with them. My, uh, my parents used to say they never left me alone for a second as a baby, or else I’d probably have destroyed every shiny thing in the house.”

“You've had all your powers, your whole life?” Bucky said.

“Well, kinda. Nothing for the first year, started being able to move stuff around when I was about one, reading minds came at six or seven-ish, and control at 13. All sort of just developed on their own, though. And they’ve all... well. Gotten stronger with time.”
“What kind of parameters -“

“I'm sorry, just -- please," Ryan interrupted again. She should really stop interrupting the superheroes. It was probably a felony. "You could learn my entire life story, but at this point, you're either going to bring me into SHIELD custody or let me off with a warning. I'd appreciate it if you'd just tell me either way."

Steve looked at Bucky again, who nodded again. They kept doing that, she noted. Apparently she wasn't the only mind reader here, figuratively speaking.

Steve turned back to Ryan, and she held her breath. “You've been completely cooperative, and surprisingly honest. Once we verify your story, you'll never hear from us again, if you don't want.”

For the first time, a real smile broke out across her face. “My mom always told me honesty was the best policy. My dad told me lying was more fun, but that I shouldn't do it anyway.”

Bucky actually chuckled at that, and she grinned at him, unable to contain her relief. "Where are your parents?" he said. "Getting in contact with them would streamline the process."

Her smile faltered, then slid off her face. “They, uh, they're not around anymore. They died in the Towers, back in the day."

“I'm sorry,” Steve replied. He sounded it, too. “I lost my mother when I was sixteen.”

“I was eleven. But, it was a long time ago, now.” She fidgeted a little, twisting her hands in her lap.

“Well. If that's all…?"

Bucky nodded. “We'll be in touch.”

“If you don't mind, I'd rather you just call or text rather than track me through security cameras next time,” Ryan said. She pulled out her phone, thumbing in the password. “Here. I'll text so you have the number.”

A moment later, he handed it back, and she raised an eyebrow. "Jimmy Buchanan?"

"Ugh," Bucky sighed. "I always hated that nickname." Pointing at the phone, he added, "Don't let that get stolen."

"I can probably manage that." With that, she scooted out of the booth, pulling out her wallet to pay for her food.

"Please, let me," Steve said, and she stared in surprise as he laid a few bills on the table. He gave her a slightly crooked smile. "You did save my mate's life."

Well, she wasn't dumb enough to say no to free food. Not rich enough, either. And it was just the one time. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he murmured, and a moment later, he and Bucky were gone.

Ryan sighed out a breath, almost dizzy with the adrenaline crashing in her veins. It still felt like her heart might give out, but to be fair, that could've been the onion rings.

“Well, well, Ryan," Linda said in a sing-song voice, picking up her empty plate and glass. "Who were those handsome fellas?"

Huh. Maybe the baseball caps were enough. “Well. New friends, I guess,” Ryan said, smiling back
at her. “Have a good night, ok?”

“You too, sweetie. See you next week.”
“Penny for your thoughts?” Steve murmured, left hand tracing up and down Bucky’s spine. Bucky was lying prostrate over him, had been breathing in his scent for the past half-hour with his head on Steve’s chest. They’d both been silent on the way back to the Tower from Hell’s Kitchen, absorbing the craziness of the day.

It all started so normal, too, Steve thought. He and Sam went on their five AM run, Buck made pancakes for everyone at seven, and people dispersed to their day jobs by eight. He and Buck had spent the morning wandering the city, enjoying the last of summer as August gave way to September. They’d been at Soho Park eating lunch when the robots had happened, and the day hadn’t calmed ever since.

Bucky huffed a small laugh. “Pennies don’t buy much these days, Stevie. Good thing you’re my favorite customer.”

“Jerk,” Steve said as he poked Bucky’s side, making him yelp and squirm a moment.

“No, I’m ok, really. It was just a surprise, but Ryan honestly seems... good.”

“Mm. I agree,” Steve replied. “I’m a little surprised you’re not more... agitated over this, though. I’m agitated over it.”

“It’s been a year of shrinks and sessions and meds, all telling me to stop holding things against myself. I’m not gonna go nuts about every little thing that reminds me of the past. You’ve gotta stop worrying so much about me, Stevie.”

Steve shook his head. “That’ll never stop, Buck. It’s a miracle I got you back, and I’m not gonna lose you again.”

“Sap,” Bucky muttered, but pressed a kiss against Steve's collarbone. “Not going anywhere. ‘Sides, you said it yourself. Ryan’s innocent until proven guilty, and it’s not like it’s her fault she’s got those powers, apparently. I can’t hate her just on principle ‘cause she's got the potential to be a deadly supervillain. Technically, I was one, once.”

Steve shifted slightly, bringing both arms up to hug Bucky’s head and shoulders against him. He ran fingers through Bucky’s hair, still so much longer than it used to be, but not the shoulder-length matted mess from when they’d reunited. Some things never changed, though, and with a quiet moan, Bucky melted into him.

After a minute, Steve continued. “I don’t know how Coulson’s going to react, though. Loki had the power to control minds, and Ryan doesn’t even need that magic staff for it. Not to mention, he’s going to want to know her powers’ origin. What if she's some new alien species? We don’t even know if she's human.”

“It’s not our job to worry about the new SHIELD, Steve,” Bucky rebuked. “We reported a new case for the index, gave them the information we gathered, and they’ll do what they want from there.”

“That’s not fair. We told Ryan we’d leave her alone; what if SHIELD decides to take her in?”
“Yeah, you shouldn’t have told her that. But regardless, it’s out of our hands now.”

Steve still felt guilty. He honestly liked Ryan. She seemed witty, confident. Impressively honest, and pretty damn brave, too. Not to mention, he was endlessly grateful she’d kept Bucky safe, even though that was his job.

“You’re thinking too hard, Rogers. I can hear the gears grinding in your brain.”

“Oh, now you’re the telepath?”

“Shut up and neck with me already, punk.”

Steve obliged.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Ryan knew she should be finding a place to crash for the night, but couldn’t seem to stop wandering aimlessly around the city instead. At least it was warm and clear tonight.

Jesus, she berated herself. Couldn’t just run off screaming like all everyone else when robots fell from the sky. No, you had to HELP and GET INVOLVED and possibly ruin your life.

And then she’d just - stood there! Waited for the assassin-turned-Avenger codenamed Winter Soldier to turn around and see her! She could've taken off right then, no problem. She could've been on a bus that afternoon, and no one would've known.

And then - oh, then she'd royally fucked up. Of all the bad luck, though. Normal people probably wouldn't have caught her terror-induced slip-up. Normal people were definitely less open to the idea that telepathy existed, and therefore accidentally responding to their thoughts instead of their words would've been shrugged off as deja vu.

Ryan groaned, slumping against a dirty brick wall. "What's wrong with me?" she said aloud, voice bouncing down the alley.

Up until that afternoon, her main priority in life had been secrecy. No one could know she was homeless, no one could know she was in her twenties and hadn’t presented, and no one could know she had superpowers, for god’s sakes. She’d be stigmatized for any one of those, but especially the second; unpresented were only approximately 3% of the population, and at best they were considered unnatural, and at worst dangerous freaks. She was lucky the general consensus for a normal-looking person without a scent was they were just a Beta on birth control.

She was fine with it, honestly. She’d never had the slightest interest in sex, despite the world’s fixation. What was she missing out on, really? She still loved. It was just a little different.

But if that secret got out, people would assume she was homeless - and much more horrible things - because she was unpresented, and they wouldn’t be entirely wrong. It was incredible how illogical some of the prejudice against people like her was. Every unpresented that went off the deep end was evidence for a stereotype, regardless of how many Alphas, Betas, or Omegas shot up schools or blew up shopping malls or did any other number of horrible things.

An Alpha had literally come here from another world, killed over a hundred people, and destroyed half of Manhattan, but the unpresented might somehow infect "normal" people! They would never mate, couldn’t mate - it was inhuman.
Ryan sighed. The world had so much more to worry about, and yet, it chose this. After everything, how were they still the aliens?

But, in truth, she was homeless by choice, not force. Years of bad foster families had led to poor grades in high school, and she had no money even for community college. She had a job right now, thankfully, but even a full-time library assistant didn’t get paid much. It was either a tiny apartment with roaches and mold and Ramen, or sleeping under the stars in summer and shelters in winter while actually being able to eat, have a cell phone, save a few dollars up here and there, and basically not be entirely miserable.

_I’m a selfish bitch, Ryan thought, but I only ever take up a bed, I don’t take food from people that have nothing…_ It had been a moral dilemma she’d wrestled with for years. She knew she couldn’t use her powers to get ahead; that would definitely be wrong. But she technically could afford an apartment, so long as she gave up her cell phone, which was her entire Internet access, any opportunity to go out whatsoever, only bought clothes at the cheapest thrift stores, and ate at war ration levels every day. As it was, she had a gym membership to have a place to shower and store a few things, a duffel of spare clothes that lived in hiding at the library, and a talent for minimalism.

But she could go to Annie’s Diner and see Linda, she could see _The Martian_ in theaters on a Sunday afternoon, and she could give away a few dollars here and there to those who needed it more. She was happy. Maybe she was being selfish, maybe she could use some more ambition, but she was happy. Was that so bad?

_You might have just ruined everything, though. So it’s probably a moot point._

Heaving a sigh, she turned out of the alley to another empty street. _You could be working harder, find another job, you shouldn’t be taking away resources from people that actually need them, you’ve got superpowers, you can’t be in need_ - the same thoughts she had every day were particularly noisy tonight. She’d long learned to shut all her problems and worries away, to only let people see what she wanted. Dazzle them with quick words and never let them know anything of import. It was a pretty mask she wore, and she knew it. Not to say that her actions were all fake, that wasn’t true. But still, no one could be allowed to see her bad side.

But somehow, in a single day, she’d managed to shine a spotlight on everything she’d worked to hide, made herself a target of a team of superheroes backed by shady government agencies. She was not looking forward to when they changed their minds and started experimenting on her. _They’d have a job of catching me, Ryan mused. But that’ll only make things worse, if I fight them on it._ All because she’d saved the life of an Avenger.

Still lost in thought, she almost didn’t hear the muffled screams echoing down the alley. She paused, tilting her head back and groaning. Twice today, she was gonna be an idiot?

_Here we go again._

*** *** ***

Clint always got weird cravings after a good fight. _Why can’t I just get horny off adrenaline, like a normal person?_ he thought as he hopped from roof to roof. Nat and Darcy were back on their floor getting it on, but all he wanted in the world was a donut. He just couldn’t quell the desire for one of Marty’s chocolate glazed masterpieces, and was eternally thankful that his favorite donut shop owner was a freak that got up at midnight to start making fresh-baked pastries, leaving his back door open for people to buy them hot for a dollar. Pity it had to be all the way in Hell’s Kitchen, though.
He was a few roofs away from sugary bliss when he heard a scuffle in the alley below, followed by a bright flash of blue light.

*No way,* he thought, remembering Bucky’s description of the encounter with the mystery super-girl Ryan from earlier. He quickly climbed halfway down a fire escape to get a better view.

Ryan had three men, two Alphas and a Beta by their scent, flattened against the far brick wall, an Omega with a shirt ripped down the front curled on the ground and sobbing by her feet. Ryan was breathing deep and slow, like she was trying to calm herself down, even as her hand and eyes glowed a bright cerulean.

Clint dropped silently to the ground, tiptoeing forward to keep from startling her. He didn’t feel like being thrown into any dumpsters tonight.

“I know you’re there. I’m not going to throw you into a dumpster,” Ryan said, her voice sounding calmer than she looked.

Clint blinked, then came forward. “Right. The telepath thing. So, you going to let those guys go?” He shucked off his jacket to cover the shell-shocked Omega on the ground beside her. “If my assumptions aren’t making an ass of me, I wouldn’t mind so much if you didn’t.”

Ryan exhaled loudly, lowering her hand. The unconscious men clattered to the ground as the glow faded from her eyes. “Call the police for me, would you? I’m going to get her back home,” she said, kneeling down to help the girl up. Clint saw the bruises on her face and arms, caught her scent mingled with Alpha and Beta lust, and almost gagged.

“No, no, please;” the girl suddenly squeaked out. “I’m half a block from my friends’ place, I’ll be fine.”

She jerked away from Ryan’s hand, eyes staring wide and scent reeking of terror, and Clint realized it wasn’t just from her attackers. Ryan might have saved her, but she was a force to be reckoned with. *Can’t Ryan tell she’s scared of her? Why isn’t she backing off?*

“Hey, come on, it’s alright. No one else is gonna bother you tonight, I’ll make sure of it,” Ryan soothed, dropping to one knee and looking up with a smile. The Omega shook her head quickly, backing away.

“I’ll be fine,” she repeated. “Th-thanks, though.” With that, the girl took off at a sprint, and Clint quietly mourned the loss of his jacket.

Ryan watched her go, then turned back to face him. “Have to say, I didn’t expect to meet another Avenger today. Well, actually, that was probably yesterday, now.” She stuck out her right hand. “I’m Ryan.”

Clint stealthily sniffed the air as he took her hand, and didn’t smell a thing. He almost fell over in shock. “Uh, Clint, I'm Clint. Barton. But you already knew that.”

She had a nice smile, he decided. It made her eyes light up. *Hah, her eyes light up,* he thought, *cause - her eyes, they glow when she - yeah. Darce would slap me for that one.*

“Well, this was a nice meet-cute, over human garbage in an alleyway full of actual garbage,” Ryan said, releasing his hand.

He chuckled, appreciating a bad joke when he heard one. “Speaking of human garbage, we should probably get these guys off the streets,” he said, moving around her to make sure the would-be
rapists were still alive. He wouldn’t be too bothered if they weren’t; they were the worst kinds of people in his book. As a Beta, he had been on the wrong end of the attention from horny Alphas once or twice in his life, and he knew it was infinitely worse for Omegas. Somewhat thankfully, these three were all fine, but would wake up with nasty headaches.

“I normally just make an anonymous tip to the police, that cool with you?” Ryan asked, taking out a cell phone.

“Yeah, definitely. I don’t think they take well to civilian vigilantism, unless it’s by that Daredevil guy. Hey, wait - isn’t this area, like, his territory? Why are you here stopping crimes instead of him?”

“Daredevil? Oh, he’s on a short hiatus right now. Taking down the Fisk empire took it out of him,” Ryan replied, eyes on what she was texting.

“You know the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen!?” Clint exclaimed. “The Avengers haven’t even been able to figure out who he is yet!”

Ryan snorted. “If you guys really paid attention, it wouldn’t be that hard to figure it out.”

“He always manages to disappear before we can get anywhere near him, I don’t know how he does it! And I grew up in the circus,” Clint declared. “How did you meet him, anyway?”

“Similar thing to this a few months ago, except it was him instead of you that scaled down the fire escape. He was confused, he’d never run across someone with my abilities before, and he thought his senses were going haywire,” Ryan explained. “If I couldn’t tell where he was coming from before I saw him, I’d probably have ended up in the hospital along with the guys he subdued.”

Clint frowned. “He tried to attack you? For no reason? I think it’s time we started paying better attention, then.”

“No, no, don’t, really, it wasn’t his fault,” Ryan cajoled. “He had gotten there first, and I was running up behind him to see what was going on. He could tell I wasn’t another douchebag Alpha, obviously, but there’s no way he could have known I wasn’t there to back them up or something. Having all the people he was beating up suddenly fly away from him was disconcerting and he reacted instinctively. We sorted it all out afterwards, no worries.”

“So you’re, like, buddies with the guy? You have an interesting choice in friends.”

“I’m friends with you,” Ryan retorted, smiling wide.

“Exactly my point!” Clint grinned. *Cap and Bucky were right, she is easy to get on with,* he thought. “Hey, have you ever been to Marty’s Donuts?”

“Um, only like EVERY NIGHT!”

* * * * * * *

One thing most people didn’t know about Clint was that he had a highly acute sense of smell, much more sensitive to subtle variations than the norm. It was useful in his line of work; he always knew where everyone in his surroundings was, and was practically a human lie detector. Every time someone got a little more nervous, a little more anxious, he could tell. Even if a Beta was on the strongest birth control on the market, he could still get a hint of scent from them, so long as he was
close by. Even kids that hadn't presented yet had just the slightest whiff, although it was very
generalized; he couldn't know what the child would grow up to be, but he knew they would grow
up, someday. The only people that didn't have any scent whatsoever were the unpresented. Ryan
didn't have any scent whatsoever. He knew right away.

Sure explains how she was with that Omega girl, he thought, munching a chocolate glazed. She
couldn't smell a thing. The mind reading must make up for it; I guess she was telling the truth when
she said she stays out of people's heads as a rule, or else she'd have known the girl was terrified of
her, too.

Logically, Clint knew that the prejudices against unpresented were unfounded and undeserved.
They were people, just like everyone else. Well, not just like everyone else, Clint thought after he
said good-bye to Ryan, both of them walking away with a small bag of donuts that smelled almost as
good as Nat and Darcy did to Clint. He still found it difficult to really trust an unpresented, though.
They could be thinking or feeling anything, and he'd never know. They'd never have a mate, which
just seemed sad; who would be happy forever alone? As far as he knew, they didn't even want one,
or anything that came with it. How was that natural? It was what made people human.

But then, all he had to do was talk with Ryan for not even five minutes, and he already liked her a
lot. If nothing else, she told a quality bad joke. If she really was untrustworthy, she was a great
actress. He assumed she had her secrets, not least being unpresented - everyone did. But regardless,
she was so genuine he found himself asking her to grab donuts with him five minutes after they
cleaned up a crime scene together.

Oh, No.

Clint stopped short as a horrible thought crossed his mind. Ryan could throw people around like rag
dolls and dig around in his brain, but that didn't entirely bother him. He was trained for that sort of
thing. He'd carefully monitored his thoughts the entire time with Ryan, just in case. But there was
the little issue of her being able to control people like a puppet master.

She just happens to be new to the city? She just happens to be around to save Bucky from the
robots? She just happens to ace the interview with Bucky and Cap and gets a pass? She just
happens to save that Omega right when I was passing by? Nope. Too many coincidences for me.
It would be the epitome of a dastardly plan to infiltrate the Avengers so subtly. No one else could
pull it off.

There was only one thing to do. Clint turned around, sprinting back up the street and catching Ryan
as she turned the next corner.

"Hey, Ryan!"

"Hey, what's up? Something wrong?"

"Do you like Mario Kart?"

"Hell yeah, I do!"
Marty's Donuts was a real place in MA I went to one time. The owner really did open shop at midnight and close around 9 when he ran out of the day's batch. Best chocolate glazed donut I've ever had in my life.

Also, this is so much exposition. Sorry.
In Which Mario Kart and Breakfast are Dangerous Pastimes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oh, you’d better watch out, asshole, cause momma’s got a blue shell and it’s coming your way!”

“What the hell? That’s the fourth one this race!”

“HA! There we go, come on, come on, come on - “

“Suck it! You’re too late, I’m still gonna - no FUCKING way!”

“YES! Bow down before your queen, peasants! There’s a new champion in town, and she’s coming for Rainbow Road!”

It was too early for this shit. But after a few years in New York, Darcy had seen weirder than a stranger jumping on their couch in celebration as Clint cursed out a video game. “Babe, I love you, but I will dig out my taser if you don’t shut up.”

He looked up and smiled, and then she had to forgive him. Damn his stupid cute face, she thought, wrapping her arms around him from behind, burying her face in his neck. “It’s barely seven in the goddamn morning, and Nat will actually kill you if you’re too chipper before coffee.”

“Shit, it’s morning already? Oops,” Clint replied, then kissed her hair and held onto her arms. “This is Ryan, by the way,” he continued, gesturing at her now sitting cross-legged beside them. "Ryan, my mate, Darcy."

“Did this idiot keep you up all night?” Darcy said, winking at her. "House-training's been a nightmare. We keep a spray bottle around here somewhere, a few squirts whenever he starts barking should do it - "

"It's my fault, really," Ryan replied, grinning back. "I said we'd play until he beat me, I just didn't think it'd take this long."

"Ha-ha," Clint said in a deadpan, "you're both hilarious."

"Oh, I like her already." Darcy uncurled herself from Clint to pull Ryan into a hug. Ryan stiffened for a second, then relaxed, throwing her arms around Darcy in return. Good. Darcy was a hugger. "Damn, it'll be nice to have another girl around, it gets so smelly with all these gross boys."

“Well, I don't know about that, but if I could bum some tea off you guys before I skedaddle, I’d appreciate it.”

“You say that now, but Jane and I were strays they picked up too, and now she's Thor's mate and I'm stuck with that loser,” Darcy teased as she led Ryan into the kitchen, leaving Clint to put away the video game. “And we don’t even have superpowers.”

Ryan blinked, looking taken aback. "If there's juicy gossip around, I will find it," Darcy said, shooting her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, no one outside the Tower fam will ever know. Secret-keeping’s a way of life around here."

“Yeah, I'd appreciate that,” Ryan said, still looking wary as Darcy took mugs out of a cabinet. The
one she handed Ryan had a simple geometric design, but her favorite had Grumpy Cat printed on the side.

“No prob. On one condition, though.” Ryan's eyes widened, and Darcy grinned mischievously. "I'm gonna need a demonstration. For science."

“Oh. Um, I don't use them unless it's an emergency, really - "

She cut off, chuckling at Darcy’s wide, round eyes and pouting moue. Darcy knew she had an amazing puppy-dog face, and she wasn't afraid to use it. “Seriously?” Ryan said, raising an eyebrow.

“Come on, nothing big! Just yank Clint's pants down from over here or something,” Darcy grinned, grabbing the coffee pot off the counter.

Just as she started to pour, though, the stream of coffee flew right out of her mug and up and around her head. "Holy - !"

Ryan sniggered, and the coffee pot flew out of her hand and hovered by the fridge. “Hey, come on, give it back!” Darcy laughed, jumping to try and reach it. Ryan gently waved her fingers, and the rest of the coffee streamed out of the pot and swirled around in the air, circling around Darcy in a spiraling stream.

Darcy's jaw dropped. “Okay, this is the coolest thing I've ever seen.”

Ryan smiled, almost shyly, and the tiniest dot of coffee flew out and splattered on Darcy's nose.

“The hell are you doing!?"  

Ryan and Darcy both startled, and the coffee and pot plummeted to the floor, crashing and splashing a few hot drops onto Darcy’s bare feet.

“Hey, ow! What the hell, Clint?” Darcy bellowed, hopping over the puddle to reach dry floor again. “What’s your deal? She was just showing off cause I wanted her to!”

“I - she shouldn’t be using - she shouldn’t have done that, she could have burned you,” Clint stammered, crossing his arms and glaring at her.

“I-I'm sorry, Clint, I got carried away. I swear, it won’t happen again,” Ryan stuttered out, and Darcy's heart melted at the naked fear on her face.

“Hey, no, don’t apologize! It’s his stupid fault,” Darcy declared, glaring right back at Clint. “The only reason I got burned was cause you freaked out for no reason. I’m pretty sure it’s Natasha’s job to be stupidly overprotective, not yours.”

Clint frowned for a moment longer, then blinked, relaxing his arms again. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said, stepping over the mess to grab paper towels off the counter. “Sorry, Ryan, I was just being dumb cause it’s Darcy.”

“Ugh, why did I mate with you, again?” Darcy rolled her eyes, then grabbed a wad of towels and started cleaning.

“Cause you couldn’t resist the unending charms of my amazing jokes and windswept blond hair.”

Darcy rolled her eyes again, and opened her mouth to tell him exactly what she thought of his jokes when Bucky entered. “Hey, I heard yelling, is everything alright?”
“No problem, just a little incident with the coffee pot,” Clint said quickly. Darcy stood up, a wad of coffee-soaked towels dripping on her feet, and found herself in the middle of a wide-eyed stare between Bucky and Ryan.

“Oh, um,” Ryan greeted. “Hi again, Bucky. Um, sorry, I was just leaving.” She quickly pushed off from counter, making to hurry towards the exit.

“Hey, no, don’t leave! You haven’t even had breakfast yet,” Darcy said, throwing the towels into the sink and catching Ryan's arm.

“Yeah, you’re welcome to stay,” Bucky added, and Ryan stopped short, looking between them both.

“Oh. Um, thank you, but it’s been 24 hours without my beauty sleep, and we don’t know each other well enough yet to see me sleep deprived,” Ryan said, trying for bravado and almost making it. She moved toward the door again, but jumped out of the way as Tony barreled in.

“Sleep is for the weak,” he said by way of greeting. "The strong survive on hidden snack stashes and - hey, who the hell put paper towels in my garbage disposal?! Is this a breakfast bar for a biker gang?!” He gestured widely with the coffee pot, glaring at them in turn until he reached Ryan. He frowned, narrowing his eyes. “Stranger, are you the reason the coffee’s gone? Because we don’t take kindly to caffeine thieves ’round these parts.”

“Ryan, and sorry, I plead the fifth,” she answered, chuckling a little. “But, I was a barista one time, I’ll make you guys some more before I go?”


“Ignore him,” Darcy said, picking up the coffee pot again to refill it. “We don’t even have an espresso maker.”

“JARVIS, buy an espresso maker,” Tony ordered, his head still in the fridge.

“Yes, sir,” JARVIS replied in a long-suffering tone.

“We having a party this morning?” Sam called out, entering the kitchen in front of Steve, both sweaty from their morning run. “There’d better be bacon left.”

Beside her, Ryan muttered, "Oh my god," and Darcy turned to her in alarm. Her eyes were wide, and she'd backed into the corner, shrinking into herself a little. It was a lot, meeting them all at once, and Darcy felt for her. The first time she'd saw Steve as Captain America, she'd practically drooled all over his uniform.

"Hey," she whispered, and Ryan's eyes shot to hers. "It's cool, I swear. They're all just regular people, like me."

Ryan laughed under her breath, shaking her head. "That's not - "

“Good morning, friends! A beautiful morning it is, no?” a deep voice boomed. Ryan jumped, just barely missing banging her head on a cabinet door, and Darcy stifled a laugh. The last of the horde all assembled at once: Natasha, Thor, Jane, Pepper and Bruce ambled in together, all except Thor looking slightly confused at the impromptu gathering.

"C'mon, I'll introduce you to everyone," Darcy whispered to her. "They won't bite."
Suddenly, it was like a switch flipped, and Ryan straightened up, a charming smile spreading across her face. "Morning to you, too, sweetheart," she called out, almost in a drawl. She grabbed the coffee pot, now full to the brim, and held it up. "Want some joe?"

Thor registered her unknown voice, and a wide grin spread over his face. "Ah, you must be Ryan, the brave warrior who saved James' life in battle! We owe you a great debt," he declared, crowd parting as he came over and tightly grasped Ryan’s right hand. He shook it in his usual forceful manner, and Ryan winced a little.

"Hi, I'm Jane, and that's Bruce, Natasha, and Pepper," Jane greeted, hurrying over after. "Sorry about Thor, he's still learning the finer points of Earth customs," she breathed in Ryan’s ear as she shook hands with her, much more gently this time.

"No worries," Ryan said, smiling back. Natasha nodded, Bruce gave a friendly smile, and Pepper said a brief hello as she kissed Tony and grabbed a bottled water, hurrying back out. The kitchen was quickly turning to chaos, with Sam digging around for bowls in a drawer, Thor opening a large box of strawberry Pop Tarts, Darcy looking for creamer in the fridge, Bruce microwaving water for tea, Tony scarfing down blueberries, Natasha drinking coffee straight from the pot, and Ryan standing trapped in the middle of it all, looking like she was questioning how her life choices had somehow led her here. The kitchen was swirling with mixed Alpha, Beta, and Omega scent, and Clint sneezed loudly.

"Alright, this room’s big, but it’s not that big. You all will get your bacon just as soon as I’m the only cook in the kitchen," Sam announced, shooing people away once they had their mugs of coffee and boxes of pastries. Somehow, a moment later, it was just Ryan, Darcy, Steve, Bucky, and Sam left.

Ryan, looking a little dazed, laughed under her breath. "Is that what mornings always look like here?" she muttered to Darcy.

"It’s worse when Bucky makes chocolate muffins," Steve remarked, smiling over at them both.

"Steve, hey!" Ryan said quickly, rubbing the back of her neck, and Darcy raised an eyebrow. "I’m, uh, I’m sorry, I don’t think I entirely know how I ended up in your kitchen at 7:30 on a Saturday morning."

"It’s no problem, Ryan. I heard you and Clint playing Mario Kart earlier, I assumed he invited you sometime last night."

"Yeah, uh, long story short, we ran into each other, and ended up getting donuts and coming back here after," Ryan explained. Then she grimaced, cheeks turning pink. "Crap - you didn’t happen to hear when Clint beat me on Bowser’s Castle, did you?"

Steve chuckled. "I did, actually, but it was pretty funny. I hadn’t heard the phrase ‘Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ’ since the ‘40s."

Ryan ducked her head, laughing. "Yeah, I don’t even know where I picked that one up. Okay. Thank you for your hospitality, but I’m kinda beat and honestly pretty gross, so I’m going to get out of here now."

"No, come on, Ryan," Darcy said, "you should totally stay - "

"Oh, you’re staying for pancakes," Sam inserted, flipping the first batch a few feet away at the stove as bacon sizzled beside them. "No, no buts," he continued as Ryan opened her mouth to reply.
“Least we can do after your help yesterday.”

“Thanks, guys, really, but - “

“No, I said no buts! Did I not just say no buts?”

*** *** *** ***

“I think you’re making a big conspiracy of this, and I’m a huge conspiracy fan, but not when it’s happening in my Tower,” Tony said, folding his arms and leaning against the doorway to his lab.

“No offense, Tony, but we’re the spies here, not you. There’s more to Ryan than she’s letting on, and we already know she’s got dangerous potential,” Clint argued. He’d shared his concerns about Ryan with Nat earlier, and she’d agreed with him. They’d cornered Tony after breakfast, feeling it was important to tell him as it was, indeed, his Tower Clint had brought Ryan into.

“Okay, let me just see if I’ve got this all straight. Yesterday, a previously unknown kid with superpowers saved Buckminster Abbey’s life from marauding robots, aced an entrance interview with the two deadly grandpas, then saved ANOTHER life from marauding gang rapists, after which you invited her over for donuts and video games because you think she’s an evil genius going the long con to kill us all and destroy the world?” Tony ticked off the statements on his hands, his eyebrows raising higher with each.

“No one’s accusing her of anything yet, Tony. But that’s a lot of coincidences for one day,” Natasha replied.

“Fine, I’ll bite. Why the hell would you bring her home to meet the folks if you’re so worried she’s secretly using mind control on us to potentially kill us all?”

“There’s no way in hell she could be stringing up everyone, she’d have to be crazy powerful. Ever heard of keeping your enemies close?” Clint shot back. “Besides, she couldn’t control JARVIS; he’s artificial intelligence, not a real mind. He’s got too many backup systems for her to shut him down without getting caught, so I’m counting on him to notice anything weird if she somehow is able to voodoo us all.”

“Um, I think you’re overlooking the fact that she can also apparently read minds, and in my mind is every little technical detail needed to shut down not only JARVIS but potentially the entire digital world,” Tony said. "Trust me, I’ve considered it extensively.”

“JARVIS watches everything in the Tower constantly, and she doesn’t have authority to shut off surveillance. Even if she hacked her way in, JARVIS would be able to alert you first. I thought this through, Tony. And there’s something else I haven’t told either of you yet,” Clint said, frown deepening.

“What is it?” Natasha asked. His Alpha’s scent was home, warm cloves and vanilla, but Clint could detect her underlying concern, like sharp lemon or citrus. He sighed to himself. He wasn’t so sure he’d thought this through well enough, anymore.

“She’s unpresented.”

The others fell silent for a moment, Tony frowning and Nat narrowing her eyes. “That shouldn’t be
a reason to be more suspicious of her,” Tony said, but he didn’t sound entirely convinced. “What motive does she have? It’s not like just because she can’t have a mate she automatically hates those who do, and that’s not even any direct connection to the Avengers. What would she be trying to accomplish?”

“I don’t know. That’s the point. All I’m saying is, let’s keep a closer eye on her. She seems to have earned Rogers and Barnes’ trust a little too easily, and then her little stunt with her powers in the kitchen this morning? It all smells weird. Or it would, if she smelled like anything,” Clint finished.

“I thought your mate asked her to do that. There didn’t seem to be any harm done, except I had to wait for my coffee. I never did get that macchiato.”

“I agree with Clint,” Natasha said. “She claims to never use her powers except in emergencies, then reneges right after?”

“She made coffee fly around the kitchen like she was Hermione showing off in Charms class!” Tony said, throwing up a hand. “God, I swear you two get more paranoid every single day. Quite frankly, you are making a huge deal out of nothing, but just for your peace of mind, JARVIS?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Restrict Ryan’s access to your programming. No requests, no questions, and certainly no cameras shut off, ever.”

“Right away, sir. Would you like me to file video of Ryan in the Tower to restricted access as well?”

“You always know what to say, JARVIS. Happy now, spy kids?”

“No one else can know, Tony,” Natasha muttered. “We need her close by to keep an eye on her, and that won’t work if everyone’s secretly suspicious. Besides, she’s already charmed everyone else, especially after that story at breakfast.”

“Oh my god, when she accidentally drank that eel? That was hilarious,” Tony laughed, putting his hand on the scanner to the lab door. “Alright children, playtime’s over. Papa’s got leftover alien robots to dissect.”

* * * *** * * *

Steve put a finger to his lips, pointing his eyes at Ryan’s sleeping form slouched over the table as Bucky finished the dishes. After she told the eel story, Sam had launched into a retelling of something similar in Louisiana but with crayfish, and Ryan had nodded off, obviously exhausted from staying up with Clint all night. All except Steve and Bucky had quietly left to go about their days, with Bruce clearing away her plate, Darcy sneaking photos of her with her phone, and Thor magnanimously draping a spare blanket over her shoulders. Steve had to admit, her tiny snores were kind of adorable.

“I hate to admit it, but that’s kind of adorable,” Bucky whispered, drying his hands. “She reminds me a bit of my little sister when we were kids, falling asleep after playing at the park all day.”

“I was just thinking that. Wait - you remembered more about Rebecca? You didn’t tell me,” Steve
whispered back, overjoyed. Buck's memory of his old family was still patchy at best. It had just been so long, now.

Bucky shrugged. “It happened yesterday, on the way home from that diner. Becca used to wink at me when she was up to no good. Ryan winked, and it nagged at me until I remembered.”

Standing up quietly, Steve drew Bucky into a hug, kissing the side of his head. They held each other a moment, and Steve breathed in Bucky’s refreshing scent, like pine trees and waterfalls. Bucky hummed in contentment, but then pushed Steve away with his metal arm, gears whirring and metal clicking.

“Alright, enough. I’ve gotta get Tony to work on this damn thing, it’s acting up again,” he said, and turned to leave.

“Hey,” Steve said, catching the hand again and pulling him back. “I’m so proud you’re remembering, and I’m so glad everything with Ryan hasn’t upset you.”

Bucky smiled, just a small upturn of his lips as he looked down and away. All these years, and Steve's heart still jumped at it every time.

“No, look at me,” he growled quietly, a hint of Alpha voice coming through. Bucky's eyes flew to his. “I love you. More than anything.”

“Me, too. Now can I please get my arm fixed before it falls off?” Bucky replied, just a tad breathless.

Steve smirked. “Don’t kill Tony. I’ll join you there in a bit, I’m going to take Ryan to a guest room.” He kissed Bucky, brief but hard, then released him and turned back to Ryan. Bucky blinked, slightly dazed, and grinned to himself as he went down to the lab.

Steve furrowed his brows, gazing at Ryan for a minute. Her face was smooth and calm when she slept, rather a change from the norm. He’d seen her face laugh, frown, brighten with joy, and pale with fear already, and they’d only met yesterday. Steve knew he was a naturally trusting person, but Ryan had won him over quickly even for him. The second she’d said it was her duty to help where she could, he knew she meant it. Her words resonated with the little guy Steve used to be, that he still felt he was inside sometimes, that always needed to do the right thing.

He frowned a little, considering. Some of the others might never fully warm up to her because of the nature her powers, but that was a horrible shame, he thought. People shouldn’t be judged on abilities, but how they use them. After all, their makeshift family had former assassins, a weapons maker, PTSD-suffering war vets, scientists more than capable of causing serious damage should they wish, and a man considered a monster because of an accident.

And Darcy with her taser, he added, chuckling to himself a moment. The Avengers had already adopted Jane, Darcy, Sam, and Bucky since the team had formed a few years back. If Ryan wanted, why not her? An orphan girl who saved their teammate’s life, with abilities they hadn't encountered before. How useful would a telepath be in their line of work?

“Hey, Ryan,” he whispered, gently touching her shoulder. Ryan jumped about a foot in the air, hitting Steve’s hand away and wrenching herself back. She gasped for breath a moment, her eyes unfocused and the blanket sliding to the floor. “Hey, it’s just me, Steve,” he murmured, stepping back to give her space.

Ryan blinked a few times, and then relaxed, her shoulders slumping down. “Hey, sorry,” she
greeted, voice a little thick from sleep. She tucked her hair behind her ears in a nervous tic, not meeting Steve’s eyes. “I’m a weird sleeper.”

Steve wasn’t fooled; that reaction was too similar to Bucky’s when he woke up from a nightmare. They still happened once in a blue moon, but Ryan’s response had been worse than Bucky’s most recent event. But whatever it was, it was her secret to keep.

“No problem,” he said, smiling reassuringly. “I was just going to move you to a guest room, if I couldn’t wake you up to show you there.”

“Oh no, thank you, but I really need to go. You’ve all been too kind already,” Ryan said quickly, hurrying past him to the living room and grabbing her shoes. “Um, thanks for breakfast, and for not being weird about me showing up in your Tower out of nowhere.”

“There was no reason to be weird about anything,” Steve stated firmly. Ryan paused, looking up in surprise.

“We both know that’s not true,” she said slowly. “There’s more than enough reason for anyone to be freaked out by me, especially the Avengers. I don’t even know why Clint asked me back here. I shouldn’t have come.”

Steve felt a small rush of sadness, tinged with anger. “Having certain abilities is no reason for people to fear you, Ryan, or anyone for that matter. I don’t stand for that kind of prejudice. And the other’s don’t, either, especially Bucky. The only reason we were suspicious of you before is because it’s our job, and we know better now.”

Ryan gaped at him a moment, then shook her head. “There’s every reason, but thank you for the sentiment anyway,” she said, her voice touched with the melancholy of very lonely people. Steve recognized it - his voice had sounded the same way once, after awakening in the 21st century with any vestiges of his old life lost to the years.

“I mean it, Ryan. You’re a friend. And you’re welcome back here anytime,” Steve promised.

Ryan stared at him, lips parting. “Th-thank you, Steve. That means a lot.” With that, she strode to the elevator as quickly as she could without running, and finally made her exit.

Steve watched her go, some strange feeling turning in his stomach. Loss, and happiness, and anger and yearning and sadness, all at once, but the reason behind each was beyond him.

Something else niggled at the back of his mind, though, as he made his way down to Tony’s lab. She had no scent. It was the first thing he’d noticed when they met in the diner. He’d assumed she was a Beta on strong birth control to ward off any potential mating responses - it was common enough among the day’s twenty-somethings, like her. He himself was on rut suppressants, just because he liked having the ability to schedule them if and when he and Bucky wanted. For Betas, the pills diminished scent to almost nothing, and more so in some cases. But it was never 100% effective; an extreme response like when he woke her up would have caused some scent to be displayed. There had been nothing.

Steve shook his head. Ryan’s secrets were hers. He didn't have any right to them. But maybe someday, if Ryan decided to trust them back, maybe he could earn them.
If you get the eel reference, we'll be great friends. And even better ones if you get the Outlander joke too.
Sam loved his morning runs, but he hated it when Steve slowed down to stick with him the whole time. He appreciated the sentiment, but he couldn’t push himself to improve when Steve was holding back. Not that he’d ever beat Steve’s times, as that was physically impossible. He still liked the challenge, though.

“You go on up ahead man, I’ve got six miles to go and you’ll get bored stuck back here with me,” he panted, still struggling to find a good rhythm after four miles at a decent pace.

“You sure? I don’t mind,” Steve replied, not out of breath in the slightest.

“Nah, it’s all good, I’ll catch up on my podcasts,” Sam said, slowing a bit to fish his iPhone and earbuds out of his pocket. Steve nodded, speeding up so quickly Sam swore he saw smoke clouds from his feet. Sam stopped a moment, dropping his hands to his knees and catching his breath. It was a fantastic Monday morning for a run, but he was coming off an injury from a few weeks ago and he was less in shape than he’d hoped. *Too many of those damn cookies Darcy and Bucky bake.*

Sam worked on untangling his headphones, cursing quietly when they somehow became more tangled. It wasn’t quite light yet, and the wires were hard to see. *Might as well take a break and stretch my calf,* he decided. The park Steve had chosen for the morning was full of wooden benches and cultivated flowers and grassy hills, and it’d been a while since he’d made time to stop and smell the roses. He made his way over to the bench a few hundred feet up the path.

Suddenly, a pale figure in dark clothes rolled out and shot up from beneath the seat of the bench, darting down the path as quickly as possible.

“Hey!” Sam acknowledged the foolishness in chasing the figure, but if someone needed help- or worse, was up to no good- he figured it was his job. He took off after the shape, rounding the corner in the path where Steve had disappeared to see a fork in the path. *Dammit.* He sniffed the air, but there was nothing; the gentle morning breeze must have dispersed the scent away.

“On your left!” It was somewhat childish that Steve still liked to show off in front of Sam, but this time he was grateful Steve was freakishly fast and could loop the park in minutes.

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“Hey, wait! Someone just disappeared down one of these paths, you take right and I’ll go left,” Sam explained quickly, rushing away in pursuit.

“Wait, why are we chasing them?!” Steve yelled, but Sam was already gone. Steve ran down his path anyway, looking left and right off the sides for the mysterious figure. There hadn’t been anyone else in the park through the morning so far, which is why Steve had chosen it; he liked a quiet morning run. *Guess that’s finished for today.*

There was a slight rustle of leaves in a copse of beech trees to the right, but there was no wind at the moment. Steve detoured off the path, rounding the giant trunk of the central beech to find Ryan sitting with her back flat against the opposite side, jean-clad knees pulled up to her chest as she panted quietly. She closed her eyes when she saw him come into view. “Hi, Steve,” she sighed, resigned to her fate.

“Ryan? Was it you I was supposed to chase down?!” Steve asked, confused at her sudden
appearance. It had been just over two weeks since the impromptu breakfast party, but they hadn’t been in contact since. Steve had considered texting her, asking to meet up for a friendly coffee, but Bucky had said not to push too hard. Ryan had seemed a little overwhelmed when she left Avengers Tower, so he would let her decompress from all of them for a while.

“Yeah, it was me,” she admitted. It had been her favorite park to sleep in on warm nights, as it was secluded enough that few police ever came by. **Definitely not my favorite anymore.**

“Why were you running from Sam? Did something happen?” Steve questioned, looking concerned. Ryan shook her head, her cheeks tinged pink.

“No, I… didn’t want him to catch me,” Ryan hedged, hoping against hope Steve would drop it.

“Catch you doing what?” Steve only seemed more confused. Ryan had to restrain herself from rolling her eyes, stress and adrenaline flooding through her still.

“Catch me sleeping under the bench where he was about to sit, ok?” Ryan said, her tone approaching defensive. Steve comprehended her meaning instantly, and Ryan watched his face go from confused to surprised to something she thought like pity in a second. “Congratulations, now you know two of my biggest secrets,” she remarked acerbically, looking anywhere but at Steve.

Steve opened his mouth to reply, and then seemed to think better of it. Instead, he sat down next to Ryan, leaning against the beech, their shoulders almost touching. “Bucky and I were 17 when we mated,” he started a minute or two later. “My mother had died the year before, and… she had been so sick, but she was my everything—except for Bucky—my only blood family, and I didn’t know where I was going to go or what I was going to do. I was an Alpha, but I was sick all the time, so small and skinny that people assumed I was an Omega when they saw me. Even though body type doesn’t matter for that,” he tacked on as an afterthought. "But back then, male Omegas weren’t... well, people thought they were pathetic, useless. Real men were Alphas and Betas, not... not like how girls were supposed to be. But looking like the Omega stereotype when I was an Alpha? It just made things worse."

Ryan remained silent. She had learned about Steve’s life and legacy in school, everyone had, but there were no really reliable accounts of his time before the war. Everyone just knew he was a skinny kid from Brooklyn caught up in some science experiment gone crazy, and then Captain America had been born. It was easy to romanticize the glory days. Steve obviously remembered things differently.

“I was sitting on the steps to St. Matthew’s after the funeral, when everyone had left. Everyone except Bucky. We’d been friends over ten years by then, and I’d been in love with him from almost the beginning, before I even knew what I was feeling. But he was my friend first. He came and sat with me, and he told me I was coming to live with him. ‘No matter what happens, I’m with you. ‘Til the end of the line,’” Steve mimicked a strong Brooklyn accent, and Ryan smiled for a moment.

"We managed to get a tenement, and he worked every day and some nights when I couldn’t. I’d presented already, and he worked every day and some nights when I couldn’t. I’d presented already, and he did within a year, right after he turned 17. Then he imprinted on me, and we mated right after. We almost never had extra money, but we had some good neighbors in our tenement for help when we needed it, and we had each other.”

“If this is the part where you tell me I need to find an Alpha to take care of me, I think you’d better stop the story now,” Ryan interrupted, still carefully avoiding looking at Steve, even as Steve kept his eyes on the park. “I have been taking care of myself since I was 11 years old, and I’m not about to rely on anyone else now.”

“No, Ryan, that’s not what I was getting at at all. I was the least able Alpha in the world, but I had
Bucky, my friend, to help me, and it was more than I'll ever deserve. I don’t know all your circumstances, but I do know you have me, and Bucky, and Sam and everyone else. But only if you let us help. It’s on you. I know you’ll survive without us, but I don’t want you to do it alone.”

Ryan had tears silently streaming down her face. *Damn it all to hell.* “You don’t know me, Steve,” she managed to get out without her voice cracking. “We met once two weeks ago, and shit happened, and now you know I’ve got superpowers and that I’m homeless. I met the rest of you all once, and I’m pretty sure everyone’s secretly scared of me, and for good reason.”

“No one’s scared of you, Ryan! I told you before, Bucky and I had to question you like we did because we’re part of a team that keeps the world safe from things it can’t handle on its own. We had no way of knowing if you were one of them, but you’re not.”

“Steve, I saw the way Bucky looked at me that day. Everyone knows his story- god, he must hate me,” Ryan sniffed, her tears still falling despite her best efforts to quell them.

“He’s doesn’t, Ryan. Really. If he was really scared of you, we would both be able to tell, right?”

*What? I'm the one who reads minds... last I checked, anyway.* “What about Clint, then? First he acts like we’re buddies, no problem, and then the next second he’s yelling at me in the kitchen and not speaking to me the rest of the time I was there,” Ryan recalled.

Steve frowned a moment. He’d wondered about that a bit himself. “I guess I can’t speak for Clint. But as for everyone else? You charmed them all in a minute. I heard Darcy asking Jane the other day if anyone had heard from you, and Tony and Thor still laugh about that eel story.”

Ryan choked out a snigger, despite herself. “I’m glad they enjoyed it, I threw up for days,” she mumbled.

Steve smiled, hoping he was getting through to her. “And you did all that by just being yourself. That first night in the diner? I was shocked by how open and honest you were. It was really, really nice, considering how many lies get told by everyone everyday.”

“How can you say that, Steve!?” Ryan burst out suddenly, rising to her feet to stand over him. “You just found out I’m homeless, sleeping under a park bench! How can you say I’m open and honest? I’ve hidden my powers from everyone my whole life, I’ve been secretly homeless for over a year, and you have no way of knowing I’ve been telling you the truth about any of this!”

Steve stood up as well, making sure to keep space between Ryan and himself. “Have you been lying?” he asked simply.

“No, of course not! But you don’t know! Jesus, I thought you were supposed to be some kind of amazing super soldier, you can’t even recognize a potential enemy…”

“Ryan.” Steve growled, approaching her carefully and putting his hands on her shoulders. His protective instincts were rearing up, and he had to hold himself back from crushing her to him and not letting go. “Your secrets weren’t lies to harm others, they were to protect you. I can understand why you didn’t want anyone to know you were homeless, and it’s still important people don’t know about your powers until you’re ready for that, if ever. You understand me?”

Ryan stood her ground, gazing steadily back at Steve. She didn’t say a word, her face betrayed nothing of her thoughts. But inside, she felt a small knot buried deep in her chest begin to loosen.

Steve sighed. “The Avengers all know what it’s like to hate ourselves, Ryan. I don’t want that for anyone, especially you.”
“Steve…” Ryan started, shaking her head. “Why do you care? Why would any of you care? I’m nothing, I’m not important.”

Steve felt a flare of rage at her words, directed at whatever circumstances had caused her to feel that way. “Well, for starters, you saved my mate’s life,” Steve began, releasing her shoulders and standing upright. “You were smart enough to anticipate us coming to interrogate you, and welcomed us instead of running. You flirted with Bucky, the first girl to do that since 1945, and it was honestly a nice nostalgia. You told the god’s honest truth, as far as Bucky and I could tell, about your powers and your intentions. That same night, you saved another life, and impressed Clint in the process. You beat him at Mario Kart, which is not an easy feat,” Steve smiled, and Ryan couldn’t help but smile briefly too. “You fit into our Saturday morning like you’d always been there, and you made friends with everyone all at once. You called Thor sweetheart, in front of his Omega, and they still loved you! You told a hilarious story that made everyone laugh, and then you fell asleep because you were exhausted. You apologized a million times for accidentally invading our space, like you couldn’t see that you were entirely welcomed. And you somehow got it in your head that we all secretly hated or feared you, when nothing could be further from the truth. So yeah, there’s a lot of reasons for me to care.”

Ryan couldn’t seem to figure out how to move her arms and legs, but if she could, she’d have been hugging Steve and possibly ruining his shirt with her tears.

“Yeah. What he said,” Sam echoed exhaustedly, walking slowly up from behind the two of them. He was plastered with sweat, his t-shirt sticking to his entire torso.

“Oh god, Sam, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…” Ryan trailed off, gesturing her hand up and down at Sam as he dropped himself to the ground, lying flat on his back. “Um, how much of all that did you hear?”

“Well, Steve, I beat my time,” Sam said, ignoring Ryan for a moment, “but I don’t think I can move another foot.” Turning his head to look up at Ryan, he continued, “And I heard from where you were insulting his super soldier capabilities. Believe me, it’s nothing he hasn’t heard before, cause the stupid punk is way too trusting. But in this case, he’s not wrong.”

“Hey, that’s Bucky’s nickname for me,” Steve interjected, giving a mock frown.

“We decided on joint custody. I get Mondays and every other Thursday,” Sam smiled.

Ryan giggled, a slight note of hysteria beneath it. This certainly wasn’t how she had anticipated her morning going. The Avengers had a knack for derailing her expectations, it seemed. Turning to look at Steve again, she sighed. “Fine. But I’m not a charity case.”

“Oh of course not,” Steve replied, a lopsided grin spreading across his face. “You’re Bruce’s new lab assistant.”

“Wait, what?”

Oh my god. I’m going to break everything. I’m way too clumsy for this, I can’t work here! Ryan panicked internally, surveying the intricate maze of cables, machines covered in buttons and dials, cabinets of beakers and chemicals, and tables covered with papers and unidentifiable metals gizmos. She’d never spent any time in a lab outside of chemistry in high school, and she’d broken two test tubes and lightly scorched her hand in the Bunsen burner flame in their first experiment. Despite being able to manipulate her surroundings quite effectively, she wasn’t always great at being aware
of them to begin with.

“Ryan? Did you get all that?” Bruce asked pointedly, noticing Ryan’s widened eyes and unsure look as he gave her a tour of the lab. He was happy that Steve had asked Tony to hire Ryan to Stark Industries and that he was finally getting a lab assistant, but he would have preferred someone with commensurate experience for the job. He could only hope he wouldn’t have to play babysitter for too long. She seemed bright enough, though.

Ryan blinked, focusing back on Bruce’s explanation from a few moments ago. “Yeah, um, your work is interdisciplinary, studying the effects of gamma radiation on the human body, gamma rays are really dangerous to me but not so much to you anymore, my main job will be keeping an eye on the experiments you have running and recording data. Can I ask a question?”

“Of course,” Bruce replied, glad that she seemed to be following along alright so far.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to understand all of this right away; I don’t exactly have the best science background. Hazard of public school education,” she joked. “I mean, I’ll read up on everything and follow your instructions exactly, but is it okay if I don’t really get what’s going on for a while?”

Bruce was mildly shocked. “Ryan, I do not expect you to be able to follow along with everything I’m doing right away at all. I have two masters and Ph.D, and Steve said you don’t have any lab experience,” he assured her kindly.

Ryan breathed a slight sigh of relief. “Ok, cool. Um, you should also know… I’m a little clumsy, on occasion,” she added haltingly.

“I’m sure everything will work out fine. Shall we continue with the tour?”

Five minutes later, Ryan tripped over a power cord and knocked over a rack of empty culture tubes. Bruce sighed internally. *Practicing patience is good for you,* he reminded himself.

“Uh, where are you going?”

The voice from behind startled Ryan as she was putting on her jacket. She turned around, surprised at Tony’s sudden appearance in Bruce’s lab. “I, uh, I was just about to leave, Bruce and I finished off for today…” she trailed off.

“Yeah, but where are you going? Your new place is upstairs, not outside. You’ve gotta come tell JARVIS how you want it finished for the painters and furniture guys tomorrow,” Tony articulated, deliberately slowing his words as though Ryan were being particularly slow.

Ryan was flabbergasted. “No, uh, what? No, no no no, I, uh…”

“That was eloquent. Come on, we haven’t got all night, it’s Taco Tuesday and Natasha always steals my special habanero peppers,” Tony chattered, sweeping Ryan along towards the elevator out of the lab.

Chapter End Notes

In case you guys haven't noticed, it's going to take a long time for certain people to get
together, and I'm not very good at writing different character voices. \_\_(ツ)_/\
“Really, I can’t accept this, I’m just Bruce’s lab assistant! I was going to find a night shift somewhere and get an apartment—”

Ryan cut off when Steve raised a hand to silence her. They were standing in what would potentially be Ryan’s new room, right now a large bare studio with light hardwood floors, a walk-in closet, and floor-length windows for a back wall. “Ryan, you don’t have to accept this, it’s entirely your choice. But you’re not going to find a better commute,” he joked, hoping to win Ryan over. “Although, your housemates are a little crazy sometimes.”

Ryan just shook her head, not sure anymore if she wanted to argue vociferously or dance in elation. Why are they being so generous? I’m a nobody, this doesn’t make any sense!

“This works out for everyone,” Steve continued. “If Bruce has anything time-sensitive, you’ll be right here. Darcy and Jane are around almost all the time, and they already like you. The rest of us will be here when we’re not on SHIELD missions or other trips, and we’re all in agreement that you should live here too.”

“Just when did you have this family meeting bringing up a new roommate anyway?” Ryan inquired, only a little sarcastic.

“While Bruce was showing you around the lab, Bucky and I went around and asked everyone. No dissents whatsoever. Clint seemed especially excited,” Steve added with a smile. “I think he wants a video game rematch.”

Ryan kept silent a moment longer. Ryan, don’t be an idiot. You know you want to live here with them. You really gonna let your pride get in the way? “Ok,” she said simply. “But, you’re sure everyone- especially Bucky- is ok with this?”

“It was Bucky’s idea,” Steve replied, grinning.

Ryan’s mouth dropped open in shock. “I- really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“But- why?” Ryan didn’t mean to be rude, but she could barely believe it.

“Let’s just say he’s spent enough time on his own that he’s sympathetic to stories like yours,” Steve hedged slightly, not wanting to divulge information Bucky might not be comfortable with yet.

Ryan seemed to understand, however. “Well, if you’re sure I’m not going to be an inconvenience…”

“Ryan, have you seen how many floors there are in this building? We’re not wanting for space. And Tony’s not wanting for money, so you’re not paying rent, either.”

“Steve—”

The super soldier crossed his arms, giving her his trademark stubborn glare. Ryan threw up her
arms, in exasperation. “I said I wasn’t a charity case!” she yelled.

“It’s not charity. You’re working for Bruce, and we all want you here. And now, you’ve got a ton of paint chips to swipe through,” Steve smirked, taking the Stark pad tablet off the small side table in the room and handing it to Ryan, who grabbed it from him begrudgingly. Steve smiled, and made to leave.

“Hey, Steve?” Ryan called out. Steve turned around to see Ryan shuffling her feet, looking down at the ground. “Thanks. And… could you tell Bucky thanks, too?”

“Of course,” he answered, closing the door behind him as he left.

Ryan sat on the cross-legged on the floor, back leaning against the wall besides the door. She didn’t understand why all the Avengers seemed to be adopting her so quickly after their first encounter, but for tonight at least, she decided not to question it. Tapping the Stark pad back to life, she began to look through the paint and furniture options on the screen.

“What the hell?? There aren’t that many paint colors in existence!”

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“So, how did it go?” Bucky smirked as Steve arrived back on their floor. He had just gotten back himself from taco night, Steve having lost rock-paper-scissors to work on persuading Ryan to live in the Tower.

“It took less time to convince her than I thought it would, to be honest,” Steve replied, collapsing on the couch beside Bucky. Bucky immediately pressed himself against Steve’s side, laying his head on Steve’s shoulder. He knew Steve liked it when Bucky was tactile as much as Bucky enjoyed it himself, and Steve rested his head gently atop Bucky’s, rubbing small circles onto Bucky’s right knee beside his own leg. “She’s not nearly as stubborn as I was worried she’d be.”

“What kind of crazy would you have to be to say no to a rent-free apartment in New York City, much less a better-paying job that comes with it?”


Bucky prodded his side, eliciting a laugh. “I came around, eventually.”

“I had to track you for a year before you even spoke to me, and you knew I was your mate the whole time!”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. I was pretty nuts,” Bucky admitted. A slight note of sadness reached Steve, who immediately lifted up his head and drew a protesting Bucky onto his lap.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” Steve apologized quietly, cupping Bucky’s cheek with his hand. “I didn’t mean to upset you, I was just joking around.”

“I know,” Bucky replied. “Some day I’ll be able to stop regretting the time I wasted avoiding you, but…” His voice trailed off, his face and scent dejected.

“The one thing, the only thing that’s important to me,” Steve vowed, punctuating every few words with a kiss to a different part of Bucky’s face, “is that you came back to me. We’re here now, together. Never going to leave each other again. That’s all that matters.”
“Never again,” Bucky swore. “God, I love you,” he breathed, turning to straddle Steve’s legs as he kissed him properly. Steve tugged Bucky’s hair out of its tie, running his fingers through and pulling gently when Bucky opened his mouth to him.

“Mmph, wait,” Steve halted a moment, pulling back as Bucky whined ever-so-softly. “I almost forgot; Ryan wanted me to thank you for her. I told her it was your idea to have her live here.”

“She’s very welcome. Now take off your shirt before I rip it off myself.”

The glint in Steve’s eyes that Bucky loved so much came in full force. “I’d like to see you try,” he countered, his scent pure Alpha and smile playfully malicious.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“It’s a bigger gamble than I would’ve taken, inviting Ryan to live here,” Natasha said over the TV, idly running her fingers through Clint’s hair as they sat watching House Hunters on their little family’s floor. Darcy was working late with Jane tonight, something about “subatomic whosie-whatsits and mysterious particle thingies”, as Darcy had described it to them. They decided to wait up for her with their favorite mindless television shows, namely everything on HGTV.

“Come on, Nat. We’re all watching her all the time now; what could go wrong?” Clint insisted.

“It only gives her closer access to all of our minds, entrance to Stark’s labs and technology, and insight into our day-to-day lives,” Natasha replied drily.

“And it gives us all the opportunity we’ll need to figure out her real endgame,” Clint countered. “We’ll have easy access to her phone, video footage of her daily movements, and a built-in excuse to find out more about her past.”

“Assuming she doesn’t control our minds and program us to kill each other, unleash the Hulk on everyone, brainwash Stark into destroying the Internet-“

“Alright, alright, I get it. But that hasn’t been her style so far; she could’ve done any of those from the start. Whatever she’s got planned is a lot more clever than that.”

Natasha stayed silent a moment as the couple on the TV weighed the benefits of total hardwood floors versus three full bathrooms. “I don’t like that this puts you and Darcy in danger,” she admitted, her voice a few notes lower than before.

Clint nuzzled up into her neck, reaching across her to take her left hand and raise it to his lips. Natasha tightened her right hand’s embrace of his head in response. Long ago, when he was still just a circus freak, Clint never imagined he’d have an Alpha, much less one he loved and trusted as much as Natasha. Now he had her, and Darcy, whom he cared for just as much. He’d stop at nothing to keep them safe, and he knew they’d do the same for him. “We’re in danger every day. You always keep us safe,” Clint pointed out quietly.

“Not always,” she replied, her face inscrutable as always but her scent despondent. Clint knew what she was referring to.

“That was before. We weren’t even mated yet,” Clint admonished. “Loki’s particular brand of crazy was not your fault, and it never will be. If it weren’t for you, I’d still be his zombie slave.”

“I knew from the second I saw you in Budapest that you’d be mine. I should’ve claimed you then,” Natasha growled quietly, still staring resolutely at the television screen. Clint felt his face flush, heart flutter slightly, and other body parts get interested, too.
“Look at it this way. When we catch Ryan in her evil schemes, it’ll be the revenge you never got when Thor took his brother to Asgard instead of letting us draw and quarter him here on Earth like he deserved,” Clint supplied, his voice lowering with arousal. Natasha quirked a half-smile, finally meeting Clint’s eyes.

“I don’t think Tony will appreciate blood stains on his floors,” she quipped, turning her body to face him fully. Her eyes were dilated, too.

“He’ll get over it,” Clint whispered, leaning in closer.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Ok, let me just recap. The Avengers encounter a new powered person with the ability to read minds, destroy things without touching them, and potentially control you like puppets, and you hired her as Banner’s lab assistant and invited her to live in the Tower with you? After I told you to bring her in weeks ago?” Phil Coulson thought himself a patient man. Considering all the crazy he had to deal with on a daily basis- everything from alien portals to strange worlds to Inhumans and other powered people to the remaining HYDRA loyalists- he believed he could handle just about anything. Anything except the human whirlwind, Tony Stark.

“Relax, Coulson, you’re scaring your hairline away,” Tony jibed. “Like I already told you, the Avengers are handling it.” He didn’t even look up from the Iron Man glove he was modifying, or else he’d have seen Coulson’s exaggerated eye roll.

“This is not your call to make, Stark. She needs much more thorough debriefing-“

“No one can control the giant green rage monster, that’s kind of the point. Besides, I didn’t invent Hulk Buster armor just for kicks and giggles, I’d like the chance to try it out,” Tony answered cheerfully.

“Stark, you are needlessly putting the Avengers and scores of ordinary citizens in danger, and SHIELD can’t tolerate this kind of recklessness! I’m sending agents Johnson and May to bring her in,” Coulson stated firmly.

Tony finally looked up to the video screen to meet Coulson’s glare. “You really think that’s a good idea? The Inhuman with the ability to level buildings and your favorite non-powered field agent to forcefully extract an extremely powerful and most likely exceedingly dangerous telepath from Avengers Tower? Yeah, I can’t see that going belly-up at all. Especially since bringing her into SHIELD headquarters only gives her more direct access to all the information anyone would need to destroy the world.”

Coulson closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose briefly. “Ryan cannot be allowed to remain at large when we don’t even know the first thing about her powers, beyond the fact that she’s essentially got the makings of a comic book supervillain. She even has a tragic backstory, for god’s sakes, what with becoming an orphan and being unpresented.”

“And that’s why keeping her close to the legendary team of comic book superheroes is the only course of action that makes any sense, o Agent my Agent,” Tony retorted. “The second she takes a
step in the wrong direction, you will be the first to find out and I will delight in telling you ‘I told you so’ when the Avengers save the world yet again. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Miss Potts and I have date night that started 45 minutes ago, and we’re not allowed to be any later than two hours each or else JARVIS takes away our Internet access for the next week.”

Coulson closed out the video window, leaning back in his chair and sighing again. If this Ryan girl really had Rogers and Barnes under her thrall, he wanted her contained immediately before any further damage could be done. Stark’s right, though, he admitted begrudgingly. They needed more information about her before that could be accomplished without putting all of SHIELD at risk. He didn’t even know if their usual containment rooms would be able to block her powers. Right now, she’d be able to hear them coming and stop them no matter how well they planned the op. Clint and Natasha, and the rest of the Avengers, were the only hope everyone had right now. Yeah, we’re probably all gonna die.

Chapter End Notes

So, I feel like I should explain some things a bit, as the story will be taking a bit of turn coming up soon. Firstly, just some clarification: the story is divergent from after Daredevil on the MCU timeline, as AOU was a ridiculous movie and I’m not going there, and since Ant-Man is after that, I’m not sure if I’ll be introducing him or not. Now, for the serious bit. I'm asexual, and this story is kind of illustrative of that in some ways. Obviously, Ryan is the equivalent of asexual in this created world, and the prejudices against the "unpresented" are analogous to some of those seen in the real world against asexual people. Things like "sex is what makes people human", people thinking asexuals are broken or deluded and need to fixed, etc. And with the way the story is going to turn, I want to make it very clear that ALL of those statements are false and acephobic, and asexuals are NOT "fixed" should they find someone they are sexually attracted to. I'm trying to work with the politics and mechanics of the A/B/O trope to show that, and show that people are more complex than just their sexualities. So please keep that in mind in the future with the upcoming chapters :) Also, I know it says Ryan will be getting together with Steve and Bucky, and that will happen still, even if it seems like it's moving at a snail's pace. Because sometimes, love does move at a snail's pace. Lastly, thank you for reading, I'm surprised and gratified that people seem to be enjoying this so far!
The day after she started in Bruce’s lab, after sleeping on the couch in the common room as a compromise to Steve, Ryan returned to her new room to find the walls a vibrant, leafy green and the black metal furniture she had picked set up to give the room a spacious but cozy feel. For a few minutes, all she could do was stare, trying not to tear up. It’s been so long, a small voice in her head whispered, so long since I’ve had a room of my own.

“Do you like it?!” A loud voice squealed from behind her. Ryan jumped, her pulse racing as she turned around to see Darcy sporting a huge grin and Jane smiling softly behind her. “The furniture guys had it set up horribly, there was no floor space at all, so we took the liberty of rearranging it,” Darcy babbled on, not noticing Ryan’s miniature heart attack.

“Oh, hi guys! Yeah, no, it looks amazing, you didn’t have to do that though!” Ryan managed to get out, her right hand over her still-pounding heart.

“It was our pleasure,” Jane lilted, entering the room after Darcy. “Just call it a welcome-to-the-Tower present.”

The tears Ryan had been holding back earlier suddenly welled up without her permission, and she quickly turned away so the other girls wouldn’t see. Come on, you little bitch, keep it together. “Thank you so much guys, really,” she said, her voice wavering only slightly on the last word. “Guess I’ll need to get more than three outfits, now, what with all the closet space,” she joked.

Darcy looked excitedly at Jane, who immediately backed away, saying “Oh, no, that’s your department Darce, I am never going shopping with you again!”

“What happened last time you two went shopping together?” Ryan asked, equally intrigued and unsurprised.

“Let’s just say we’re not exactly welcome at the giant Forever 21 downtown after last year’s Black Friday,” Jane replied, leveling a cool glare at a smirking Darcy.

“To be fair, they never said how long I was banned, I’m sure almost a year is enough time for them
to forget,” Darcy countered, looking more proud than humbled.

“It’s alright, I frequent thrift stores as a rule,” Ryan maintained. “If nothing else, you can always find a book you haven’t read for a nickel.”

“Ugh, I’m surrounded by nerds!” Darcy complained jokingly. “Come on, it’s family dinner night tonight and Clint brought enough takeout for a small army,” she added, tugging on Ryan’s arm to lead her towards the hallway.

“F-family dinner? Is, uh, that something that happens often?” Ryan inquired, taken aback slightly.

“Two or three times a week, generally. Breakfast on the weekends and random weeknights we all eat together; Sam and Bucky started it a while back. It’s really nice, actually, getting to catch up,” Jane explained as they got into the elevator.

“Gotcha,” Ryan replied. Her thoughts were roiling around in her brain, and she took a deep breath to try and quiet them. I’m not family! These guys are all mated to each other and save the world and are super celebrities and I’m a stray they happened to pick up! God, this doesn’t make any sense, why do they all care…

“Hey, don’t worry, it’s not like Thanksgiving at your racist uncle’s place,” Darcy reassured, misinterpreting Ryan’s sighing breath. “It’s just like breakfast a few weeks ago was, no need to be nervous.”

The elevator dinged as Ryan made to reply, the opening doors cutting her off. A very strong wave of smell breached her nose and made her eyes water suddenly. “Good lord in heaven, how spicy does Clint like his Indian food?” she choked out, dabbing at her eyes with her sleeve.

“Yeah, you get used to it,” Jane sighed. Clint smirked at her from the kitchen.

“Hey, girls, what’s good?” Sam called out from his spot on the couch in front of the TV.

“Oh hey, what’s the score?” Ryan asked, darting over to check the side of the screen. “Yes, up 4-0!” she cheered, punching the air with one fist.

“What, the Yanks are lo- oh, no,” Sam said, exaggerating the exclamation. “Don’t you let Steve or Bucky know you’re a Red Sox fan, that rivalry goes back further than they do.”

“I lived in Boston most of my life, what do you want from me?” Ryan teased back.

Come on, Ryan, I already knew that, Clint thought as he set the last of the take-out containers on the table. He had the basics on Ryan, gathering as much as he could from online. Born in Boston to parents Mary and Alexander Green, lived there a decade before her mother’s job moved them to NYC, where both parents died less than a year later in the Tower attacks. Her mother had worked in the Trade Center, her father was a first responder. She had ended up juggled around foster families around the city suburbs for a bit before settling in a girl’s home until she was 18. No driver’s license, only a few photo IDs from public schools, no arrest record- although that doesn’t mean much, she could get away with pretty much any crime if she wasn’t careless- and she was off the grid ever since besides her cell phone, which was a no-contract. Clint’s heart had broken a little at her story, but it was nothing he hadn’t seen before. He merely hardened it up again.

“Boston, huh? Never been myself, but I’ve heard it’s cleaner than it is here. Even if the people have stupid accents,” Sam joked.

“Not one ‘Hahvahd Yahd’ joke or I’ll kick your ass,” Ryan threatened, raising one eyebrow and
“Cross my heart,” Sam promised, clicking off the game as he stood up and stretched lightly. “Come on, we’d better get some food before Thor gets here. I’m not getting between him and the tandoori chicken.”

“He says it tastes like wild bilgesnipe from back on Asgard,” Jane admitted, setting plates out on the long table as Darcy grabbed silverware. Ryan flipped through cabinets, looking for glasses, trying to keep a goofy smile off her face. She hadn’t been so happy in a long time.

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A few days later, Bucky was on his last set of chin-ups when Ryan entered the gym. Looking determined, albeit slightly intimidated by the mass of equipment surrounding them, she was dressed in a very ratty t-shirt and sweats, her sneakers old and creased. Glancing up at Bucky, Ryan smiled a hello and went over to a treadmill, setting it for a light jog to warm up. Bucky dropped down from the bar and wiped away the sweat on his forehead, reaching for his water and walking over to Ryan.

“Hey, Bucky,” Ryan greeted, her breath and pace steady. She knew she wasn’t in fabulous shape, but she had always enjoyed running and wanted to keep it up.

“Morning, Ryan,” Bucky smiled. “How are things going with Bruce?”

“Well, I’ve only broken two beakers and tripped over a power cord once since the first day, so I’d call it at least mildly successful,” Ryan remarked lightly. “I guess not everyone can be as graceful as you or Nat or… well, everyone else.”

“You should have seen Steve when I first taught him how to dance. Two left feet would’ve been a big improvement,” Bucky laughed. His mind flashed back to a staticky radio, big band tunes, and Steve’s feet stomping on his in Sarah Rogers’ living room when they were twelve. With Steve in his arms, though? He’d never been happier.

“Believe it or not, I actually really like to dance. A lot,” Ryan professed, her voice a little breathier as she increased the speed to a mild run. “People did swing dancing in the 40s, right? You show me how that works, I’ll introduce you to the Macarena.”

“Sure thing, doll,” Bucky agreed with a smile. “But seriously, how are you doing? I know this place is… an adjustment.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Ryan chuckled, sweat beginning to bead on her forehead. “Everything’s fine, really,” she continued. “Everyone’s been so nice, it’s…” Too good to be true, she finished in her head.

Bucky nodded, understanding her unspoken words. He’d felt the same way, more than once. “Hey, why don’t you come watch a movie tonight with me and Steve? We’re still catching up on some of the classics, I think Natasha recommended The Godfather,” he invited.

“Now that’s an offer I can’t refuse,” Ryan replied, giggling as she said it. Bucky figured he was missing some joke, but shrugged it off.

“Perfect,” he grinned, glancing at the clock on the wall. “Natasha and I are going to spar in a few minutes, so I’ll leave you to your run,” he finished.

“Yeah, yeah, see you later,” Ryan smiled, her breathing even louder now. She was a little embarrassed that a genetically enhanced super assassin that could probably run for days was around grinning.
Natasha entered the gym just then, wearing an all-black, skin-tight outfit that looked more like combat gear than workout clothes. It probably is combat gear, Ryan reminded herself. Makes sense to train in what you’d have to wear when actually kicking bad guys in the balls. Nat greeted Bucky, and the two of them stood on opposite sides of a large wrestling mat Ryan could see reflected in the mirror wall in front of her. Bucky was taping his hands, and Nat pulled back her hair.

Suddenly, the two of them were punching and kicking and flipping and dodging and pounding and—holy shit, how the hell did she get her thighs around his throat?! Ryan slowed back to a jog, mesmerized by the sight in the mirror. Bucky was more vocal than Natasha, grunting and yelling as he missed more often than made contact with her lithe, darting form. Ryan had once thought sports like wrestling and karate completely barbaric, not understanding the point of people purposely trying to hurt each other. Watching them, though, she could appreciate the sort of artistry involved, the mastery over the body to be able to keep a level head and not literally lose it with your adversary’s next move.

Bucky’s style was slightly more offense than defense, the bionic arm giving him greatly increased strength behind his graceful but clearly boxing-inspired strikes. Natasha was just a hair quicker than he was, and she used it to her advantage, able to break his stance at the root and knock him off-balance a few times. They were incredibly even-matched, though, and it took almost five minutes for Natasha to pin Bucky, both of them panting hard but smiling nonetheless. She extended a hand, helping Bucky up, and the next second they were at it again. Ryan gave up on her run at that point, hopping off the treadmill and turning around to watch directly.

A few minutes later, Bucky having been victorious that round, Natasha appeared to notice Ryan for the first time. She’d known all along Ryan had been fascinated, obviously. Seizing an opportunity, Natasha approached Ryan for the first time.

Good chance to learn more about her abilities, especially her control over her powers. “You want to learn?” she asked directly. Ryan’s eyes widened in surprise, her mouth dropping open.

“Uh, I mean, yeah! But, no, actually, it’s probably not a great idea,” Ryan stumbled over her words, shocked that the first time Natasha had spoken to her was to offer fighting lessons. It wasn’t that she’d been unfriendly thus far; Ryan just got the feeling she was a person of few words until you got to know her.

“Well, my parents always told me not to fight…” Ryan trailed off. She wanted to learn—why wouldn’t want to be able to do that?!—but she had no idea how she might instinctively react when she got punched in the face for the first time. Her parents had told her not to fight, but not for the same reasons other kids were told so. She could snap a bone with a thought and twist of her hand, so it wasn’t exactly fair to begin with, and she could kill someone if she wasn’t constantly careful.

“You can keep your powers under control, correct?” Natasha said, her voice casual but the challenge behind her tone clear. “If you’re ever in a situation where you can’t use them, for whatever reason, it’s best not to be helpless.”

Ryan agreed with her, but was still nervous. “I don’t want to hurt either of you,” she said haltingly. Bucky choked back a laugh, and Ryan glared at him. “Obviously I don’t mean I’m going to actually land a punch on either of you for the next decade, but I could do a lot worse,” she reminded him, her voice slightly sour.
“Stop worrying, it’ll be fine. Come here and I’ll tape up your hands,” Bucky countered, reaching out a hand to Ryan. She moved to him, still rather reluctant but excited despite herself. “Lesson number one of fighting,” he began as he took her hand and started, “is to never fight if you can help it. Always run away if you can, because there’s no point in getting bloody if you don’t have to. You never know if the other guy is going to be better than you.”

“Reasonable enough,” Ryan replied, looking over her shoulder at Natasha, who was watching them with an interested expression.

“Lesson number two: always keep your guard up. Don’t let them get at your weak spots, ever. That means protect your face and torso first and foremost,” Bucky continued as he started the other hand. “You do that by keeping your arms up and dodging all you can, ok?”

“Got it,” Ryan stated, her insides starting to twist in knots.

“Hey, don’t worry, sweetheart,” Bucky reassured, the endearment rolling off his tongue without conscious thought. “You’re not going to get hurt.”

Ryan’s cheeks tinged the slightest pink, and she gave him her best “I’m not an idiot” look to cover up the jump in her stomach at the word “sweetheart”. *What’s wrong with me? Besides the obvious,* she thought wryly. Turning back around to face Natasha, she stood blankly, not knowing what to do next. It hit her all at once that both of them were incredibly dangerous, and had killed a lot of people in their darker pasts. She gulped nervously.

“The key for you to keeping yourself safe is your stance,” Natasha dictated, stepping one foot forward and balancing her weight evenly. Ryan copied the motion. “Dominant foot in back, and you shift your weight as needed. Keep your hands up.” She brought up two fists close to her torso, and Ryan mimicked her again. “Good. Stay light on your feet, and don’t let me get behind you.” With that, Natasha lunged forward, much slower than she had with Bucky, but powerfully nonetheless. Suddenly, Ryan’s right hand instinctively moved lightning quick, grabbing Natasha’s wrist and yanking it off to her side. She sidestepped as Natasha went past her, letting go of her arm and neatly dodging over Nat’s leg as it swept out under her. Ryan dropped back into stance, Natasha facing her again but having switched sides.

Bucky was floored. “You didn’t say you had prior experience,” he said, impressed with Ryan’s quick response. Ryan looked just as stupefied as he did.

“I don’t,” she voiced, her words laced with shock. “I have no idea where that came from.” Natasha looked at her curiously. Ryan didn’t really like it. “Uh, sorry?” she offered.

“Don’t be,” Natasha returned, and she shot forward again unexpectedly. Ryan’s feet moved of their own accord, darting out of reach. She ducked beneath Natasha’s swinging punch, rolled to the side, and landed a blow to Nat’s left ribcage before she was suddenly caught in a chokehold, Natasha’s arms around her neck. The whole series of movements took less than five seconds.

“Hey, let her go!” Bucky screamed, rushing in to grab hold of Natasha and free Ryan. Before he reached them, though, Ryan had launched herself into a forward flip, landing atop Natasha and springing away when her arms loosened. Ryan quickly backed off the mat, staring at Natasha on the ground in horror.

“Hey, what’s going on in here?!” Steve’s voice echoed through the room as he ran up to the scene, having entered to see Ryan being pinned down by Natasha. Bucky turned to look at him, astonishment and concern warring on his face.
“I’m so sorry, oh my god, are you okay? I don’t even know what happened there, I swear, oh my god,” Ryan was babbling, her hands shaking and mind reeling. Natasha blinked a few times, getting back to her feet and silencing Ryan when she looked at her.

“How did you do that?” Nat asked, her voice low.

“I-I swear I don’t know! It was like I could tell what you were going to do and I just reacted, somehow,” Ryan stammered.

“Hey, why was Ryan fighting in the first place? She could’ve gotten hurt!” Steve interjected, grabbing Natasha’s arm none too gently and turning her to face him.

“I don’t think we need to worry about that, Steve,” Bucky spoke up. “You’ve never had that happen before?” he said to Ryan.

“No, I’ve never fought anyone before, I’ve never hurt anyone!” Ryan pleaded, looking more and more terrified by the second. Bucky immediately raised both his hands in a placating gesture.

“Hey, don’t worry, it’s fine,” he insisted, stepping towards Ryan and laying a hand on her shoulder. “We were just surprised, is all. I guess your powers have a little greater scope than expected.” He looked purposefully into Ryan’s eyes, searching out the telltale blue glow he saw all those weeks ago. Sure enough, it was present, although not as bright as when she had crushed the robot about to kill him. “You said you could tell what she was about to do, and how to counter it?” Ryan nodded mutely.

Steve and Natasha were also staring at Ryan, although Steve’s gaze was in wonder while Natasha’s was closed off. “You mean, you just beat Natasha, with no prior experience? Training? Anything?” Steve questioned, rather in awe of what he’d just witnessed now that his concern for Ryan was assuaged.

Ryan shook her head, still bewildered. “I’ve never done anything like that before,” she repeated. “I’m sorry, it’ll never happen again.”

“What’re you talking about? You’re sparring me next!” Bucky ordered, pulling Ryan back to the mat. “Let’s see how good you really are.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Ryan started, as Steve yelled “NO!” at the same time. Everyone turned to look at Steve, who crossed his arms and glared at them all.

“I don’t care if Ryan’s powers help keep her safe, either of you could seriously hurt her if she slips up,” he explained. “There’s only so far instinct can take you, and she doesn’t have the experience to fight any one of us.”

“I agree,” Natasha said firmly. “She didn’t even know she was using her powers, she could kill us in an instant if she loses any more control.”

“What?! No, I swear, I would never hurt you,” Ryan protested, backing away from all of them with her hands up. “I’m sorry, I never should’ve done this,” she exclaimed, taking off at a run for the door.

“Ryan, no, wait!” Bucky called after her, but she was gone. “What is your problem, Nat?!” he snarled, turning back to his mate and the other Alpha. She smelled no different than normal, but Bucky knew she could hide any emotion she wished. Steve, on the other hand, smelled incensed, his glare intensifying on Natasha.
“You saw what she just did!” Natasha rumbled, gesturing at the door where Ryan had disappeared.

“She would never hurt anyone! She saved my life!” Bucky blasted, angry and confused at Natasha’s antagonism. Steve put a hand on his shoulder, and Bucky tensed, pushing him away. “We’re trying to make her feel welcome here, not scare her into submission.”

“You don’t find it strange that all of a sudden she can defeat the best fighter on the team?” Natasha growled. “Out of nowhere, a girl who could stop any of us with a thought shows up, and then does that?”

“What are you saying, Natasha?” Steve interrupted. He didn’t like the suspicions he was beginning to believe Natasha was harboring.

“Shut up! Her pride’s just bruised,” Bucky spat, stalking away from the other two. “I’m going to find Ryan.”

“Buck, wait, I’ll come with you,” Steve called out, but Bucky stormed away without him. Sighing, Steve turned back to Natasha. “Bucky didn’t mean that.”

“You don’t have to apologize for him. I was wrong,” Natasha stated, her voice back to normal.

“You know Ryan would never keep secrets about her powers from us like that, right? I mean, she’s been open and honest right from the start,” Steve cajoled.

“Of course. I’ll apologize to her later.”

Steve gave her a half-smile, and Nat returned it. Turning away from her, Steve strode off to find his mate and his friend.

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Ryan, meanwhile, was huddled in her walk-in closet, sitting on the floor with her head in her hands, trying to make sense of everything that had just happened. She was absolutely not bawling her eyes out, because she had cried more in the past few weeks than she had for the past decade, and she felt it was quickly approaching ludicrous levels. Her body wasn’t cooperating, however. Traitor, her mind called out to the rest of her over her hiccupping sobs.

A knock sounded on the door to her room, and she heard Bucky’s voice call out her name. Ryan didn’t answer. Please just go away, she pleaded internally. No such luck, though, as Bucky opened the door and came in anyway. Ryan hadn’t closed the door to the closet, and the four shirts and two pairs of shoes inside weren’t enough to hide in. He’d have heard you anyway, you big baby, she chided herself.

“Ryan?” Bucky crouched down next to her, touching her shoulder gently. Sighing shakily, Ryan raised her head to look at him. “Hey there,” he smiled gently, his voice soft. “What’s got you so upset?”

“What do you think?” Ryan spat out, her embarrassment at being caught crying like a child turning her defensive. “I knew right from the start you people didn’t trust me, and now I’ve gone and-“

“Ryan, hey, no, you didn’t do anything wrong! Really, you didn’t,” Bucky insisted, cutting Ryan off and sitting down next to her shoulder to shoulder. “We discovered a new aspect of your powers by accident is all. That’s nothing to be upset about.”

“Tell that to Natasha,” Ryan countered, wiping her streaming eyes with the back of her hand. “She...
and Clint don’t trust me any farther than they can throw me. Less far, actually, they could probably throw me a good distance if they wanted to.” _Bad jokes always were your top defense mechanism_, she thought wryly.

Bucky sighed through his nose, his mouth tightened to a thin line. “Natasha and Clint are suspicious people, and for good reason. I am, too, in general. It’s hard not to be, with lives like ours.”

Ryan turned to meet Bucky’s eyes again. “Why are you here, then?”

“Because you saved my life first time we met, in case you forgot. I haven’t. I trust you.”

“You really shouldn’t,” Ryan declared. “Today proves that.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Steve said, appearing in the doorway of the closet suddenly. Ryan was surprised, but Bucky didn’t seem to be. He could smell Steve's distressed concern a mile away. “Ryan, I don’t know what’s happened to you that made you hate yourself so much, but as for Bucky and me? We trust you. As much as anyone else here in the Tower.”

“I—” Ryan’s voice cut off, choked by renewed tears. She took a deep breath to try and get herself under control as Steve sat down across from Bucky facing the two of them. Ryan swiped furiously at the tears in her eyes until Steve gently took her hand. She closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the closet wall, not trusting herself to say anything even if she could string two words together from the storm of emotions clouding her head. A minute or two later, she managed to make a decision. Opening her eyes again, she see Steve and Bucky gazing at each other, their eyes communicating as well as they could aloud.

“My mother worked in the Towers, and my dad was a firefighter,” Ryan began, her voice low and scratchy from crying. The boys looked to her immediately, rapt with attention. “I was in school when it happened. That morning had been as normal as any, and I never saw them again after.”

Steve seemed like he was about to say something, but Bucky silenced him with a look.

“They always told me that no one could find out about my powers, and I knew they were right. I almost ruined everything when I found out. We were in lockdown for hours, and when we were finally let out, the principal had to tell me. I almost brought the building down.”

Steve and Bucky’s eyes flickered to meet again, then returned back to Ryan.

“I don’t know what the principal thought was happening, and I don’t really remember what happened afterwards. Just that everything in her office was dust by the time I realized what I’d done. I ran off alone, but I got caught and became a ward of the state a few hours later. Probably shouldn’t have gone back to my house.

“Anyway, I got shuffled around between foster families and group homes after that. I never used my powers if I could help it, but…”

“But, what?” Bucky asked gently.

Ryan took yet another deep breath. There was a reason she never visited these memories. “When I was fifteen, I was with- well, probably the worst of the foster families I had. Some just used me as a meal ticket, and they were fine enough. These guys, though… I have no idea how they were allowed to care for their own kid, much less foster others. They had an Alpha son. Sixteen, had just presented. He tried to rape me.”

Steve’s hand suddenly tightened painfully around hers, and Ryan yelped in protest. “Sorry, sorry,”
Steve apologized, releasing her immediately.

“I tried to just run away, but he caught me. Roughed me up.” Ryan paused a moment, feeling like she was about to be sick. She knew she needed to get the words out, though. It had been ten years, she could handle it. “It was the only time I’ve ever controlled someone after I discovered I could do it. I was so angry, I made him-” Her words choked off, her lungs feeling compressed and asphyxiating.

“You don’t have to continue,” Steve said, his voice low but firm.

“I wanted him to feel what it was like to be helpless,” Ryan confessed, the memories of her terror and rage relighting the emotions in her chest. “I made him hold a knife to his own throat while he begged for mercy.” Ryan could see the unfiltered panic in the boy’s eyes like she was back in the disgusting place, her memory of the incident as sharp and vivid as it had been for the past decade. “And those aren’t the only times... So that’s why you shouldn’t trust me. When it comes down to it, I’m the monster you all fight every day.”

Ryan fell silent, and no one spoke for a few moments. Bucky cleared his throat, but Ryan couldn’t face him. “How much do you know of my history?” Bucky asked rather pointedly.

“Enough to know you were completely brainwashed and found innocent of all your actions,” Ryan replied acerbically.

“Not innocent of the stuff I did in the war,” Bucky replied coolly. Ryan met his gaze then. His face looked stoic, but his eyes were pained. “I killed a lot of people before I was ever forced to. Hell, I signed up for it. Steve did, too. Destroyed a lot of people, and took an indecent amount of pleasure doing so, sometimes.”

“That’s different,” Ryan contradicted, but Steve interrupted her.

“War might be a necessary evil, but it’s an evil nonetheless,” he contended. “We could argue back and forth about whether what we did was right or wrong, for self-defense or protection of others, but the fact remains that we ended a lot of lives. And that still keeps us up at night.”

“You never wanted to hurt anyone. That was your famous line, it’s in all the history books. ‘I don’t want to kill anyone. I don’t like bullies. I don’t care where they’re from,’” Ryan quoted.

Both Steve and Bucky scoffed at that, Steve shaking his head. “I can’t believe I ever thought it could be that simple,” Steve lamented.

“You always were an idealist, Stevie,” Bucky offered, taking Steve’s left hand in his right and squeezing it once before letting go.

“You were an idealist, Stevie,” Bucky offered, taking Steve’s left hand in his right and squeezing it once before letting go.

“Yeah, well, I’ve learned a lot since then. And the most important lesson,” Steve revealed, “is that as black and white as our guilt makes them seem, all our choices are tinted some shade of gray.”

“I don’t think there’s any way to justify wanting to kill someone as badly as I did,” Ryan persisted. “And I took away any choice he could’ve made, any agency. He would’ve bled out slowly— and I would’ve enjoyed it— if I hadn’t been able to stop myself before it was too late.”

“I was more than happy to watch Red Skull die. I was more than happy to tear down SHIELD brick by brick when I found out HYDRA had been controlling it all along. I was more than happy to rip the agents that kept Bucky captive limb from limb. None of those things were right, either,” Steve insisted.
“So what? You don’t lose control of your powers. You can’t take over people’s minds and force them to your will or kill people in a second or-“

“And you haven’t done any of those either!” Bucky inserted, turning his body to face her entirely. “You were suddenly thrown into a nightmare, what happened at your school was NOT your fault. And you stopped yourself before you killed that boy. I wish I had been strong enough to do that when I was murdering innocent kids, HYDRA brainwashing be damned.”

“Just because you have these abilities, it doesn’t make you a monster, Ryan,” Steve said. “And if you are one, then we are, too.”

Ryan exhaled loudly, feeling a tiny bit of the knot in her chest begin to loosen at their declaration of support. She wasn’t anywhere near okay yet, but she felt it was high time to get off the floor regardless. “Just three monsters hiding in a closet, huh?” she joked. Steve and Bucky gave her half-grins in return. Steve stood up, reaching out a hand to both Ryan and Bucky.

“What do you say we start movie night early?” Steve suggested as he pulled them both up.

“It’s 10am,” Ryan chuckled weakly. Steve hadn’t let go of either of her or Bucky’s hand.

“Sounds perfect,” Bucky answered, taking Ryan’s right hand in his metal one. “I think I could do with something lighter than The Godfather, though.”

“Disney movies it is, then,” Steve smiled, tugging the others along out of the closet and to the elevator with Ryan sandwiched between the boys. Neither of them let go of her. She didn’t let go, either.

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“Even after the latest incident, neither Steve nor Bucky harbors any doubts about Ryan,” Natasha reported, Tony’s face uncharacteristically serious as he processed the news. “I think this is an intimidation tactic. Infiltrate the team, slowly reveal what she can do, take some of us hostage and the rest down from the inside while those in the know watch helplessly. Fits the typical bad guy ego, if nothing else.”

“I knew it,” Clint muttered. “I knew that girl was bad news. All we need now is hard evidence.”

“Get it fast, I want her out of my Tower as soon as possible. No one screws with the team, especially a wannabe supervillain,” Tony huffed. “And keep it quiet from the others while you do it, we can’t afford any mistakes on this.”

*About time he got on board,* Clint thought. *Now’s where the fun begins.*
In Which the Interlude Continues, but with Less Angst This Time (For Approximately Five Minutes)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Your latest meltdown aside, things appear to be on the upswing, Ryan thought, humming happily to herself as she swung her legs back and forth. She was sitting atop a lab bench, waiting for Bruce to return with lunch while she presided over the machine running the latest experiment. She had no clue yet how to interpret the data from the mass spectrometer, but at least she knew it was analyzing the composition of the latest round of molecules Bruce had been exposing to gamma radiation.

It was around two weeks after the “incident”, as she referred to it in her head, and she finally felt like she was starting to settle into a happy, stable routine. Get up, exercise in the gym with whoever happened to be there that morning- mostly Bucky or Nat, occasionally Darcy or Clint when they were feeling ambitious-and get ready for the day after. Natasha had apologized to Ryan the same day as their sparring match, catching her as she returned from Steve and Bucky’s, so it wasn’t even awkward in the gym. After that, Ryan would go downstairs to grab a quick breakfast and go to work with Bruce, which turned out to be a low-key fascinating job. She had a real knack for the practical side of science, it appeared, her klutziness notwithstanding.

At the end of the day, she’d eat quickly and return to her room to read, having started a small book collection with her first paycheck. Family dinner nights kept her later, but she was still making serious headway through the Game of Thrones series. Occasionally, Steve and Bucky or Jane and Darcy would come and drag her out to be more sociable: joining in on poker nights, watching trashy reality TV, or even one highly memorable night involving Russian vodka, a karaoke machine, and an extremely hammered Sam Wilson screaming Beyoncé. On weekends, though, she somehow found herself hanging out with someone different every day.

Last Saturday, she had played video games with Thor and Clint, winning at Mario Kart again but losing spectacularly at Super Smash Brothers, much to their delight. The day after that, she’d spent the entire afternoon volunteering with Sam, helping set up, serve and clean after at a local VA event. The weekend before, she’d gone shopping with Darcy- what an experience that was- then stayed up half of Saturday night talking with Bruce and Tony as they worked through their usual bouts of insomnia. She still didn’t quite understand how Einstein had proved the concept of simultaneity false, but for her first foray into special relativity, she felt the night had been a success. Why would the guy on the train see the lightning on the front strike first? It’s not like the strikes are going at different speeds...

Ryan was stirred from her reverie by the elevator dinging, and she dashed over quickly to make sure the spectrometer was still functioning correctly. Bruce entered a moment later, carrying a small tray with sandwiches and vegetables. “Normally, it’s not good protocol whatsoever to eat in the lab,” he smiled, “but it’s Friday, and I’m over it.”

“Cheers to that, boss,” Ryan grinned, walking over and raising half a sandwich in salute.

“Have any plans for the weekend?” Bruce asked politely as they ate.

Ryan swallowed quickly, laughing a little. “Somehow, I got roped into introducing Thor to baking? Except, I don’t know how to bake either, so…”

“Well, just stick to something simple and hopefully you’ll be fine,” Bruce replied. “How has Thor
been here this long and not learned about baking yet?”

“I get the feeling I was the only one stupid enough to let him talk me into it,” Ryan admitted. “The others seemed pretty adamant about keeping him out of the kitchen; something about an electrical short a while back.”

“Oh yes, I’d forgotten about that,” Bruce groaned. “He almost fried JARVIS, Tony was livid. Please, for the love of god, just keep him away from any machine more complicated to use than the refrigerator. And don’t let him bring his hammer.”

“No blenders, toasters, or waffle irons, and Mjolnir stays out of the kitchen. Got it,” Ryan listed, laughing to herself at what her imagination supplied about Thor’s past cooking escapades. “There was this recipe for chocolate chip cookies I had all the time when I was little, I’ll try to find something similar.”

“That sounds safe,” Bruce agreed.

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“Ugh,” Clint moaned aloud. Why did I think this would be fun again? He was getting bored just listening to Bruce and Ryan and their small talk. Having to watch them putter around the lab poking at machines and writing down numbers was worse. And the bad jokes are my bit, no vile villain gets to steal them too, he thought in response to Ryan’s quip about kitchen appliances.

“JARVIS? Keep an eye on them, please. Let me know if either one leaves the lab before five for any reason.”

“Yes, sir. Should I save the video to the file labeled ‘Screw That Sneaky Evil Chick’ where the others have been kept?”

“Only if there’s anything suspicious on there,” Clint ordered. He got up from the desk where he’d been sitting for the past hour, stretching his arms above his head when Darcy unexpectedly entered the room.

Darcy was looking for her cell phone, having lost it for the fourth time this month, and was surprised to find Clint in their study instead. “What’s up, babe?”

“Oh, hey, Darce, how’s it going?” Clint tried to close out of the video stream as nonchalantly as possible while reaching behind him for the keyboard and blocking the screen with his body.

“Who’re you spying on now, you creepster?” Darcy admonished, trying to peer at the monitor around him while giving him a kiss hello. Clint grabbed her wrist as she pulled back, dragging her into a deeper kiss with one hand as he finally managed to shut off the monitor with the other. “Uh huh, you’re up to no good,” Darcy accused, her eyes sparkling with playfulness.

“You know it’s my job to spy on people, right?” Clint said, putting his hands on her waist and smirking down at her.

“Like you don’t do it for fun, I know for a fact you still hide in the vent shafts to mess with Thor and Jane,” Darcy pointed out, enjoying messing with her Beta. “Who’s the sneaky evil chick you’re going to screw instead of me?”

Clint’s eyes darkened slightly, a mischievous smile slowly spreading across his face before he quickly dropped his hands to the back of Darcy’s thighs, tugging her up to sit on his hips. Darcy gave out a little yelp, trying halfheartedly to push away. “Like I’d ever want to screw someone else,
not with your pretty little face and,” he cut off briefly, burying his face in her neck a moment and breathing deeply, “perfect little smell made just for me.”

“Don’t let Nat hear you say that, she might get jealous,” Darcy replied, her voice high and breathy.

“Maybe I want her to,” Clint breathed, his voice low and gravelly. “Maybe I want her to come back here tonight, find you laid out all gorgeous and-” he continued whispering in her ear until Darcy gave out a small moan of pleasure. He unhooked her legs from around him suddenly, dropping her back to the ground and stepping away. “Or, maybe not,” he smirked.

“You- you goddamn freaking TEASE!” Darcy shrieked, the smile plastered on her face betraying her. She thumped his shoulder with her fist as Clint laughed, dodging around Darcy and running away. Darcy chased after him, the computer monitor completely forgotten.

Clint was, after all, very good at his job.

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“Stevie, we’ve gotta talk about Ryan,” Bucky said, his face serious. Steve looked up from his drawing pad to meet Buck’s eyes, which he’d been sketching as Bucky laid out on the couch reading *Pride and Prejudice*. Why he’d taken such a liking to Jane Austen, Steve would probably never understand.

“I know, Steve replied. “I assume you’ve worked out by now she’s unpresented?”

“Duh,” Bucky gibed. “No birth control in the world’s strong enough to mask a scent when something like the other week happens. That’s not important though, obviously.”

“Good. I don’t think it’s something we’ve ever talked about, I didn’t know how you felt,” Steve reflected.

“After all the shit we went through, two underage fellas mating when we did? I’d never hate someone for their presentation, or lack thereof.”

“I know. But unpresented were more even contentious than two guys mating back then, and it hasn’t changed much with the times.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Yeah, so much for the advancements of modern society. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

“What, then?” Steve asked.

“Natasha and Clint. They’ve got something against her, but I don’t know exactly what,” Bucky supplied. “It’s something to do with her powers, but I can’t tell if they’re just being overly cautious or if they actually think she’s up to something.”

“Yeah, I got the same suspicion,” Steve revealed. “Shouldn’t we just, I don’t know, talk to them about it?”

“No,” Bucky stated firmly. “Whether they confirm or deny it, it’ll get back to Ryan somehow, and she’s had a hard enough time as it is.”

“Clearing the air with everyone all at once would be helpful,” Steve reiterated.

“You’re right, but that would bring up stuff Ryan’s not ready to admit to yet. Like the fact she’s
unpresented,” Bucky argued. “We already know about her superpowers, her past, and the fact that she’s terrified of her abilities. She needs to keep at least one secret to herself if she wants to. It wouldn’t be fair to take that from her.”

Steve smiled. “You’re a good guy, you know.”

Bucky rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Don’t go spreading it around, you’ll ruin my reputation.”

“So what do you suggest we do?” Steve inquired.

“For now? Nothing. Nat and Clint seem content to bide their time, so we will too. Hopefully, once they get to know her better, the issue will resolve itself.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Bucky replied, flipping back to his bookmark and settling into the couch again.

"Why didn't you bring this up earlier? It's been a few weeks," Steve wondered, picking up his pencil again. Bucky looked back over, a small frown miring his face.

"I wanted to watch Natasha a little more closely first. She hasn't done or said anything out of the ordinary, but that's what worries me. No one keeps up a facade that perfectly, unless it's an op."

Steve frowned, too.

I really hope this doesn't go sideways on us.

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"Ok, so the recipe says you have to mix the dry ingredients and the wet ingredients in different bowls first, and then combine them,” Ryan instructed, peering down at the notecard she’d written the directions on. “That’s stupid, they’re all just going to get mixed together anyway!"

“Are you suggesting we disregard the rules?” Thor grinned, a glint gleaming in his eyes.

“Very much so,” Ryan agreed, matching his smile with her own. “Saves us extra dishes to clean, at least.”

“Excellent! How many eggs are necessary?” Thor inquired, opening the thin Styrofoam carton very delicately.

“One, but we need one egg white too,” Ryan read, her brows furrowing slightly. “I guess you just kinda scoop the yolk out when you crack it?”

Thor very gently tapped the egg on the side of the bowl, just barely denting the shell. “Here, big guy, I’ve got this,” Ryan said kindly, taking the egg from him and breaking it more forcefully. “Could you get the two cups of flour, please?”

“Certainly.” Thor replied, setting out the measuring cups. “Ryan, might I ask you a personal question?” he continued, reaching for the bag of flour.

“Uh, yeah, of course,” Ryan replied, wondering what was about to come out of Thor’s mouth next. He had a propensity for embarrassing his friends; it seemed people from his culture were a lot more open about their feelings than the people of Earth, and it was a little mortifying to be on the receiving end of one of Thor’s heartfelt speeches or probing questions in front of everyone. Thankfully, it’s just us today, Ryan thought.
“Why is it you are still unmated? A young, beautiful, obviously fertile woman such as you could have any partner she so desired,” Thor affirmed, as though it were a perfectly normal statement.

*Oh my god. Nope, I brought this on myself, this one’s on me,* Ryan thought. “Uh, I don’t know,” she confided, lying through her teeth, “I don’t think it’s really in the cards for me.”

“What cards would dictate to you that you would not be a desirable match?” Thor exclaimed, offended on Ryan’s behalf.

“No, no, it’s a figure of speech,” Ryan explained, “They’re not literal cards, it’s the same like ‘raining cats and dogs’ or something like that. Do they not have those where you come from?”

“Yes, but not the same ones, and I still occasionally mistake them for common Earth speech,” Thor acknowledged. “Regardless, why should you not believe yourself worthy of such joy? I have never been happier than when I first met my lady Jane, despite being banished to Earth as punishment.”

“And that’s great, I just… am not looking for that right now,” Ryan hedged, hoping he would sense her reluctance and change the subject. She finished with the second egg, throwing out the shell and yolk and washing her hands. “You got the flour all set?”

“You making an offer, cutie?” Ryan taunted, turning to give Thor a rakish, exaggerated wink. Thor clapped his hands together, his deep laugh booming throughout the kitchen. *At least he understood that. Sex themed jokes come so much easier to presented…*

“Nay, my dear friend, Jane and I are quite satisfied in each other. Although were we to ever consider bonding with a Beta, you would be our first choice,” Thor said, clapping a hand on Ryan’s shoulder and almost knocking her sideways.

“Aw, sweetie, I’m touched,” Ryan chuckled. She really was, though. “Assuming Sam’s not available, though, right?”

“Sam is a kind and honorable man, but he still yet mourns the loss of his Alpha Riley. I do not know if he will ever be ready to search for such relationship again any time soon.”

“Oh, I didn’t know.” Ryan sobered up immediately. “That’s so sad.”

“Sam is yet young and strong. He will love again one day, I am sure,” Thor assured, smiling down paternally at Ryan. “But, tell me truly, Ryan. Do you not desire to be mated at all?”

She shook her head. “I don’t,” she said simply. “I never have. Guess I’m just weird like that.”

“It is unusual, yes,” Thor agreed. “But I do respect your wishes, and sincerely hope others do as well.”

Ryan couldn’t help it. She put the mixing spoon down and wrapped her arms around Thor, gripping his as tightly as she could. Thor seemed surprised for a second, then returned the hug enthusiastically. Ryan barely reached the top of his chest in height, and Thor’s arms crushed around her shoulders while his head reached down to rest atop hers. “Thanks, Thor,” Ryan choked out, her air supply greatly restricted.
“You are most welcome,” Thor replied graciously, releasing Ryan and smiling at her. “Now, shall we endeavor to finish the baking lesson?”

“Yeah, they should be just about ready to go in the oven,” Ryan smiled back.

The fire alarm went off ten minutes later, but the second batch was pretty good.

Chapter End Notes

Look up the Einstein train thought experiment, it's super cool. Also, I know it's another trope to make Thor kinda dopey, but sweet dopey Thor that could also destroy the world is my favorite.
“Okay, so you step back with your left foot while I step forward with my right,” Bucky explained, holding both of Ryan’s hands in his. “Then you’ll bounce back forward, and step your right foot out to the side.”

“My left foot comes back too, right?” Ryan was distinctly uncoordinated at the best of times, and she’d never expected Bucky to actually try to teach her how to dance.

“Right,” Bucky affirmed.

“Wait, it’s my right foot that steps forward?” Ryan said, trying to follow Bucky’s lead.

“No, your-oof,” Bucky let out a small grunt as his left foot’s toes were trod upon. Steve chuckled from the couch in the background, and Bucky glared at him over Ryan’s shoulder. They were in the common room, having cleared out a space by moving coffee tables and set up an honest-to-goodness antique record player to croon out Frank Sinatra.

“Oops, sorry,” Ryan giggled, staring down between their bodies to try and straighten out her footwork. “Wait, so like this?” she said, stepping her left foot back and then forward, her right foot coming out to the side after the left landed.

“Yeah, there we go,” Bucky smiled. “Now shift your weight onto the right foot, then back onto the left, and then just repeat the whole thing a few times.”

“That’s it?” Ryan commented as they practiced the steps together. “That’s not so hard.”

“That’s the basic step for swing dancing, as far as your feet are concerned. Now your hands come in,” Bucky replied.

“Crap, what do they do?” Ryan complained.

“It’s easy; just pull back gently but keep them in kinda the same spot when you step back, so they’ll press against mine. There, that’s it!” Bucky encouraged as Ryan’s stilted movements started to flow together. She grinned ecstatically up at him, her feet skipping lightly in time with the music.

“Alright, hold on,” Bucky warned, and suddenly Ryan was spinning under his arm and twirling back and forth, her feet somehow knowing where to step and her body knowing when to turn, until she just as quickly lost the rhythm and tripped over her own feet. “Oh, careful!” Bucky called out as caught her by the waist as she pitched forward, both of them laughing heartily.

“How did you do that?! I can’t dance like that!” Ryan blurted out, beaming with joy.

“All you really need is the right partner, sweetheart,” Bucky said, pulling Ryan back upright and winking over at Steve. “It’s all in the leading.”

Steve ducked his head and smiled to himself, the sight before him bringing back a swirl of bittersweetly nostalgic memories. His mother, Sarah, straightening his tie for his first date; long, wistful gazes at Bucky when he was supposed to be looking at girls; crowded, sweltering ballrooms full of swinging dancers and necking couples, scents swirling and combining into a chaotic tempest
of allure. He’d never liked dancing much, mostly because there was only one partner he ever wanted, and they couldn’t be together outside their cramped, creaking apartment. Nowadays, though? He could be convinced to pull on a pair of suspenders and revisit the good old days. So long as Bucky would pull the suspenders off him afterwards.

Steve stood up, asking quietly, “May I cut in?” as he approached the two practicing again. Ryan suppressed a stupidly happy grin as she backed away and watched them both fight to lead, bodies whirling and toes tapping joyfully.

*It’s like some mushy rom-com,* she contemplated as she sat on the couch to watch them go at it. Both of them had identical sappy expressions, never taking their eyes off each other for a second as Sinatra flowed into Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald. The song was slow, and they transitioned into an easy waltz, Bucky resting his head on Steve’s shoulder and Steve’s eyes closing as they held each other close and swayed. *Ok, time for me peace out before I throw up.* She couldn’t help but think, though, that if she had presented all those years ago and wanted the old apple pie life, she’d hope it’d look just like theirs. Ryan shook her head, smiling, and then stood up and made to leave quietly. Bucky noticed, however, and lifted his head to call after her.

“Hey, I’m pretty sure you owe me another dance,” he declared, stepping back from Steve and turning off the record player.

“No, it’s fine, you two can,” Ryan trailed off, gesturing her hand up and down at them.

“No, no, I want to learn about this famous macaroni dance,” Steve insisted, plugging the stereo system back in.

Ryan snorted back a laugh. “It’s called the Macarena, actually, and it’s really stupid compared to what you guys can do,” she admitted.

“Well, we’ll all just have to look stupid together then, won’t we?” Bucky declared, holding his hand back out to bring Ryan back. “So, how’s this one go?”

“Well, it’s all arm movements, really, and you just do it to the beat of the song that no one understands,” Ryan confessed, making her way over to the stereo and shuffling through the iPod attached. “People like to do it at weddings and stuff, because no one knows how to actually dance anymore and it puts everyone on equally ridiculous ground.”

Steve and Bucky glanced at each other, amused. “Sounds simple enough,” Steve shrugged.

Ten minutes later, all three of them were yelling “HEEYY, MACARENA!” when Sam walked through to get to the kitchen. *White people really shouldn’t dance,* he thought, trying his best to not laugh his ass off and record the scene on his phone at the same time.

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“She’s been here for three months now, and you haven’t found a thing? It’s almost Thanksgiving, I don’t really fancy spending it with someone who wants to kill me rather than a turkey,” Tony retorted.

“Don’t be dramatic, Tony. This isn’t nearly the longest we’ve had to work an op,” Clint shot back.

“You track her movements every day, you access all her account records and internet histories, and you’ve played Mario Kart with her a dozen times. Have you considered the possibility that you’re missing something?”
“Oh yeah? You have any grand ideas? A career in private investigation you forgot to tell us about?” Clint rolled his eyes. He was losing patience, both with Tony and the mission. He knew he should have something by now, but Ryan was either biding her time or a lot more clever than he had anticipated.

“There’s another possibility,” Natasha voiced, her tone contemplative. “Ryan could be making us forget.”

Silence met her words. “Well, then, what do you suggest we do, if we literally can’t do anything to catch her?” Tony snarked, his scent like cold stone, betraying his underlying fear.

“Take it to an outside source. From now on, the footage is reviewed by a trusted SHIELD agent. Anything suspicious is reported to one of us in meets outside the Tower.”

The others nodded their agreement, sobered by the thought of their own memories being controlled against their will and without their knowledge. “Get this done,” Tony said, his voice low and hard. He turned back to his lab bench, ignoring Clint and Natasha as they left.

“He’s bossy for a Beta,” Clint remarked, trying to master his own nerves coiled in his stomach. Natasha took his hand in reply, her coffee-and-cinnamon scent calming him.

“So are you. And we’ll end this. We haven’t failed yet,” Natasha said quietly.

“The stakes haven’t really been this high before, either,” Clint worried, ashamed of his weakness but needing the comfort of his Alpha nonetheless.

“Look at me,” Nat growled, Alpha voice leaking through. Clint’s eyes shot up to hers immediately. “Go upstairs and wait for me; I’m getting Darcy off early today. You’re not going to worry in the meantime. And if you’re good,” she murmured low and smooth in his ear, stroking up his chest, “I’ll make you forget your own name, never mind hers.”

Clint tried to walk away casually, but his breath was coming in heavy pants, and he was ready to go off her words alone. Natasha smirked after him. Don’t worry, my Beta. We’ll get her.

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It was the first week of December, and Ryan had absolutely no Christmas spirit, despite the best combined efforts of Sam, Darcy, and Thor, surprisingly. Everyone seemed a little happier with the holidays in their sights, but those three had already tried to make her sing along to Mariah Carey, tempt her with Christmas cookies Sam’s mom had sent over, and now were trying to force her into helping hang up Christmas decorations all over the Tower.

“Come, Ryan, it is a season of merriment and joy!” Thor bellowed, stringing strands of tinsel across the ceiling of Bruce’s lab while she was resolutely ignoring him. She was poring over the data from the last round of bacterial cloning, trying to troubleshoot what went wrong, but was getting nowhere. Sighing in frustration, she gave up and turned to Thor standing atop the ladder.

“The holidays aren’t exactly my favorite time of year,” Ryan explained, crossing her arms and scowling at the twinkling lights he’d already hung. “Hard to spread Christmas cheer when you never had much reason to be cheerful. Plus, I think I’m getting the flu.” Despite the flu shots Bruce had insisted everyone receive, she’d been a bit achy for the past few days. It had passed, but bizarrely, she’d felt an incessant need to clean her room afterwards, and had scrubbed floor to ceiling until everything was neat and perfect. Yesterday, though, she had awoken early to twisted sheets, strangely hot and uncomfortable all over as though her skin was an itchy, ill-fitting sweater. It had
worn off after a shower, but it had begun to return an hour or so ago today.

“You are feeling sick?” Thor said, immediately concerned. “You should not be at work when you have taken ill. I shall inform Bruce of your condition; you return upstairs and rest.”

Any other time and Ryan would have argued, but it would be nice to get away from the incessant holiday merriment for a little while, at least. “Thanks,” she smiled, putting down her notebook and grabbing her cell phone. “I’ll catch you later, alright?”

“Of course. If you have recovered sufficiently tomorrow, I shall see you then,” Thor said as he waved goodbye.

Ryan pressed the button for the elevator, and found Jane on the other side when the door opened. “Hey, were you looking for Thor? He was just in the lab,” Ryan pointed back down the hall.

“No, thank you, but I was just going upstairs to make some more coffee. Late night last night fighting with some equipment,” Jane explained, stifling a yawn behind her hand.

“Ooh, that’s rough. But man, that’s a good idea, some tea would be prime right now,” Ryan replied, entering the elevator and pressing the button for the main floor again.

Waiting for the doors to close, Jane noticed a very faint smell she hadn’t perceived before, and sniffed quietly. It was a lightly floral scent, like lilacs, leaves and sunshine. “That’s a nice perfume you have on,” she complimented Ryan.

Ryan drew her eyebrows together, a slight frown crossing her face. Did I put on perfume? Wait, I don’t own perfume, she laughed at herself. “I’m not wearing any, but I guess my deodorant smells good today,” she quipped as the doors opened and Jane went ahead of her to the kitchen. Ryan was laughing at the life-size cardboard cutout of Santa Claus next to the TV when an intense dizzy spell came over her. She stopped dead in her tracks, trying to keep upright as the world spun around.

“Is everything okay?” Jane called back, already in the kitchen grabbing mugs.

“I-I just got really dizzy for a second there,” Ryan answered, her voice sounding hollow and far away to her ears and her skin suddenly boiling all over. “I think I’m getting sick.”

“Here, why don’t you lie down on the couch, then? I’ll make you the t-” Jane cut off suddenly as a gigantic wave of the scent she’d detected before suddenly rushed over her. It was overwhelming, and Jane covered her nose and breathed through her mouth. “Ryan!” she called out, her hand muffling the sound as she heard a loud thumping noise from the other room.

Ryan dropped down heavily to her knees, one hand clutching the glass table beside the couch to keep herself upright as she panted like she was running a marathon. Her limbs were shaking uncontrollably, and she was barely able to keep from crying out as a scorching heat seared through her inner torso. Every part of her felt like a parched desert, except for the sweat pouring down her legs beneath her jeans, of all places. “J-Jane, water,” she begged, barely able to get the words off her dry tongue as she fell fully to the floor on her back.

Jane dashed to the fridge, grabbing a bottled water and twisting open the cap as she returned to help Ryan up. “Here, drink this,” she commanded, holding the bottle to Ryan’s lips and pouring it slowly down her throat. Ryan swallowed greedily, the water only partially quenching the flames spreading over her body. After a minute, though, she finished the bottle and was able to sit up again. Jane stayed silent, keeping a hold on Ryan’s shoulders as she straightened. Logically, Jane knew what was occurring, but she didn’t know why or how. Ryan’s scent was incredible even to her, entirely
staggering in its intensity, and all she could think was that they needed to get out of there now.

“Sorry, Jane,” Ryan apologized, her voice thin and wavering. “I didn’t mean to collapse on you like that.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jane admonished. “Come on, can you move now?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Ryan replied, slowly standing back up and swaying just a little, her head still fuzzy and confused. “What the hell?” she murmured, feeling a cooling wetness on the seat of her jeans. “Did I spill the water on myself? And what on god’s green earth is that smell?” she inquired, her head starting to clear a bit.

Jane stared at her a moment, eyes wide. “Okay, we really need to go, I’ll explain everything once we get you back to your room,” she ordered, pulling Ryan’s right arm across her shoulders to support her weight back to the elevator. Just before she could push the button, however, the elevator dinged, and the doors opened to reveal Bruce fiddling with a Starkpad.

“Hey, Ryan, Thor said you were sick, I was coming to check you out,” Bruce said in his bedside manner voice, looking up from the touchscreen. He inhaled to speak again, and the scent suffocating the room overpowered him in an instant. The Starkpad clattered to the floor as a horrible growling sound ripped from his chest, his eyes flaring a vibrant green.

“No, no, Bruce, hey, I need you to stay with me here!” Jane commanded, her voice raising in volume as she left Ryan and rushed forward frantically to put her hands on Bruce’s shoulders. Bruce moaned, shaking his head violently as another roar clawed its way up his throat. Jane was suddenly flung across the elevator, her head banging off the wall as she fell to the ground, motionless.

“Bruce?” Ryan squeaked, terror paralyzing her. She had seen the Hulk before, but never the honestly gruesome transformation. Within seconds, she was faced with an eight-foot-tall mass of pure, roiling muscle, growling down at her as she stood petrified. Flight instinct suddenly overtook her, and she sprinted across the room in the direction of the little-used staircase along the back wall.

A hand the size of her torso snatched her back, yanking her into midair from behind and dropping her just as suddenly, landing hard on her back and hitting her head. Ryan cried out in pain as the Hulk loomed over her, a manic grin spread across his face. Ryan didn’t know what was happening, but she knew it was time for her last resort. She quickly raised a trembling hand, her eyes beginning to radiate a deep sapphire.

Before she could get a word out, the Hulk roared again, the undertone rippling with power. Ryan’s voice abruptly failed, and she gasped a few times, trying to get a single coherent syllable out. Nothing happened.

The Hulk leered at her, a giant hand reaching down and ripping up her cotton t-shirt to pieces to reveal her chest and stomach. Ryan stared in horror, struggling futilely to wriggle out of his grasp on her legs as he ogled her exposed torso. His other hand reached for the top of her jeans. Ryan screamed, a panicked shriek that echoed off the walls.

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“Sirs, there is a situation in the common room,” JARVIS alerted Steve and Bucky as they were getting ready to go out to an art museum for the day.

“If Thor set off the sprinkler system again—” Bucky started, but JARVIS cut him off.

“It’s the Hulk, sir. He is loose in the common room with Ryan.”
“WHAT?!” Steve roared, dashing over to the door to their suite to grab his shield from its place among their coats and shoes. “JARVIS, video screen, now!”

The television across the room came to life immediately, showing Ryan being grabbed by the Hulk and slammed to the floor. Bucky and Steve flew out the door a millisecond later, Steve tearing the door to the stairwell off its hinges as they bolted the three floors down to the common room. A piercing scream reached them, and Bucky tore ahead of Steve to fling open the door and assess the situation.

The scent of unmated omega in heat, the strongest he’d ever encountered, ripped through him as he bounded into the room. His thoughts clouded, the impulse to claim almost overpowering him. He shook it off as the Hulk roared at his arrival from his stance over Ryan, who looked like she was about to pass out. Wait a second, he’s looking at- shit. Bucky’s thoughts raced through his head at a thousand miles an hour, and he whipped around to see Steve, his teeth bared in a furious gaze locked with the Hulk, both of their eyes dilated almost entirely to black. If Bucky had had as strong a reaction as he did, there was no way he could stop Steve and the Hulk’s instinctual response. I have to get Ryan out of here.

Steve hurled his shield at top speed, the blow glancing off the Hulk’s forehead as Steve charged forward. A thundering snarl came from the Hulk, who ran forward off of Ryan to meet Steve's challenge. Bucky darted past the fray, ducking beneath the Hulk’s wide swing at Steve as he reached for Ryan and yanked her back upright. The Hulk was failing to connect with Steve, who was dodging every blow neatly. Bucky knew he couldn’t keep it up forever, though.

“Come on, we’ve gotta move!” he shouted at Ryan, whose eyes were glazed over and mouth was hanging open in shock. Bucky picked her up bridal-style and rushed back towards the stairs. Suddenly, the wall of windows lining the front shattered to pieces as the largest Iron Man suit Bucky had ever seen flew in and began wrestling one-on-one with the Hulk. Bucky didn’t stay to see the outcome, though.

Hurrying back up the stairs, Bucky tried to put as many floors between the common room and Ryan as possible, all while desperately fighting against his natural reaction to the most amazing smell he had ever come across. By the time they reached six floors above, he was acutely aware of Ryan’s torn clothes and was trying his hardest to not finish what the Hulk had started, to not drop her to the ground to explore her uncovered chest with his mouth. A minute later, he couldn’t take it anymore, and he laid Ryan on the floor and backed away, covering his nose with his hand.

Ryan’s head was whirling, and she was only dimly aware of what was happening as she was rescued by Bucky and brought away from the shouts and clamors of the fight below. She wasn’t burning anymore, but rather felt very cold and incredibly weak. I can't see right, she noticed vaguely as the edges of her vision blurred. How odd. I must be going into shock. She felt the hard floor beneath her, warm compared to her shivers, and its solidity began to ground her as the blood rushing in her ears blocked out Bucky’s yells.

“Ryan!” Bucky was urging, backed into the opposite corner of the small landing. “Ryan!” he called again, breathing shallowly through his mouth. “JARVIS, get Darcy and Jane here, now!” he ordered.

“Jane is currently unconscious in the elevator. EMS is on the way. Shall I contact Miss Potts and have her return to the Tower?”

“Yeah, just get anyone that can help her!” Bucky shouted. “Cancel EMS, no one else gets into the Tower. And get Natasha, Thor, Sam, everyone else outside and away from Ryan.”
“Right away, sir.”

“B-Bucky?” Ryan croaked feebly, the smell of pine forests and fresh rainfall washing over her and focusing her attention. She felt a foreign sensation in her lower torso, and a strange, aching emptiness interspersed with need, a need to feel Bucky’s hands on her body again. Heat began to roll through her once more. *What the actual hell?*

Bucky bit back a moan at her helpless cry. “Ryan! Listen, doll, just lay still, ok? Darcy and Pepper will be here to help you in a minute,” Bucky conveyed, starting back down the stairs away from her. Ryan calling his name had almost undone him, and he needed to get back and help Steve before he did something he regretted immensely. It felt like all the blood in his body had rushed to one place, and he could barely think straight.

“W-wait, please, you…” Ryan struggled weakly, trying to push herself upright.

“NO! Ryan, please, I’m sorry but I have to go, just stay there,” Bucky urged, fleeing down the staircase at a sprint, every cell in his body screaming for him to go the opposite direction. A few floors down, the scent began to dissipate, and by the time he reached the common room, it was at a much more tolerable level. He surveyed the destruction, the couches overturned, glass shards scattered everywhere from the windows, cracks in the walls from where the Hulk had slammed into them. Bruce and Tony were nowhere to be seen, but Steve was lying on his back amidst the broken glass, still breathing heavily. Bucky rushed over, dropping to his knees at Steve’s side.

“Hey, hey, Stevie? You here with me?” Bucky forced his voice to be calm, checking Steve over for injury.

“I’m fine now,” Steve panted, his eyes pained but the scent of crazed Alpha swept out with the breeze from the windows. “Just a cracked rib, I think. Check on Jane, she’s still in the elevator.”

Bucky acquiesced, jogging carefully over the crushed glass and pressing the button to open the doors again. *Well. No one saw that coming.*

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Darcy found Ryan in the back stairwell, prompted to help her at JARVIS’ insistence. “Holy shit,” she exclaimed as she approached. “Wake up, girl, we need to get you to a room,” she insisted, lightly hitting the side of Ryan’s face. Ryan blinked slowly a few times, a sickly sweet smell like cotton candy and carnations tickling her nose.

“She…she?” she rasped, wanting nothing more than to never move again and sleep forever. She shook her head, trying to clear her vision and keep from slipping back into peaceful oblivion before the painful heat stirred in her again. “What happened?”

“Um…” Darcy trailed off, not sure what to tell her. As usual, she settled on the blunt truth. “Somehow, you just presented. You’re an Omega.”

Chapter End Notes

Surprise!
I know I said I probably wouldn't update for a bit, but it turns out I'm a liar. Sue me.

Also, I feel some more explanation is probably needed:
1) Alphas and Omegas have stronger initial responses to each other than they would to a Beta, but mating with a Beta is just as strong. That's not to say anyone would be attracted to anyone; attraction is still multifaceted and variable. After mating, an individual can still be attracted to a scent besides their mates', but it's much more rare and greatly lessened.

2) I purposely didn't immediately outline all the characters' presentations; they only showed up when a character discussed or thought about it, because it's obvious to (almost) everyone immediately and no one would find it necessary to specifically tell someone else. Just to clarify, then-
   Alphas: Steve, Thor, Natasha, the Hulk
   Betas: Tony, Sam, Clint, Coulson, Bucky
   Omegas: Pepper, Jane, Darcy, Bruce, and now Ryan.
I know the male/female ratios of each presentation are skewed in this case, but it's not atypical to have male Omegas or female Alphas/Betas.

3) A/A, B/B, and O/O pairings don't occur in this iteration of the universe; they're simply never attracted to each other. A/B/O triads are now socially accepted and common but not seen as necessary. They can be any combination of male and female as well, although back in the 40s, male/female pairs were the norm and others were looked down on if not outright persecuted.

4) Ryan does have PTSD from both an attempted rape (the one discussed in a previous chapter) and (spoiler alert) another previous sexual encounter she later understands to be corrective rape (to be discussed in the future). Trigger warning. Also, if I have accidentally made some glaring error about PTSD or panic attacks or such, this is a work of fanfiction and that will just have to be how it is in this world. I did some research, but I'm don't have time for anything extremely in-depth.

“No, no, that’s impossible!” Ryan panicked, Darcy’s pronouncement having fully awakened her for the moment. Her eyes searched and her hands patted frantically up and down her body, looking for some, any kind of reassurance that Darcy was mistaken. Everything looked normal, but the inexplicable sugar-and-flowers fragrance was still invading her nose, her skin and mouth were dry, and her pants were wet with some slick substance. It was all too much at once, and Ryan felt hysteria unfolding in her chest along with the continuing feverishness.

“Shh, hey, it’s gonna be ok,” Darcy soothed, grabbing Ryan’s hands with her own and stopping their frenzied movement. Ryan was starting to hyperventilate, her eyes wide and dismayed. Her scent soured with panic, like lemons and mold.

“No, Darcy, I’m not, I can’t be an Omega! I’m unpresented, both my parents were, it’s impossible—” Ryan’s speech dissolved into a wheeze, and Darcy clutched her hands tighter on impulse, having
absolutely no idea what else to do.

“Ryan? Hey, Ryan!” Darcy cried, completely out of her depth. Ryan didn’t respond, and her breaths were getting shorter and shorter. Her hands and eyes suddenly flared blue, and Darcy was pushed away to the opposite wall, albeit not very forcefully.

“Ryan? I’m going to need you to focus on my voice if you can,” Pepper articulated calmly, all of a sudden appearing at the foot of the stairs to their floor. Climbing them quickly, she knelt beside Ryan, keeping a short distance between them and speaking very clearly. “I want you to follow my breathing pattern, okay? Breathe in with me now.” She inhaled slowly through her nose, holding it a moment before exhaling, “And back out.”

It took Ryan a few moments to register Pepper’s words, but when she was lucid enough to understand she copied the pattern as best she could. A minute or two later, her mind slowed its reeling and her chest didn’t feel straightjacketed anymore. Her eyes dropped shut, and she continued to inhale and exhale, noticing dimly that a new scent of sugar cookies and sunflowers was mixed with the first now. Another wave of heat swept through her, making her cry out in pain from the intensity.

“Ok, Darcy and I are going to help you up to your room now, alright?” Pepper stated, looping Ryan’s right arm around her shoulders and beckoning to Darcy, who had been watching the scene apprehensively. Together, they slowly managed to make their way back down the one flight to the fifth floor, where Ryan’s room was located. Darcy and Jane deposited Ryan on the bed, where she flopped down limply, the pain from the burning beneath her skin making her cringe. Along with the heat was a pervasive sense of emptiness, as though a vital piece of her had gone missing.

“Ryan, Darcy is going to get you some water, and I’ll be back in a few minutes with some other things you’ll need,” Pepper relayed, gently lifting Ryan’s head to place a pillow beneath it. “It’s just you, me, and Darcy, okay? We’ll be here if you need us.”

Ryan managed a small nod before closing her eyes, hoping for the numbness of sleep. The aches in her body dulled as exhaustion swelled over her like a tidal wave, dragging her down into unconsciousness.

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“I’ve never seen anything like that,” Pepper confided to Darcy, peering back into Ryan’s room through the open door from the hallway. Ryan was sound asleep sideways on the bed, still fully dressed atop the covers.

“How the hell is it even possible?! Presenting at 25? I presented when I was 18, and I was a crazy late bloomer. Most people present when they’re, like, 15,” Darcy whispered back, trying to wrap her mind around it all. She had been waiting for Jane to return to their lab when JARVIS had locked down the Tower, ordering and releasing Darcy to find Ryan on the stairs a few minutes later. She’d scented the Omega heat from four floors down, it was so pungent.

Pepper merely shook her head. “I have no idea. And to have a scent that strong? It’s all unheard of.”

“Maybe it’s because she’s presented so late? It just all came out at once?” Darcy hypothesized, shrugging her shoulders.

“What exactly happened? All I know is I got an emergency alert on my phone and rushed back. Thank god my meeting was only a few blocks away,” Pepper said.
Darcy shrugged again. “I have no idea. Jane left for a few minutes and then JARVIS just locked everything down out of nowhere. He told me Bucky said to help Ryan on the stairs, and I haven’t seen or heard from anyone since.”

Pepper checked in on Ryan again. Still completely out, her breathing steady and deep. “Here, I’ll bring up the security footage,” she decided, pulling out her cell phone and scanning her thumb. “JARVIS, can you play back the events from earlier, please?”

“Certainly, Miss Potts,” the AI replied, his voice automatically lowered for Ryan’s sake. The screen lit up with a view of the common room, Ryan and Jane entering from the elevator. Both Pepper and Darcy gasped when the Hulk cornered Ryan, and Darcy clapped her hands to her mouth in horror as they watched her clothes ripped off and listened to her screams. The Hulk Buster armor, holding the Hulk in a chokehold, dove back out the broken windows after Bucky had gathered up Ryan and retreated to the stairs. After everyone disappeared, Steve dropped to his knees, clutching his side before twisting onto his back amidst the shattered glass. The view switched to an outside camera, showing the armor fly up to the roof and release the Hulk, who roared furiously until a dart the size of one of Clint’s arrows pierced his neck, causing him to collapse unconscious instantly. Ryan and Bucky appeared on the screen again, Bucky jerking away from her and instructing JARVIS before fleeing the scene to leave Ryan alone and helpless. Darcy watched herself and Pepper arrive, her mind half blank with shock. The last scene was Bucky entering the elevator to help Jane, who seemed to awake without a problem.

“Oh my god,” Pepper breathed as the screen went to black. “That poor girl.”

“What are we gonna do?” Darcy asked. “None of the others except Jane can come within a thousand feet of her.”

“JARVIS, is everyone else out of the Tower?”

“Yes, Miss Potts. Dr. Banner has returned to normal, but is still unconscious. Mr. Stark was uninjured and has flown him to a safe house outside the city to recuperate. The others have been evacuated to the emergency floors underground and are a sufficient distance away. Miss Foster is being attended to by Miss Romanoff and Mr. Thor, and Captain Rogers by Sergeant Barnes. Mr. Barton and Mr. Wilson are waiting together.”

“Thank you, JARVIS. Update everyone on Ryan’s condition, please, and let us know if there’s any changes.” Turning back to Darcy, she said, “Hopefully, her scent is only this strong because of her heat. We get her through it, and assess from there.”

Darcy nodded, glad of Pepper’s level-headedness in a crisis.

“Get her a new shirt and plenty of water, she’ll be dehydrated when she wakes. I’ll be back in a little while,” Pepper dictated, adopting her no-nonsense business leader tone.

“What are you going?” Darcy inquired.

“She doesn’t have a mate, and her heat is incredibly strong. She’s going to need some supplies to get through it. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Darcy nodded again, Pepper’s words a lifeline to her worried mind. Entering Ryan’s room, she tiptoed quietly to the ensuite bathroom, filling up a cup from the sink and then pulling over the desk chair before riffling through the closet for some clothes. Ryan stirred briefly, then relaxed back into sleep.
Darcy felt entirely unsettled, wishing for Nat and Clint or even just Jane or Thor to be there to help. Beneath her horror at what had transpired, her worry for Ryan, and her mild anxiety at her mates’ forced absence, there was a stirring of anger and hurt. Why didn’t you just tell us you were unpresented? Why lie and pretend to be a Beta? she thought, glowering slightly at Ryan’s comatose form as she unhooked a flannel from its hanger and laid it beside Ryan on the bed. The scent of her heat had abated somewhat, although Darcy knew it wouldn’t last. Her own first heat hadn’t been nearly this traumatizing; it had only lasted two days and she’d been able to get herself through it alone, although her college roommate had been extremely upset with her for locking her out that long. Not nearly as pissed as Clint will be, she remarked internally, being locked out of the Tower for however long this takes.

A half hour or so later, Ryan shifted and groaned slightly, bringing Darcy’s attention back to the matter at hand. “Hey, how’re you feeling?” she asked gently as Ryan blinked slowly back to life.


Oh crap. “You don’t remember?” Darcy asked, anxiety creasing her forehead.

“I remember falling down in the living room, and Jane was there…” Ryan trailed off as she struggled through her muddied memories. Suddenly, her scent spiked with terror again, and Darcy grabbed her hand as Ryan’s eyes widened with panic.

“Hey, no, it’s okay, you’re safe now,” Darcy promised, rubbing small circles onto Ryan’s hand with her thumb. She’d never felt so helpless and frustrated as she watched Ryan’s eyes fill with tears. “Please don’t cry, I never know what to do when people cry.”

Ryan snorted, tears still streaming down her face. Third time’s the charm, I guess, she thought hysterically. The Hulk’s roars and broken glass meshed with a dank alleyway in Boston and shouts of pain, turning into a filthy kitchen and cries for mercy. Ryan choked back another sob.

“Here, have some water,” Darcy offered, bringing the cup up to Ryan’s lips. She drank it down thirstily, then collapsed back on the bed, feeling a creeping numbness steal over her. Her body remained overly warm and aching with emptiness and need, but she herself felt detached, a drifting spirit in a world that seemed false, somehow. A stray thought passed through her mind of a book on PTSD she had read long ago, after the incident in the alleyway. She vaguely recognized what was happening, but didn’t have the strength to fight it.

“Ryan? Can you sit up for me?” Pepper reentered just then, toting a black shopping bag that she laid down on the floor beside the bed as she approached. There was no response. Ryan’s eyes were glassy and unmoving, staring up at the ceiling blankly.

“What’s going on? She could just hear me second ago!” Darcy asserted frantically, looking to Pepper for guidance. Pepper quickly checked Ryan’s pulse at her wrist, laying her other hand across Ryan’s forehead and watching her chest for movement.

“JARVIS, scan her vitals,” Pepper commanded, ignoring Darcy for the moment.

“All are within normal range for an Omega in heat,” JARVIS reported. “Miss Green appears to be dissociating. It is recommended that one should let the episode pass and seek psychiatric treatment for the future.”

“Wait, dissociating? What does that even mean?!” Darcy felt like she was about to lose it herself from the stress. She wished in vain again for the comfort of her Alpha and Beta, torn between
wanting to help Ryan and wanting to escape the Tower and hide in their arms.

“She’s going to be fine,” Pepper reassured her calmly. “She’s sort of just retreated into herself for the time being to help herself cope with the trauma. She’ll come back when she’s ready, and we’ll take care of her until then.”

Darcy nodded, still overwhelmed. “How did you know what to do? Where’d you learn all this stuff?”

Pepper gave her a tiny, saddened smile. “After the fight with Loki a few years ago, Tony… well, it’s not the first time I’ve dealt with PTSD,” she answered wistfully. “Why don’t you take a break? I’ll sit with her for a while now.”

Darcy nodded her thanks, vacating the chair and stretching gently. Noticing the bag at the foot of the bed, she opened it to see a few unopened packages from an adult store she knew of nearby. “You think she doesn’t have any of her own already? She’s unmated in her twenties,” Darcy remarked.

“She’s unpresented- or, rather, she was. I have no idea if she’d have toys or not,” Pepper replied.

Darcy shook her head, closing the bag again. “How could she have lied to us like that, the whole time?” she blurted out suddenly. “Did she really think we would care?”

“Lots of people do,” Pepper responded sadly. “I wouldn’t have told anyone, if it was me.”

Darcy sighed. She felt mentally overtaxed, and Ryan’s scent was beginning to spike again. “I’m going to go sleep. Have JARVIS yell at me if you need help.”

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Steve bit back a moan as Bucky’s hands brushed gently over his purpling ribcage, checking the healing of the fracture. Not a moan of pain; that was already mostly diminished, and the bruising would follow soon after, his body able to heal such a minor injury in mere hours. No, he was stifling more carnal reactions than that. “Bucky, please, stop,” Steve gasped out.

“Are you still in pain? You shouldn’t be,” Bucky said urgently, rifling through the first aid kit for oxycodone. Steve was sitting on the bed in the tiny, dusty bedroom of one of the little used safe rooms below the Tower. It was comfortable enough, but Bucky was already restless, still distressed over Ryan’s situation. He hated himself for having to simply abandon her like he did, but he’d had no other choice. He had been a few seconds away from finishing what the Hulk had started, her scent was so amazing.

“No, just- you still smell like her,” Steve groaned, breathing through his mouth to try and dull his body’s reaction. Bucky glanced back at him, seeing and scenting the obvious signs of his arousal now that he wasn’t focused on his injuries.

“Sorry, I’ll go shower really quick, okay?” Bucky apologized, making to enter the bathroom nearby. Steve grabbed his right hand and yanked him back instead.

“No, please,” Steve begged suddenly, his rational mind being overridden by his senses. “Oh, god,” he breathed, nosing at Bucky’s wrist. It was like rainfall and sunshine all at once, warm summer days and crisp winter evenings, like heat and sex and home. The musk of his mate that he loved so much perfectly complemented Ryan’s fragrant allure; it was beyond intoxicating, and the need to claim, possess, make it his surged through him.

“Steve, you’re still hurt,” Bucky protested weakly, his own arousal spiking when he caught wind of
Steve’s own, mixing deliciously with what was left of Ryan on his skin.

“How did you stop? I thought you were perfect before, but god, the two of you together!” Steve panted, ignoring Bucky to scent at his neck now. He bit down none-too-gently at the scar on Bucky’s collarbone he’d left himself all those years ago, and Bucky arched into him, stepping one leg between Steve’s. The friction only crazed Steve further, and he quickly flipped them around and pushed Bucky atop the bed, crowding over him to claim his lips and mouth. Bucky let out his own moan, letting Steve dominate him fully as he felt his jeans being undone and hands stroking up under his shirt. He wrapped his legs around Steve, and they lost themselves in each other, all the while tasting Ryan on each other’s tongues.

Some time later, Bucky rose to retrieve a towel, cleaning off both himself and Steve. He collapsed back on the bed, his lust abated but shame rising in its place. “Did we really just have amazing sex while thinking of Ryan the whole time?”

Steve rolled over tiredly, taking Bucky’s hand in his. “No guilt until after we wake up,” he mumbled. “We’ll deal with it then.”

Bucky obliged, turning his back to Steve. He was wrapped in his lover’s arms a moment later, and promptly fell asleep.

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Ryan came back to herself what felt like days later. Glancing at the clock on her bedside table, it had been about five hours since the whole incident had started, now around six in the evening. She was alone in the darkened room now. Her mouth was extremely dry, and she gulped down the water left in the cup, spying a chocolate granola bar beside it and scarfing it down, too. While she was chewing, she took stock of herself again.

The pervasive heat—she refused to think of it as her heat—was still present, but manageable for the time being. More imminent, however, was the shivering thrills still tingling in her chest and lower torso. It was like the warmth elsewhere, but different somehow, too. Shifting slightly, her jeans rubbed on her skin, and she gasped as the feeling spiked suddenly, and warm wetness blossomed down there yet again. She had never felt anything like this before, and it was unnerving to say the least. Keeping very still, she waited for it to subside again. Unbidden, the memory of the same sensations occurring earlier arose in her mind, Bucky’s face by hers and his arms supporting her as he ran. A small sigh escaped her as her imagination suddenly put Bucky back in the room with her, one hand cradling her face and the other reaching down—

What the FUCK!? Her head abruptly screamed, the daydream extinguished in a second before waves of the tingling warmth washed through her. No, no, Bucky is Steve’s mate—a picture of Steve’s ferocious growling at the Hulk, growling over her, appeared in her mind, and she moaned aloud. Holy shit—no, no, this isn’t happening, I’m not! Her breath was coming faster, and her heart was thumping in her chest, not entirely from her panic. The taste of sugar cookies danced lightly across her tongue, warring with her feelings of alarm.

“Ryan? Hey, you’re alright,” Pepper’s voice rang out as the lights suddenly blinked on, blinding Ryan for a second and shocking her back to reality. “How are you feeling?” she asked as she gently pushed Ryan’s hair away from her face. Her cool hands felt wonderful on Ryan’s skin, and the smell of vanilla and sugar increased.

“I-I don’t know,” Ryan stammered, focusing on the relief brought by Pepper’s ministrations. “I don’t know what’s happening, I feel…wrong,” she faltered.
Pepper gave her a compassionate look. “It’ll be alright, don’t be scared. This is all perfectly natural.”

“Perfectly natural?” Ryan’s voice rose, abruptly enraged. “This is not natural! I’m unpresented, this can’t be happening to me!” A feeling like red-hot iron pierced through her, and she yelled in sudden anguish, gritting her teeth and clutching her side.

“Shh, shh, it’s easier if you stay calm,” Pepper counseled, producing a wet washcloth and lightly smoothing it across her forehead. “I don’t know how long your heat will last, but you’ll be back to normal soon.”

“Normal?” Ryan parroted again. “I feel like I’m boiling alive, I almost died earlier, my pants are soaked, and why the hell does everything smell like cookies?!”

A look of confusion flickered across Pepper’s face, quickly replaced with a mild shock. “Ryan,” she asked slowly. “Have you not been able to scent us this whole time?”

“Scent you? What, like, tell what you smell like? I don’t go around smelling people, do you?” Ryan shot back, still irrationally angry at Pepper. Logic told her she was acting like a child, lashing her feelings out at whomever was nearest, but she was too upset to care.

“Okay,” Pepper sighed, as if to herself. “I think this is probably a conversation best held for when you’re feeling better,” she said, not unkindly. “I’m going to let you get some rest now. But here, I’ve brought you some things to help for when your heat gets bad again.” She put a black shopping bag on the bed, smiling sympathetically down at Ryan.

“Wait, I’m sorry, don’t lea—” Ryan was cut off by more stabbing pains.

*I, this is getting old,* she thought petulantly.

“I’m not mad at you; this will just all be easier once you’ve recovered,” Pepper smiled. “I’ll bring you something else to eat in an hour or so, alright? Oh, and here are some fresh clothes.” She laid out Ryan’s only pair of sweatpants and some underwear beside the flannel Darcy had left earlier.

“Please, just tell me what’s going on,” Ryan begged, suddenly exhausted again and close to tears. “Why do I feel like this? How do I make it stop?”

“I promise, this will all make sense soon. I want to be able to explain this properly, not when you’re in... pain,” Pepper vowed. “These will help,” here she pointed at the bag, “and you should be alright within the next few days.”

“Days?!” Ryan quavered, one tear spilling down her cheek. She wiped it away furiously as Pepper stroked her hair maternally.

“It’ll be okay,” Pepper said again, for lack of a better encouragement. On impulse, she kissed her hand and touched it lightly to Ryan’s forehead. She was still fevered, but hopefully it wouldn’t reach the same levels it had when her heat first struck.

Ryan closed her eyes when Pepper left, at once grateful for her care and frustrated with her caginess. She remembered the bag just then, and sat up slowly to peer inside. “What the hell are these?”

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“Tony, did you know unpresented can’t scent?” Pepper asked, interrupting Tony’s rambling recap of the day’s events.
“What? That’s impossible, how would they even be able to go out in society? Even little kids can scent, they all know who the Alpha or whatever is in their families, it’s instinctual,” Tony contradicted.

“Well, apparently not, because Ryan just asked me why everything smelled like cookies,” Pepper maintained.

“That’s surprising, your scent isn’t even that strong outside of heat, considering the birth control you’re on,” Tony remarked. “But god, Ryan’s? If it weren’t for the suits’ air filters, even I would’ve been tempted. Lord knows what would’ve happened if Steve and Bruce had been left to finish their WWE match, I don’t know how Barnes made it out.”

“I don’t blame you, it’s still a little overwhelming,” Pepper admitted, pacing back and forth across the floor of her and Tony’s bedroom. “She’s resting again now, but- I don’t think she knows anything about Omegas, and probably not about any of this, really. It’s not like most of this stuff is taught in school, it’s just-natural.”

“Damn,” Tony sighed. “I-look, I have to go, but I’ll call you back soon as I can, alright? I love you.”

“You too,” Pepper returned.

Tony hung up the phone and sighed again, more heavily this time. He had been pacing the floor of the room where Bruce slept, his body slowly metabolizing the rest of the tranquilizer. The heart monitor blipped quietly in the background, a steady beat Tony’s footsteps mimicked unconsciously. A million thoughts were whirling about in his head- have to keep the press off of this somehow, Bruce should be awake in approximately three more hours, shit I left Dummy on in the lab, didn’t I- but at the forefront of it all was a growing sense of conflict. What if he’d been wrong about Ryan this whole time?
“Okay, body, I’m getting really freaking sick of this,” Ryan muttered to herself, jaw clenched tight to the point of pain. It was 3am, and she’d been awoken by another wave of her heat. The room was spinning around her, despite the fact that she was laying perfectly still on the bed. She was still both mentally and physically exhausted, and the unceasing feelings of warmth and tingling in her chest and between her legs were beginning to crescendo. Breathing in through her nose, Ryan pleaded with the universe to just make it stop. Casting about for a distraction, her mind began to replay the dream she’d awoken from, the details fuzzy but the impression left behind clear as day. It had been Bucky and Steve again, and their hands on her, and their mouths... It thrilled her body, feeding the tickling heat in her torso, but it also frightened her to her core.

Breathing heavily, she tried to shove the lingering memory away. You don’t want that, you’ve never wanted that... But the stubborn dream refused to be held down, and her eyes closed involuntarily as she could practically feel Bucky stroke up her thigh, Steve’s firm but gentle lips on her neck. Suddenly, she felt herself clench down on nothing, her muscles spasming, and then her mind went blank as an overwhelming sensation like dancing sparks trilled up and down her spine. Aftershocks echoed through her as she came back to herself, gasping. For the first time since she’d awoken yesterday morning, the sensations rolling through her were entirely pleasurable rather than painful. A few minutes later, her blissfully blank mind blinked itself back awake, and she realized all the heat and pain had evaporated away, as if they’d never existed. The only evidence remaining was the slick substance once again coursing down her thighs.

Ryan sat up slowly, hoping against hope that both the dream and the nightmare were over. No quivering limbs, no sweat pouring down her back, no outlandish, terrifying thoughts in her head, and most importantly, no more agonizing fire beneath her skin. She was incredibly tired, but felt herself approaching the sort of dreamy wakefulness of a late-night second wind. The next thing she noticed was that she was hungrier than she’d ever been in her entire life.

Treading cautiously, she slowly went into her closet and changed into her last clean flannel and jeans, the rest not already in the laundry littered about the floor after being sweat through at various times in the last few hours. She pulled on her sneakers for good measure; she felt a long walk was in order, despite the creeping weariness she knew would overtake her eventually. There was a lot she had to work through. No, denial first. Problems after I eat the entire fridge.

Ryan took a detour to wash her face and brush her teeth, staring at her reflection in the mirror for a few long minutes. You don’t look any different, her voice in her head remarked. She had tired circles under her eyes and her skin was paled even more than normal, but it was no worse than any other time she’d gone without sleep. And truthfully, she didn’t feel any different inside, either. Except you are, the traitorous voice remarked. Ryan rubbed her eyes, forcing her mind back to emptiness. She’d deal with her issues after eating. And maybe sleeping for several days...

She paused outside her door a moment, a small twinge of fear unfolding in her stomach. Somewhere, in her more rational mind, she knew it was a bad idea to revisit the place she was just assaulted, but the less intelligent side of her wanted to get back on the horse, so to speak. Plus, the food was down there. She took the stairs rather than the elevator, both to build up her courage and because she felt the need to stretch her muscles after hours trapped on her bed. The door to the common room was still open, and the entire floor was freezing, the broken windows exposing the
Ryan stood rooted for a few moments, facing the shattered glass, broken TV, overturned furniture, and the stupid Santa cutout knocked to the floor illuminated by the pale city lights. She expected to feel, well, something, but for now, it seemed she was alright. A breeze blew in from outside, and Ryan shivered, hastening carefully into the kitchen but pausing before reaching for the light switch. She didn’t know what kind of electrical damage the rooms might have sustained, and she didn’t feel much like dying before she got some sandwiches in her. She made her way through the kitchen in the dark, working by memory to grab peanut butter, honey, and bread.

A small bell sounded in the next room, seeming loud in the solitude. Peeking over through the door, she saw Natasha and Clint enter by the light of the elevator, surveying the damage in the room. The night blew chilly air inside again, and the scent of cinnamon cocoa and evergreen needles reached Ryan.  *Ok, if nothing else, my nose is apparently wacked up.*

“This has gone too far,” Clint was saying sharply, flicking the light switch to no avail. Ryan could barely make the two of them out, their faces half mired in shadow. “We’re lucky Steve and Bruce aren’t dead. Evidence be damned, Ryan needs to be in SHIELD custody, like, yesterday. I don’t know how her presenting fits into her schemes, but we can’t take any more chances.”

Ryan almost dropped the butter knife she was holding. Disbelief coursed through her, her mind fighting against what she’d overheard. Betrayal, hurt, and fear swirled beneath it.

“A sympathy ploy. She would know we knew she was unpresented, she had to throw us off her trail. Catch us off guard, pretending to be traumatized. The scent had to have been synthetic,” Natasha theorized. “Induce heat symptoms with a drug cocktail and you’ve got a fake presentation.”

“If she wasn’t really in heat, we’ve gotta move fast.”

“We have a small window of time. JARVIS says her vitals are back to normal, but she’ll be exhausted from the side effects; if we move fast, we can knock her out long enough to get her to Coulson.”

“Why would she only fake it for this long? It hasn’t even been 24 hours,” Clint frowned.

“Heats burn stronger but quicker when Omegas are unmated. Their bodies want an Alpha, and a greater scent would be more attractive,” Natasha explained. “But they can’t sustain it long until after they’re mated, when they’re more likely to get pregnant. She would have factored that in. You pay attention at all in high school health class?”

“Beta/Omega sex ed sucked. It was basically ‘don’t have sex or you’ll get pregnant and die’,,” Clint recalled, rolling his eyes. “Come on, we’ve got a job to do.”

“I’m lead on this. You take point,” Natasha ordered. “We use the stairs, get her up to the roof, wait for SHIELD.”

A burning rage was simmering in Ryan’s bones as she listened to her supposed friends plan to kidnap her, overriding her shock and fear. *You need to get out of here,* the still-reasonable part of her demanded. *Fuck that,* the rest of her said as she stormed out of the kitchen, adrenaline surging through her veins.

“How long?” she demanded, Clint and Natasha startling back around on the opposite side of the room. Natasha instantaneously pulled a gun out of nowhere, aiming at Ryan’s heart as Clint nocked an arrow in his bow. Ryan didn’t even flinch. “How long!?” she repeated, her voice icier than the
whistling winds outside.

“Hands where I can see them. Now!” Clint yelled, taking a step closer. Ryan slowly raised her hands, the knife still covered in peanut butter clattering to the floor. Suddenly, she clenched her left hand to a tight fist, eyes like blue flame. Clint’s weapon snapped in half, bowstring twanging, and the top of Natasha’s gun crumpled into itself with a horrible grinding sound.

“How long what?” Natasha asked as she tossed aside the now-useless gun, her tone as calm and casual as though they were just chatting in the gym before a workout.

“How long have you been lying to me?” Ryan seethed. “How long have all of you been lying to me?”

“Give it up, Ryan. We’ve known your plans the whole time,” Clint shot back, only half-bluffing. The freezing air still swirled around them, though Clint didn’t feel it anymore. It was coming in from the side, though, blowing away towards the kitchen any scent he could possibly detect.

“What plans?!?” Ryan shouted, her shaking hands starting to radiate cerulean as well. “You- you invited me here! You all said you wanted me!” she screamed, and the floor beneath them rumbled and vibrated. Too furious to wait for any answer, she took to their minds instead. Looking to Natasha, she saw nothing, her training from SHIELD and before keeping her mind empty of all but the present moment. Clint seemed to be struggling slightly, and one memory slipped through, playing out in Ryan’s mind’s eye as clear as day. She saw herself, walking away with a bag of donuts under a street light, Clint glancing back as he mulled over her being-

“What?” she gasped, her voice little more than a whisper. Her rage took a backseat, a different pain than she’d suffered earlier now racing through her veins. “Thi- it’s not even about my powers, it’s because-” She swallowed suddenly, her words choking off. The floor shifted beneath them again, more insistently this time.

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Steve startled awake to a load groaning sound, like the entire Tower was settling at once. He automatically turned to his left to check on Bucky, who was sound asleep across the bed. Briefly registering that it was odd for them not to still be wrapped around each other, he got up and pulled on his boxers, heading into the kitchen for some water. “JARVIS?” he called out softly.

“Yes, sir?” the British voice from the ceiling replied.

“How is Ryan doing?” Steve questioned, taking a glass from the cabinet by the sink.

“My apologies, sir. Information on Ryan is classified as restricted.”

Steve frowned up at the ceiling, his eyebrows knotted together. “Restricted? Why? And who has access?”

“Mr. Stark’s orders, sir. Ms. Romanoff, Mr. Barton, and Mr. Stark have direct access, and Ms. Potts has top level clearance for all matters.”

The walls and floor suddenly creaked again, and Steve felt the ground tremble slightly beneath him. “JARVIS, what’s going on?” he demanded, striding quickly back to the bedroom to put on the rest of his clothes.

“I do not have permission to answer your query, sir. My apologies,” JARVIS repeated.
“Buck, wake up,” Steve said, shaking his mate’s shoulder firmly. Bucky sprung up, instantly alert.

“What’s happening?” Bucky asked, watching Steve dress hurriedly.

“I don’t know, but the roof’s shaking and JARVIS won’t tell me anything about Ryan,” Steve declared, tugging on his shoes. “I have to go help.”

“Steve, no! Her heat’s not done-!” Bucky started, but Steve cut him off.

“It took me by surprise earlier, it won’t happen again,” he insisted. “We’re not animals, we can control ourselves. Ryan could be in trouble.”

Bucky sighed. “I’m coming with you,” he said resignedly, climbing out of the bed.

“I’d argue all the usual points with you, but it wouldn’t do any good, right?” Steve quipped, giving Bucky a half-smirk as he waited for him to finish dressing.

“Can it, punk.”

“Come on,” Steve urged as the earthquake-like shaking resumed, more forcefully this time.

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“Sir, there is another situation back at the Tower,” JARVIS informed Tony, causing him to jerk back to full wakefulness from the light doze he’d managed in the chair beside Bruce’s bed.

“Good god, what now?” Tony griped, rubbing his forehead with his hand. Bruce still slept on peacefully, having awoken earlier for a few minutes only to fall catatonic again.

“Miss Green’s heat appears to have ended, and Ms. Romanoff and Mr. Barton have cornered her in the common room,” the AI stated. “The internal cameras were destroyed in the earlier fight; I have no direct view of the scene.”

Tony swore profusely, pressing a code into the band on his wrist. “Keep the others away, no one else gets involved! Monitor Bruce until I get back,” he ordered, rushing out of the room as pieces of his armor flew to him.

“Mr. Rogers and Mr. Barnes are preparing to investigate,” JARVIS updated. “Shall I bar their access to the common room?”

“YES, god, don’t let them anywhere near Ryan,” Tony shot back, already taking off back towards the Tower. “Lock the doors from the outside, but let Clint and Nat get wherever they need to.”

“Yes, sir.”

How could two professional spies be so monumentally stupid?! Tony fumed internally. Beneath his near-panic, though, a smaller voice pleaded with the universe for it to be all a misunderstanding. Otherwise, he didn’t know if his friends would make it out alive.

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Steve jabbed at the button of the elevator twice, three times to no avail before giving up and rushing over to the stairs, Bucky following right behind. It was ten stories up to the common room and another five to Ryan’s, but he was barely breathing hard when seven floors up, the ground beginning to shake again. It was lasting much longer this time. He met Bucky’s eyes for a moment, and they doubled their speed.
Steve would have rushed right past the common room if it weren’t for Bucky grabbing his arm as they passed the door, yanking him to a halt. “I think she’s in there, her scent is fresh,” Bucky noted over the low rumbling of the Tower as he reached for the door handle.

Steve sniffed, paying closer attention, and there it was: wildflowers in a sunny field mixed with the petrichor of a spring rain. Still incredible, but not nearly as potent as earlier. “Could her heat have finished so quickly?” he wondered aloud.

Bucky pushed on the door, only to find it stuck fast. He jiggled the handle again, shoving it forward a few times, but with no success. “What the hell? This doesn’t even have a lock!”

Suddenly, they heard Ryan yell, her voice muffled but clearly distressed on the other side. Steve’s protective instincts reared, and he pushed Bucky out of the way to ram the door with all his strength. The door held steadfast, but the wood around the hinges splintered, raining small chips down into Steve’s hair.

“Hang on- together,” Bucky commanded, lining up his shoulder next to Steve’s. A moment later, the wood gave way with an almighty crack, and they pushed over the door to see Natasha and Clint standing with their backs to them, caging in a glowing Ryan on the other side of the room.

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Ryan didn’t register the tears falling down her face after she saw Clint’s memory of her from all those months ago. “Y-you’ve thought, all this time… that I w-would ever… because I’m unpresented?” she cried out. The entire Tower was trembling now, mimicking the motion of the chaotic mass of hurt, anger, and betrayal erupting within Ryan’s chest.

“Enough games, Ryan. Come quietly and no one needs to get hurt,” Natasha stated, her voice and face unyielding. It was her job to control the situation and protect Clint, even when the odds were as astronomically against her as they were.

Ryan shook her head slowly, lowering her hands back to her sides as the tear tracks dried on her skin. “I’ve done nothing wrong, and I’m not going anywhere with you,” she said deliberately, her voice raising by the end in renewed anger. Abruptly, a loud crashing came from behind Nat and Clint, and a few seconds later the door to the common room smashed to pieces, Bucky and Steve appearing on the other side. Surprise and confusion bloomed on each of their faces as they took in the scene.

“Ryan? Guys? What’s going on?” Steve asked, cautiously making to enter the room.

“Stay back!” Ryan snarled, the brightness around her hands and in her eyes flaring again. What little was left of the windows burst to pieces, raining down to the city below. Natasha growled low, sidestepping in front of Clint defensively.

“Whoa, hey! It’s okay, no one’s going to hurt you,” Bucky reassured, raising his hands in a pacifying gesture.

“Shut up, Bucky,” Ryan snapped coldly. “Your secret’s out, you can drop the act.” The windy air still gusting died down for a moment, and Steve caught the harsh, burning scent of her anger before it slipped away again. “You know, it all makes sense now,” she continued. “What better way to unearth my supposed evil schemes than to kill me with kindness? You sick, disgusting bastards.”

“Ryan, we don’t know what you’re talking about,” Steve plead, shocked at the harsh words he never would have imagined coming from his normally amiable friend.
Ryan let out a short, disbelieving laugh. “Sure you don’t,” she barked. “Try to keep your cover all you like. I won’t fall for it again.”

“We’d never lie to you, doll,” Bucky implored, very slowly taking a step forward. “Come on, what’s this all about?”

Ryan studied him a moment, seeing nothing contradictory to his words on his face or in his head. *He’s just like the others, they both are,* her mind supplied. *It’s his job to lie.* “Apparently, it’s all about the fact that I’m unpresented,” she spat out. “I don’t roll over and beg for an Alpha or rape helpless Omegas, so I must be the freak.”

Ryan’s words stung deep within Steve, the guilt over his earlier actions he’d forced into silence for the time being rising again to the surface. “I’m sorry, Ryan, I- there’s no excuse for what I did,” he professed, shame coloring his cheeks.

“Yeah, right. You’re all the same,” Ryan said, shaking her head in anger. “You pretend, you lie, you make me think I’m your friend, and for what? To try and unearth my dastardly plots?” she rounded off sarcastically.

“Plots? Ryan, no one thinks you’re plotting anything!” Bucky exclaimed incredulously. “Clint, Nat, tell her!”

Both of them remained stonily silent, never taking their eyes off Ryan. The wind still howled outside.

“Look, let’s just all calm down,” Steve asserted authoritatively, stepping fully into the room at last.

“Screw you, Steve. I’m leaving. Don’t try to follow me,” Ryan said icily.

“We can’t let you do that,” Clint interjected, still partially shielded by his Alpha. A loud rushing sound was building outside, and the room was suddenly lit with glowing spotlights as Tony flew in from the windows, landing between Ryan and Natasha.

“Stand down, Ryan,” he ordered, his voice sounding mechanical through the helmet as he raised his right hand to aim its repulsor at her.

“Tony, stop!” Steve yelled, rushing over across the room with Bucky on his heels. Before they made it to Ryan, Natasha drew another gun and aimed it at Bucky, halting him and Steve in their tracks. At the same time, Clint drew one of his own, pointing at Ryan along with Tony.

“Back off,” she warned, finger firmly on the trigger. “SHIELD will be here any minute, and this will all be explained.”

Ryan, meanwhile, was glaring daggers at Tony, investigating every thought that crossed his mind. “Your paranoia is astounding,” she remarked. The light on Tony’s palm grew brighter as she started to laugh. “All this time, you thought I was controlling all of you? Your memories, your thoughts, your every movement? You’re insane,” she chuckled, feeling her emotions starting to slip out of her conscious control. The glow in her hands and eyes never faded.

“If that’s so, then just come quietly, if you’re actually innocent,” Tony stated, not shifting an inch from his stance.

Ryan continued to laugh, the sound echoing off the walls and chilling the room more than the cold outside. “Oh, Tony,” she choked out between giggles. “If I was controlling you, you’d know.” Her laughter died down then, and all trace of humor left her face. “You’d deserve it,” she muttered.
quietly, as if to herself.

Clint tensed, taking an automatic half-step to better his aim on Ryan’s head. “Last chance, Ryan,” he warned. “Stand down now, or this will have to get ugly.”

Ryan met his gaze again at last. “You want to make me your villain? Fine. But I refuse to play the part,” she decreed, her voice as dead as her eyes. “I will never use my powers to hurt anyone again. But I’m not coming with you, either.”

Chapter End Notes

I have so much work to do that I wrote this instead. Kill me.
As Ryan finished her declaration, she took full stock of her surroundings as quickly as she could. There were five superheroes, a sea of dagger-sharp glass, overturned couches and an upended table in the path to the stairwell, her only chance of escape. *Only got one shot.*

“Ryan, please!” Steve begged, still held fast by Natasha’s gun trained on Bucky. “We can still sort this out. Tony, she’s not a threat, she’s our friend!”

“She’s brainwashed you, Cap,” Tony intoned automatically, not fully believing the words even as they escaped his mouth. Regardless, Ryan had to be contained. “She almost got you and Bruce killed, and we’re not letting her get away with it.”

His vindication caused something in Ryan to snap. Letting out a furious cry, she viciously flung her right arm in a wide arc, causing the table to her left to launch rapidly at Tony. She dropped and rolled forward instinctively as it was blasted apart by a repulsor blast, causing both woody shards and the shot from Clint’s gun to soar over her head.

From her crouch on the ground, she thrust out both glowing hands forcefully, and Nat and Clint were jerked back violently to crash hard and droop to the floor against the far wall. She sprang up to keep running when suddenly another high-pitched whine boomed, and she was thrust into the wall from the side. Ryan screamed in agony as she fell, the pain scorching along her right ribcage like all the burning sensations of her heat condensed into a searing point.

Steve had automatically pulled Bucky behind him to shield him from the flying debris when the chaos began. Bucky just as quickly had pushed Steve off to try and run fully into the scene. With Clint and Natasha shoved away, he and Steve both had a perfect view of Tony blasting Ryan with a repulsor beam.

Time froze. Bucky saw Ryan as if in slow motion, her excruciated cry shredding his insides with jagged spikes. When she hit the ground, conscious thought was gone, replaced with fierce protectiveness and the cold fury of the Asset. Everything zoomed into fast forward, and Bucky found himself snarling ferociously as he rushed at Tony.

Steve’s mind went blank, all emotion silenced as he watched Ryan collapse. In that moment, he was powerless to stop it, to save her. A thunderous roar erupted from his chest as his every instinct to fight, to save, to defend what was *his* flooded through him. He was on top of Tony in an instant.

Bucky propelled Tony backwards with a powerful kick to the chest, Steve’s downward punch forcing him to his knees. Tony stumbled down, then aimed another repulsor blast directly at Steve, missing as Steve wrenched his arm to the side. Bucky punched the stomach of his armor with his metal hand, denting the armor as Tony swung around to aim at him instead. Steve punched his right shoulder, knocking him off balance again as Bucky suddenly grabbed Tony by the neck, yanking him up and swinging him around in a chokehold. Steve pinned Tony to the wall, powerful arms holding back his hands. Bucky’s left hand smashed its way through Tony’s chest plate, and he grabbed the arc reactor in a crushing grip, loosing a feral yell as sparks flew around them.

Ryan was clutching her side, the pain almost unbearable, when the sounds emanating from Steve and Bucky flooded her with adrenaline-laced fear. Looking up, she saw them descend on Tony,
incapacitating him in perfect coordination. Seizing her chance, she struggled to her feet and made her way as quickly as she could to the doorway, breath coming in short gasps as she stumbled across.

Her left hand was clamped across her torso, her right on the railing for balance as she hurried down the stairs to the ground floor. The pain had momentarily disappeared with the adrenaline rush, but she couldn’t stop to truly assess the damage until she had escaped. Seven floors back down to ground level, through the spare garage full of cardboard boxes and abandoned tools, and out the high-security door to freedom. When Ryan at last reached the exit, it was barred tight, but it only took a moment of concentration for her to blast it outwards in a flash of blue light. She took off into the night, footsteps echoing hollowly in the still, wintry silence. The lightest of flurries began to fall.

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Clint groaned softly, pushing back the dizziness swirling about his head from after he blacked out. Sounds of a fight had roused him, and he blinked a few times to clear his vision as he looked back up across the room. He jumped to his feet, fighting off vertigo as he rushed back to the melee, seeing Bucky and Steve holding Tony down. “Get off him!” Clint shouted, stooping as he ran to retrieve his lost gun.

Bucky was about to fully rip out the arc reactor when he heard Clint’s exclamation. The familiar voice grounded him somewhat, and he stopped trying to crush the machine, breathing hard and stepping back. Steve seemed to have a similar reaction, releasing Tony and glaring down as he slumped to the floor.

Clint kept the gun trained on Steve and Bucky as they calmed down, their scents matching odors of raging fury and fierce protectiveness. “What happened? Where’s Ryan?” Clint demanded.

Steve and Bucky turned as one to where they’d seen Ryan fall, only to find her gone. “She got away,” Bucky breathed, a half-smirk briefly crossing his face.

“Goddammit,” Clint swore, backing up without turning away from the two in order to nudge Natasha. She awoke immediately, taking in the scene in a second. Tony was standing back up, releasing his mask to reveal a pained expression.

Suddenly, there was a thundering noise on the roof above, and moments later a small army in combat gear arrived on the scene, pouring out the door to the stairwell with guns raised. Steve shielded Bucky again as Natasha stood up authoritatively, striding confidently back to the middle of the room. Coulson himself entered last, bulletproof vest on over a white dress shirt with sleeves rolled back.

“You’re too late. She’s gone,” Natasha stated bluntly. Coulson’s lips tightened to a thin line.

“Friends? What in the name of Valhalla is happening?” Thor interjected, appearing in pajamas and slippers behind Coulson with Jane at his tail. Both looked perplexed as they took in the SHIELD agents, Coulson, and burn marks on the walls from Tony.

“Nothing, if you don’t count Stark, Barton and Romanoff trying to murder Ryan,” Bucky spat out, his ire still not fully extinguished. Jane’s eyes widened, her hand clapping across her mouth. Thor looked equally stunned.

“Enough, Sergeant Barnes,” Coulson replied curtly. “Search the adjacent blocks, but don’t raise any alarms. Do not engage, trail only and call for backup,” he ordered to the surrounding men, all of them filing back to the staircase and disappearing from view.
“Coulson, I don’t know what the others have told you, but Ryan has done nothing wrong. She only attacked with her powers just now because she was cornered,” Steve asserted, towering over the smaller Beta as he approached.

“I’m sorry, Captain, but SHIELD will be the judge of that,” Coulson replied, no longer intimidated by any superhero, even his childhood idol. “And we’re going to need to bring all of the Avengers in as well.”

“What for?” Bucky protested, already itching to get away from the agents to start searching out Ryan. She was hurt, scared, alone, outside in sub-freezing temperatures; he knew far too well what that was like. He wouldn’t let what happened to him happen to her.

“To figure out whether or not Ryan was controlling any of you,” Coulson said simply.

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Ryan had managed to make it five blocks away when the throbbing in her side forced her to a halt, nausea building in her stomach as she tried not to retch from the pain. Leaning against the brick wall of a corner bodega, the cold felt simultaneously painful and soothing to the wound. She tenderly lifted up her shirt, noticing for the first time the dark, chilling wetness of blood staining her hands. "Shit,” she exhaled raggedly. The orange light of a streetlamp discolored the seeping wound, but she saw blood trailing down her side, felt the bone-deep pain of severe burns around the edges. Her arms were stinging as well; feeling along her forearms, she uncovered a few shards of glass embedded from rolling and landing on the floor, though thankfully none seemed wedged in too deep. Those would heal without aid, but she would need help for the other damage as soon as possible.

Pressing her hands to her side to staunch the blood flow again, she kept moving, able to reach a brisk walk. She was shivering violently, her denim and cotton attire only thin shields against the biting December air. Simple breathing was beginning to burn in her lungs, each inhale paining her side further. Her mind whirled, and she couldn’t quite focus anymore to figure out where to go or what to do next. Walking aimlessly away from the Tower through various alleyways, she only made it about a mile before stumbling to the ground, complete, cell-deep exhaustion sweeping over her in endless waves. She wasn’t shivering anymore, her hands and feet almost entirely numb. Collapsing against the side of a dumpster that barely shielded her from the wind, Ryan promptly passed out.

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“We have to go with them; we can’t fight them all,” Steve muttered, his voice low enough only for Bucky to hear. They were sitting against the wall in the wreck of the common room, surrounded by more armed agents as they waited for the rest of the Avengers to arrive. Natasha, Clint and Tony were talking quietly with Coulson across the room, but Steve and Bucky were under guard by Coulson’s orders after the fight. Steve knew they thought their actions were because Ryan had them under her spell, but it didn’t change the fact he was ready to bust them both out now, consequences be damned. The only thing keeping him cautious was his need to keep Bucky and Ryan safe; going after her would put them all in danger right now. Leading SHIELD to Ryan by accident was unthinkable, and leaving Bucky alone with them under lock and key was too.

“You saw what Stark did! Ryan will die if she doesn’t get help!” Bucky hissed back through his teeth, baring them at his Alpha.

“What do you want me to do, Buck?! This will never end if we don’t prove her innocence. She’s smart and capable, we have to trust she’ll be fine,” Steve shot back, despite intense worry roiling in his stomach and souring his scent.
“If she dies out there alone, I will end them,” Bucky replied chillingly, his voice cold as ice. “I will rip out their throats with my teeth.”

Steve reached his arm around his mate, pulling Bucky’s head in to his neck to make his Beta scent him. “That’s not you talking, Buck,” he murmured, forcing his own emotions down in order to calm them both. “That’s the Winter Soldier.”

“Maybe he’s what we need right now,” Bucky growled, even as the fight slowly leaked out of his tone and posture. Steve smelled like warm cinnamon and safety, and with his Alpha holding him he began to settle down.

“If either of us disappears right now, they’ll never trust Ryan again,” Steve reasoned. “I’m just as worried as you, but we have to play by the rules for now. She survived on her own for 14 years. She’s our best girl, she will be fine,” he reassured, trying to convince Bucky and himself at the same time. Bucky slung an arm around Steve's waist in response, and they silently awaited judgment.

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“Hey, can you hear me?” a rough, deep voice uttered, shaking Ryan’s shoulder. The sound echoed far away in her ears, unable to fully rouse her to wakefulness. A tiny part of her brain registered a potential threat, and she gasped sharply as the partial alertness brought back the stabbing pain in her torso.

“G-get away,” Ryan slurred weakly, unable to even open her eyes, much less recognize the man’s voice.

“Ryan?” He sounded astonished. “Hold on, I’m going to get you help,” he said firmly, carefully lifting her into his arms.

“Nn-“ Ryan moaned as the shift pulled at the wound in her side. “Le’m go,” she croaked, raising one hand to push feebly at the man’s shoulder. She managed to barely crack open an eye, but her vision swam around in the light of early morning. A small drop of freezing wetness landed on her cheek, matching the collection gathering in her hair.

“Don't worry. I’ll keep you safe,” the man reassured, his low voice urgent but not unkind. He stood up, carrying Ryan bridal-style down the alleyway to locations unknown.

“Who’re-?”

“It’s me, Matt. Matt Murdock.”

Chapter End Notes

Heyyy... sorry this is a shorter update, but it felt natural to end where it did. This marks the conclusion of sort of "Act One" of the story: introductions, set up the plot, rising conflict, etc. The story will be in three of these "acts", I'm thinking.

Also, if you've watched the Civil War trailer (and who hasn't by now?) you'll be able to tell that the fight choreography between Tony and Steve/Bucky was shamelessly stolen from it, minus the shield passing cause silly Stevie forgot to bring it up with him here. Sorry not sorry. That fight was amazing.
Also, I am IN LOVE with Marvel's Daredevil, so I'm super pumped that Matty found his way into the story for real this time. I hope you all enjoy it!!
Sam had been kept entirely out of the loop for the past fifteen hours, and it was getting old really fast.

There he'd been, minding his own business, hanging Christmas lights in the common room, when a bulb went out in the strand and the whole string went dark. “Of course they’re not wired in parallel, that would be ridiculous,” he’d muttered to himself, digging through the closet down the hall for a spare. Then, not five minutes later, he’d screwed the new bulb in, the strand had lit up in pure holiday joy, and JARVIS had set the Tower on red alert and ordered him to an emergency bunker.

Naturally, when he questioned why, he’d been told it was classified, and he’d got no further info since. Clint apparently didn’t know a thing either, Sam discovered, finding him wandering about the underground maze. They’d talked, they’d waited, and Sam had finally peaced out and crashed in a random bedroom, only to be awoken not four hours later by JARVIS squawking overhead again, something about an emergency meeting back upstairs.

Screw that. Short of an alien invasion, he was getting those damn lights hung, then he was going to bed.

Or, that was the plan, until he exited the elevator to find the common room destroyed, a riot squad holding Steve and Bucky captive, and SHIELD Director Phil Coulson calling the shots.

“Alright, that’s it,” he called over the din, and the room went quiet. "What in the actual hell is going on?” Looking around, he noted that Bruce was the only one missing - oh, and Ryan. “No one’s told me anything all day and all night, and it’s about time some answers start coming in.”

“Mr. Wilson,” Coulson called out. “There’s been an incident. Everyone will be fully debriefed on the way to SHIELD headquarters.”

“Yeah, no. Right now would be fantastic, cause apparently you’ve got Cap and Buck under arrest, the Tower looks like a war zone, and my Santa got ruined,” Sam held forth, gesturing pointedly the wreck of the entertainment center, where the once-jolly cardboard cutout lay trampled.

“Relax, Sam, we’ll tell you everything,” Clint snapped from next to the stairwell, arms crossed and face sour. Darcy was wrapped tightly around Natasha next to him, but he seemed too angry to join them. “We’re just waiting for Tony to get back with Bruce.”

“What about Ryan?” Sam asked. “And why wasn’t Bruce downstairs with the rest of us? Where did he go?”

“Question of the hour, right there,” Tony remarked shortly, zooming in through the shattered windows and taking off the suit helmet. “Bruce is gone. Security and cameras were disabled so JARVIS has nothing, I have no idea where he went.” He strode over to Pepper, who took his metal-encased hand.

Coulson sighed. “If Ryan has the Hulk, we need to move fast. What’s the chance he left of his own volition?”

“He was still recovering from the sedation, only Pepper and I knew where the safe house was.
Doesn’t mean Ryan didn’t get it from us, though.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Sam interjected, barely comprehending their words. “What, you think Ryan kidnapped Bruce? You hear yourselves right now?”

“It appears that Ryan might not have been all that she seemed, my friend,” Thor responded. He and Jane were huddled together against the cold, both in their pajamas. Jane looked like she had been crying.

“Not all she - can someone please give me a straight answer?” Sam looked to Steve, angling through the black-clad agents encasing him and Bucky against the wall to meet his eyes, then almost wished he hadn’t. Steve hadn’t looked like that since he’d led Sam on the frantic search across the world, eyes growing darker every night his mate stayed gone. Sam caught Bucky’s expression next, then quickly looked away. It reminded him too much of a certain bridge in D.C., back before the machine remembered being a man.

“Right now, we all need to get back to SHIELD,” Coulson instructed, signaling the agents. They dragged Steve and Bucky up, and Sam noticed a silver cuff around Steve’s left wrist, matching one on Bucky’s right.

“Shock bands? Seriously?” Sam frowned at Coulson. “Scared of a couple nonagenarians?”

“We appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Wilson,” Coulson replied, sarcasm coloring the undertone. “If you’ll please follow me to the Bus?”

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“I can’t believe Ryan would do all this,” Darcy repeated, her head in her hands. She, Clint and Natasha were all sitting on a couch together on the giant SHIELD plane, Natasha’s hand stroking her hair and Clint’s arm around her hunched shoulders. Both of them had just finished explaining everything about the past few months to Darcy and the rest. They were still two hours away from wherever it was they were headed, but Darcy couldn’t calm down to sleep, even with her Alpha and Beta finally back with her.

“We’re sorry we couldn’t tell you earlier,” Natasha said quietly. “We needed her to think she’d taken us all in.”

“But how could you just- just let me be her friend?!” Darcy proclaimed, rising quickly off the couch to look back at them. Her sudden distress soured her normally saccharine scent. “What, were you just like ‘Oh, we’ll let our Omega that we supposedly love just as much as each other be around a dangerous supervillain all the time and not tell her, won’t that be fun?!’”

“Darcy!” Natasha growled, standing up and grabbing her Omega’s shoulders, shaking her gently as she projected dominance and protectiveness. “We would never put you in harm’s way like that.”

“Yeah, right, except you did!” Darcy yelled, shoving Natasha away and ignoring her calming scent. “I was up there taking care of her during her heat! What if I’d been the one in the elevator instead of Jane, huh? Speaking of Jane, how could you put all of us in danger like that?”

“We never thought you’d be a target!” Clint shouted, his frustration flaring again. His scent smelled more like ashen wood smoke than pine trees now, tainted with his burning anger. “You’re not an
Avenger, you have no knowledge she’d want, there’s no reason you’d be in danger!"

“Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot I’m just some nobody, never mind!” Darcy screamed back at him. “I’m just some loser stray Omega you two picked up, I don’t have any spy skills or superpowers, I’m just the stupid useless sidekick!”

“DARCY!” Natasha thundered, Alpha voice in full force. Darcy’s mouth closed, though she was still glaring furiously at both of the others. “You are our mate. You come first and foremost before the Avengers, before any op, before anything. Never doubt that! No one else knew; we kept this a secret for yours and everyone’s safety.”

Darcy just shook her head, lips pursed into a scowl. “I don’t care what you say, that’s a shit excuse,” she spat out. “And no one else? Really?”

“Yes! Well, Tony knew,” Clint professed. “But we needed him, JARVIS had to-“

“Oh, you needed him. That’s fine, you obviously don’t need me!” Darcy retorted, throwing her hands up in the air.

“What do you want from us?! You want an apology? Well, sorry it’s our job to keep the world safe! Sorry we followed our instincts that have saved all of our lives a million times!” Clint raged, reaching the end of his metaphorical rope. “You’re right, you don’t have any superpowers, but neither do we! So excuse us for using our spy skills to save everyone’s asses!”

“Enough, Clint!” Natasha ordered. Clint felt his jaw snap shut, not entirely by his will, and his glare turned from Darcy to Natasha. “Darcy, no one saw Ryan’s plans coming, and we don’t even know if she meant to set off the Hulk. What happened to Jane is on us, and we’ll have to live with that.”

“You’re damn right it’s on you! Jane is my boss and my best friend, since way before either of you were in the picture, and she could’ve died! Some amazing spies you are, not even figuring out anything about Ryan for months while she lived literally two floors down!”

“We spent every day investigating her, it’s not like we just sat around and waited for something bad to happen!” Clint interjected again.

“We don’t know for sure how she was keeping her secrets or what her ultimate endgame was. We think she was causing us to forget,” Natasha added.

“Seriously? She was mind controlling you the whole time?!” Darcy fumed. “Yeah, none of us were in danger at all then, my bad! Were you just going to let her brainwash everyone? Why the hell didn’t you just stop her from the beginning?”

“We just told you, we didn’t have any proof! That’s what undercover ops are for, to get the proof we needed to take her down!” Clint yelled back.

“Oh, so naturally you thought the best way to get proof was to invite her to back to play video games? Get her a job with the Hulk? Let her live with us?!”

“How else were we suppose to watch her all the time?” Clint argued. “We sent out all the footage to SHIELD when we suspected she was controlling us, we did everything we could to try and put her away.”

“Yeah, well, it obviously wasn’t enough,” Darcy shot back. “I can’t do this anymore, I’m taking a walk,” she finished, storming away towards the front of the plane.
Natasha sighed deeply, her arms crossed over her chest. She loved Darcy and Clint with all of her heart, but three explosive tempers in a relationship like theirs was always a powder keg waiting for a spark. Especially when it came to her and Clint’s work; Darcy was their everything, but she could never really understand their obligation to the world as well.

“Well, that was just great,” Clint retorted sarcastically, flopping back down on the couch length-wise. “How does she still not get that we have to keep secrets in our jobs?”

“She had every right to be angry at us,” Natasha countered, staring aimlessly out the window behind him. “Mates aren’t supposed to keep things like this from each other.”


“I’m not sorry for keeping Darcy safe. But it’s also not that simple, and you know it.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Clint acknowledged petulantly. “I’m going to find something to eat.” He walked off in the opposite direction as Darcy, guilt gnawing at his stomach beneath his irritation.

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“Do you really believe Ryan could have been lying to us the whole time? That she was trying to, I don’t know, take down the Avengers from the inside?” Jane asked, her head leaning on Thor’s chest as they sat together. His scent was a bit different than Earth Alphas, like ozone and leather, and she’d always loved it. She and Thor were in a back corner of the plane, seeking out some quiet from the insanity that had begun when they had awakened to stomping boots on the stairs of the Tower.

“I don’t know. I would not have thought it possible of her.” Thor replied. “Surely someone as kind and genuine as she…?” He sighed. Since the betrayal of his brother Loki, he did not consider himself an authority on judging one’s true character anymore. “I don’t know,” he repeated.

“No, no, it doesn’t make sense,” Jane declared firmly, standing up and starting to pace back and forth. “She just didn’t have any reason!”

“Those who covet power scarcely have an abundance of reason,” Thor replied philosophically.

“No, sweetie, I meant she didn’t have a reason to act like she did,” Jane said impatiently. “Think about it. Her first interaction with the Avengers, she saves Bucky’s life. Ok, fine, maybe that’s to get our trust, make her way in. She meets with Steve and Bucky, wins them over. Even if she was controlling them from the get-go, later that night she goes out and saves another life! There was no way she could have known Clint was going to be around to witness it; they hadn’t met yet, he hadn’t made the plans to be out yet. Assuming she can’t see the future…” she trailed off.

Thor shook his head. “Ryan has many powerful abilities, but there is no indication she is also clairvoyant. If that were true, she would have known to avoid the confrontation with Natasha and Clint this night.”

“Yes, exactly! So she can’t see the future, but she still saved that Omega from being assaulted. What, she’s a psychopath that wants to take over the world but moonlights as a vigilante of justice?” Jane finished sarcastically. “Besides, we all met her at once the next day, and she was great! She moved in a few weeks later, and nothing weird happened that whole time. No one was acting out of the ordinary.”

“It was suggested that perhaps she was causing us to forget any unusual occurrences,” Thor reminded her.
“Ok, but that wouldn’t change video record. Tony said that all the surveillance of her was sent out to SHIELD recently for review, to make sure it was being seen by an independent source. There still wasn’t anything.”

“It is true, they had not received notice of any suspicious activities,” Thor agreed.

“And there’s no way her heat was faked like they said. I was there with her right from the start, that was 100% genuine. She was terrified, I could smell it on her. Although I have no idea how it could happen to someone so late,” Jane continued. “I mean, unpresented are that way from birth, but almost no one can scent kids because their hormones are completely undeveloped until later in puberty. No one could have known either way, so I guess maybe she’s just an anomaly?”

“It’s possible, yes. How would one find out if she was truly unpresented or no? That could prove strong evidence either for or against her,” Thor pointed out.

“I- I’m not sure,” Jane admitted. “I mean, theoretically, you’d just have to isolate a sample of her scent, right? To test if it’s synthetic? But I have no idea if that’s all we’d need to do, or even how to do that. I have no biochem experience.”

“Once Dr. Banner is located, he would be able to perform the necessary tasks.”

“Assuming we find him anytime soon. And Ryan, for that matter, to get a sample,” Jane replied, her pacing beginning to slow. “And you know what else? I’m pretty sure Clint and Natasha suspected her at first because Clint said she was unpresented. How is that fair?”

“There is certainly no shame in being unpresented, of course. Asgardians have believed that for centuries,” Thor affirmed. “However, continually lying to everyone does not inspire us to have confidence in Ryan.” He frowned, thinking back through all the time he had spent with Ryan in the Tower. “When I asked her about why she had not yet mated, she lied directly to me about her motives.”

“Only from one point of view,” Jane argued. “We all assumed she was a Beta the whole time, that’s on us. And there’s tons of prejudice out there against unpresented. She would have no way of knowing whether we would mistrust her for it.”

“Regardless, her dishonesty in the matter does not help her case. We were all her friends after a time; why should she continue to distrust us?”

Jane sighed heavily. “I don’t know. God, this is so messed up.”

Thor stood up, taking Jane’s hand and bringing it to his lips. “We will make it right, one way or another,” he vowed, reaching his other hand to cradle her face. “I suggest we await further evidence before deciding Ryan’s fate.”

“Evidence. I like that.”

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“Was locking up Steve and Bucky really necessary?”

“Hey, I was the one attacked by the brainwashed super soldiers, I think a little sympathy for my cause is in order,” Tony griped, fiddling with the tools he’d found in the on-board mechanical lab. The arc reactor didn’t appear to be damaged from Bucky’s actions, but it couldn’t hurt to check out the rest of the suit. As always, he was distracting himself with work to avoid thinking. Thinking about his problems, at least.
“You shot Ryan at point-blank range, you don’t get sympathy today,” Pepper maintained.

“Well, excuse me for trying to stop the supervillain. Next time, I’ll just-“

“Tony, you and I both know perfectly well there’s no solid evidence against Ryan. Everything Natasha and Clint said was circumstantial,” Pepper said, cutting him off. “I’m not blaming you for being cautious, but attacking her wasn’t the best move either.”

“Blame the Bond wannabees for that one, they were the idiots discussing their plans right out in the open for her to hear!” Tony shot back, twisting in a screw with unnecessary torque.

“Tony.” Pepper implored, gently taking his chin and turning his head to face her. His scent was mixed, the normal fresh-cut-grass tainted with the metallic tang of underlying worry. “If Ryan really was trying to destroy the Avengers, then we will find out. Don’t finish the job for her in the meantime.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tony answered, frowning angrily at his mate. Releasing his face, she folded her arms and looked down at him with a kinder expression.

“It means you throw yourself into everything 100%, and normally it’s a good thing,” she explained, her tone gentle despite the bluntness of the words. “But not everyone agrees with you about this, and it’ll tear the team apart if we go about this the wrong way. What’s happened has happened, and we can’t change it now. But can we please just make sure we get irrefutable proof before we convict Ryan completely?”

“That’s all I was ever trying to do,” Tony sighed, closing his eyes and wiping his hand across his face in frustration.

“And Steve and Bucky were just defending their friend, provided they weren’t actually brainwashed. Neither of you was wrong,” Pepper pointed out.

“Somehow, I don’t think they’ll see it that way,” Tony replied, laying down his tools tiredly.

“It’ll all work out. Come on, can we please get some sleep?” Pepper petitioned, tugging at Tony’s hand to bring him to his feet. “It’s going to be a long day.”

Chapter End Notes

I DIDN'T WRITE THIS INSTEAD OF DOING MY ASTRONOMY PROJECT WORTH LIKE 75% OF MY GRADE I HAVEN'T STARTED YET DUE ON TUESDAY
In Which There Is Entirely Too Much Insanity Before Breakfast

Chapter Notes

Hoo boy. Finals and grad school apps kicked my ass. It's also been 2 full weeks since I updated this, and I feel like the ultimate scrub. So sorry :( But on the bright side, Christmas is soon!!!

“Foggy! Karen! Wake up!”

Matt’s gruff tone carried through the living room, illuminated pink and white from glowing cherry blossoms through the window, into the dark bedroom where Foggy groaned softly into the silk navy sheets on the bed. Rolling over from his stomach to his side, he grabbed his cell phone and checked the time. Overly bright numbers blinded him for a moment, and he blinked to see 4:36 AM flashing on his retinas. He groaned again, dropping his hand back down and closing his eyes.

“Wha’ time ’s it?” Karen mumbled incoherently from Foggy’s right, her arm still slung across his waist. Her airy scent, like leaves in spring, wafted over Foggy as she shifted.

“Too early. Go back to sleep, I’ll see what Matt wants,” Foggy grunted, blinking blearily and pushing his hair behind his ears as he sat up.

“Foggy! Call Claire, now!” Matt yelled insistently, his voice closer to his somnolent mates than before.

Foggy shot out of bed, almost tripping over the blankets tangled around his foot as he tugged on his shirt and grabbed his cell phone off the bedside table again. He darted out to the living room to see Matt in the black mask and outfit, back turned as he laid a seemingly unconscious girl onto their couch. “What the hell, Matt? I thought you were dying!” Foggy breathed out, sagging against the doorframe. Matt's scent was no different than normal, gingersnaps and fresh air, but the girl's floral tone was distressed and weak.

“Not me. Her.” Matt moved aside, pulling off the black mask covering the top half of his face as he maneuvered deftly into the kitchen, pulling out a first aid kit from the cabinets. Foggy saw then the bloodstains along the girl’s side, the wan pallor of her skin, and thanked the universe for speed dial as he brought his phone up to his ear.

“Claire? It’s an emergency. No, not Matt, he found someone and brought her back to the apartment. I don’t know, a stab wound, maybe?”

“Two fractured ribs, second-degree burns, and some kind of entrance wound on the fourth intercostal space, right side. There’s no bullet, though. She’s hypothermic, internal temperature around 85 degrees Fahrenheit,” Matt listed off loudly as he ripped open the girl’s shirt to reveal a mass of dried blood atop scaling red skin, a jagged gash oozing fresh blood still.

“Holy shit,” Karen breathed, coming up behind Foggy in just an oversized t-shirt and tiny shorts. "Where did you find her?” She pushed past him to help Matt mop up the blood that was slowly spreading down the girl’s side onto the couch cushions as Foggy instructed them. Matt stood again, striding over to the bedroom and rifling through the closet a moment.
“She was in the alleyway across the street. I smelled the blood, it was everywhere before I covered it,” Matt explained.

“Okay, most important things are to stop the bleeding, keep everything clean, and get her warm,” Foggy dictated, kneeling down to pick up discarded wipes and throwing them in the garbage. “Shouldn’t you be, I don’t know, wearing gloves or something? Oh, Claire says to wear gloves.”

“I’m a little more concerned about keeping her from bleeding out right now, Foggy,” Karen stated bluntly. “How close is Claire?”

“Ten minutes. Matt, Claire wants to know how much blood she’s lost?”

“I can’t tell. She was running away before she passed out, I could smell the trail, but I have no idea how far she’d gone. She’d been unconscious for under a half hour when I’d found her.” Matt returned from the bedroom with a small stack of blankets and a heating pad. He wrapped them all over the girl’s legs and across her upper chest, leaving the wounded area untouched. The heating pad went between her legs pressed against her lower torso.

“How the hell do you know that?” Karen exclaimed, still holding a mass of crimson-stained gauze to the hole in the girl’s side. It wasn’t unusual for Matt to disappear on them in the middle of the night if something they could never hope to sense had awoken him. But he’d never brought anyone back to the apartment, much less an Omega girl who looked like she’d lost a fight with a cherry bomb.

“Educated guess. Hypothermia sets in faster with low blood sugar, and she’s lost blood and not eaten in hours. Take her lack of clothing into account, she’d be dead if it was much longer than that.” Matt never showed it outwardly, but his scent betrayed that he was slightly shaken. “She’s fresh off her heat too, only a few hours past; her body’s exhausted. Ryan’s lucky to be alive.”

“Wait, you know her? How?”

“Ok, ok, yeah. Thanks,” Foggy finished over their conversation, hanging up the phone and hurrying into the kitchen. Filling a mug with water, he set it in the microwave to heat and pulled out the jar of honey from its cabinet space. “Ok, if she wakes up before Claire gets here, we have her drink warm honey water and try to keep her calm,” he called back to his mates. “Look, Matty, I’m not saying this isn’t how I wanted to wake up this fine early Saturday morning, but why didn’t you bring her to the hospital? It’s literally four blocks away, and I think they’re more equipped to deal with this than we are.”

Matt’s response was cut off by a keening gasp from the girl, and the lamp beside the couch suddenly threw itself into the wall with a flash of blue light, the bulb shattering to pieces on the floor. The girl’s eyes were still shut, but her breathing was beginning to deepen slightly.

“The hell was that?” Karen demanded, looking between Matt and Foggy for an answer. Foggy looked shocked, but Matt was unfazed.

“Remember a few months back, I mentioned I met a girl with abilities?” Matt reminded them.

“I thought you meant like you! Not- not throwing our furniture around in her sleep!” Karen replied, her scent mirroring her voice’s unease.

“Ryan’s not dangerous to us. She saved two girls’ lives and never once lied to me when I questioned her,” Matt stated firmly. “That’s why I brought her here. I have no idea what caused her injuries, or what she was running from either. I can keep you two safe, but not an entire hospital.”

“Ok, let’s just pause a minute,” Foggy interjected, coming back to the living room with the mug and
sitting on the coffee table. “Matt, can you start at the beginning, please?”

“It was six months ago, just before Fisk went public. I was tracking down the last of the Russians after Vladimir died, looking for more intel. I was down at the docks when I heard screaming. Five Alphas had two Omegas cornered, the remnants of the trafficking ring, I think. I got two down, but one pulled a gun on the Omegas. I heard someone new coming up behind me when suddenly the one with the gun collapsed and the other two flew into the walls. I didn’t know what was happening, and I attacked on instinct. Ryan held me back like it was nothing.”

“For real?” Karen sounded both alarmed and impressed.

“Yeah. I was frozen in place, couldn’t move my arms or legs at all. She said her name was Ryan, and that she was just trying to help. The Omegas ran off, and we talked.”

A knock at the door interrupted the story. Foggy hurried to let Claire in, who toted a big black bag along with her to the living room.

“Jesus,” Claire breathed as she crouched next to the couch, assessing Ryan’s injuries as she snapped on gloves. “Get out the suture kit,” she ordered to Foggy as she checked Ryan’s pulse and shone a light into her pupils, raising each eyelid. “Has she been unresponsive the whole time?”

“No, she woke up for a few seconds when I first found her,” Matt answered. “She said to let her go, tried to push me away.”

“Good,” Claire said absently, listening with a stethoscope beneath the blankets. She discarded the stethoscope and peeled away the reddened mass of gauze from where Karen had been pressing into the girl’s side. “Bleeding’s mostly stopped, but I can’t stitch through these burns.” Claire dug through the suture kit and grabbed the butterfly closure tape. “What the hell happened to her?”

“All I know is she’s running from someone,” Matt replied somberly.

“She should run faster next time,” Claire sighed. “Lift up her torso, I need to wrap this gauze around her.” Claire finished slathering on antibiotic ointment, and Matt reached in to lift Ryan around the middle.

Matt heard Ryan’s heart rate jump, could practically taste the spiking fear from her scent just before he was flung bodily across the room to crash into the armchair.

“Matt!” Foggy and Karen yelled simultaneously, both rushing over.


“Wh-wha?” Ryan faltered, her voice weak and wavering.

“Ryan? Hi, my name’s Claire and I’m a nurse. You were injured and hypothermic, but you’re safe now and I’m taking care of you. Can you tell me your last name, please?” Claire interrupted, switching to perfect bedside manner in a second despite widened eyes and a slightly shocked look.

Ryan didn’t respond right away, struggling to keep her eyes open. She blinked heavily a few times, a pretty Latina face swimming through her vision as a scent like ocean waves filled her nose. Her brain was stuck fast in a quagmire of sleepy confusion. “’M cold,” she realized vaguely, her fingers and toes pricking like needles. A shiver ran through her, and she gasped sharply at the pain that tore through her side at the movement. The door to the bedroom slammed shut of its own accord, making Foggy and Karen jump.
“Ryan, I need to finish wrapping this wound, ok? Matt needs to lift you up so I can reach. Don’t move, just let him pick you up, alright?” Claire instructed, waving Matt back over.

Ryan gritted her teeth and held back a cry of pain as they finished ministering to her injury, the throbbing clearing her head of the foggy confusion as she fully awoke for the first time. “I need to get out of here,” was the first coherent phrase she could manage as Matt laid her back down.

“You’re not going anywhere, you need to rest and let yourself heal,” Claire ordered as she stripped off the gloves and handed Ryan the now-lukewarm mug of honeyed water. “You have second-degree burns, two rib fractures and hypothermia. Two weeks of bedrest, minimum.”

“You don’t understand, I’m putting all of you in danger,” Ryan replied sharply. The mug felt almost painfully warm against her fingertips, but the pervasive cold where there had been heat just hours before was starting to leach away.

“Ryan, you need to let us help you. Whatever it is, we’ll keep you safe,” Matt promised.

“Matt? Can Karen and I talk to you for a minute?” Foggy piped up for the first time since Claire arrived. The three of them retreated into the bedroom, closing the door behind them. “Matt, we just finished bringing down Fisk’s empire, and now you want to potentially rain another unknown evil entity down on our asses?” he hissed.

“Foggy, wait. She obviously needs help, and Matt already vouched for her. Plus, she looks familiar, for some reason,” Karen argued quietly, crossing her arms at her Alpha. His cedar musk was permeated with concern, not only for the half-dead girl on their couch but for the safety of his mates as well, and Karen knew she had to be the voice of reason. “Matt, please, finish the story.”

“I asked her who she was, about her powers, where she came from, what she wanted. She answered everything truthfully,” Matt asserted.

“Ok, fine, but why did you tell her who you were?! It’s supposed to be a secret identity for a reason!” Foggy whisper-shouted.

“If you’d like to stop muttering about me behind my back, I’ll tell you my story myself,” Ryan yelled from the other room. The walls weren’t thick, and it didn’t take a genius to figure out what they were talking about.

Opening the door again, Foggy stepped back out to see the girl sitting propped up slightly against the arm of the couch, her entire body now swathed in blankets. She was slowly eating a protein bar that Foggy assumed Claire had given her. Claire was washing her hands at the kitchen sink. “I’m sorry, but we’re… cautious, by necessity, what with our line of work,” Foggy conveyed cagily.

“Good. You shouldn’t trust me, I’m apparently nothing but trouble,” Ryan spat out. “So you can sit here and listen to my life story and put all of your lives in danger, or you can let me get out of here and never have to see me again.”

“Ryan,” Matt said shortly. “You go back out in the cold alone with your injuries, and you won’t last a day. Not if whoever did this to you is still after you. And I’ve got questions myself, so you’re staying here. For now.”

“Everyone, please,” Karen cut in, stepping between Foggy and Matt and the couch where Ryan lay, reaching her hands out in a placating gesture. “Ryan, this is Foggy, and I’m Karen,” she introduced, gesturing at Foggy, who was standing with his arms crossed looking uncharacteristically stern. “You already know Matt and Claire. Now, you’re free to leave if you want, of course. But please,” she
continued, kneeling down beside the couch. “If you’re in trouble, we can help you.”

“Oh, the last people who told me that are the ones that did this to me. So forgive me if I’m skeptical,” Ryan scoffed, her harsh tone not completely masking the hurt beneath it.

“Who was it that hurt you?” Karen asked. “We can call the police and—”

“Yeah, no, you can’t. Wouldn’t do a damn thing,” Ryan replied, looking out the windows to the right instead of meeting Karen’s gaze.

“We have contacts on the force, and they arrested all the dirty cops months ago. We know who to trust,” Karen cajoled. “If you know who did this to you, then we can get them put away and you’ll be safe.”

Ryan stayed silent a moment longer, her eyes far away. “It’s SHIELD that’s after me. Tony Stark shot me with his Iron Man suit. Still think you can go up against them?”

Everyone was silent then. Ryan chewed quietly as she looked to Matt, who was looking towards Foggy. Foggy met Matt’s gaze, then looked to Ryan with more sympathy this time. “I think we all know a little better than to trust the supposed good guys at face value nowadays,” he sighed. He sat down on the coffee table and smiled kindly at Ryan. “Why don’t you start from the beginning.”

Ryan looked back at him for a moment, then dropped her eyes. “My name is Ryan Green. I came to the city over a year ago now from Boston. That was probably my first mistake.”


“No. I was trying to come to terms with my parents’ deaths.” Ryan’s voice was low but steady as she looked down into the empty mug in her hands. “They died in the Towers. As soon as I could, I ran away from the city, but it was haunting me. I decided to try and face it, move on.”

“I’m so sorry,” Foggy said simply. Somehow, coming from him, it didn’t seem like a platitude.

“Thanks,” Ryan replied automatically. “All I’ve got is a high school diploma, so I’ve never had any money. I lived on the streets, worked minimum wage at the Columbus Library. Not much happened for a while, but I saved a few girls from shithead Alphas—sorry, if any of you are Alphas, I haven’t figured it out yet,” she continued, waving around a hand aimlessly in their general direction.

“Wait, you don’t— you can’t scent? For how long?” Claire came back from where she’d been standing in the kitchen, looking concerned.

“If by scent you mean smell people and apparently figure out their presentations, then never.” Ryan looked up again; Foggy, Karen and Claire all looked stunned, but Matt’s face didn’t change from its unexpressive but not unfriendly stare. “Except I’ve been smelling weird things all the time ever since… shit, was it just yesterday?” Ryan trailed off, a look of weariness crossing her face.

“Oh, um, we’ll deal with that later. Please, continue,” Foggy said politely.

“I met Matt back in June sometime. He was beating up some Alphas, I helped. We talked, and that was that.”

“Matt, why did you tell her who you were then?” Karen asked again, looking over her shoulder to Matt behind her.

“He didn’t. I can read minds,” Ryan inserted. They’d already seen her superpowers; there was no
point in hiding anything. “Relax, I’m not doing it now,” she snapped, as looks of surprise tinged with fear crossed Foggy, Karen, and Claire’s faces. “I can move stuff, read minds, and control people, okay? And I’m a decent fighter too, apparently.”

Foggy sighed heavily, running one hand through his long, dirty-blond hair. He wasn’t liking where the story was going, but it was too late to stop now. “Okay, so you read Matt’s mind when you first met him, found out his secret identity, and then…?”

“Look, I didn’t mean to, okay? The mind reading comes on automatically when I use the other ones; I don’t know why and sometimes I can’t entirely block it out. But there were five guys up against one, and I did what I had to.”

“It’s alright,” Karen soothed, smiling at Ryan gently. “No one’s upset that you helped Matt and those girls. What happened next?”

Ryan sighed through her nose, looking back down at her hands again. They were almost warm now, but the steadily beating pain in her side wasn’t decreasing. “I answered Matt’s questions, and then we both left, and I never saw him again until now. I stayed around Hell’s Kitchen mostly, though, cause it was close to work, and no one looks at another homeless girl sleeping outside around here.”

“Why didn’t you look for help? There’s housing assistance and-” Karen started, but Ryan cut her off again.

“Cause I’ve got superpowers, okay? I’ve got more than most people could ever dream of, I’m not taking away resources from people in actual need!” Ryan’s voice rose a bit then, as she tightened her grip on the mug in her hands. “Can I just finish the story, please?”

“Sorry,” Karen apologized.

“No, I-“ Ryan sighed, closing her eyes a moment. “I’m sorry. You all probably saved my life, and I’m grateful. I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“I think you’ve got a decent excuse,” Karen responded, smiling a little. “You were staying here in Hell’s Kitchen?”

“Yeah, until the robot attacks in Soho a few months ago. I, uh, I saved the Winter Soldier from one, and the Avengers took me in a few weeks later.” Ryan couldn’t bring herself to say Bucky’s name aloud. A different kind of hurt was coursing through her veins now, somehow more painful than the gaping hole in her side surrounded by blistering burns.

“Oh,” Karen breathed, sounding like some puzzle piece had just snapped into place. “I knew I recognized you from somewhere. I saw the tabloid rags that were trying to spread the gossip about some new girl on the Avengers.”

“I didn’t know that was a thing. When did they get a picture of my face?” Ryan asked, feeling like an idiot for not even noticing.

“I don’t know, a few months ago, maybe. The Avengers are pretty tight on privacy, most media respect that cause of who they are, but the Enquirer will publish anything.”

“Well. That’s not really important right now, I guess,” Ryan resumed. “Anyway, I stayed with them the past few months. Worked in Dr. Banner’s lab. And then, yesterday…” she trailed off, not knowing how and definitely not wanting to explain what happened next.
Foggy sensed Ryan’s discomfort, and decided she’d been through enough for now. “You know what, Ryan? You’ve been through absolute hell, and here we are pulling the Spanish Inquisition on you,” he remarked, standing back up and reaching a hand to Karen on the floor. “Why don’t you get some rest? I promise, you’ll be safe here.”

“It’s not my safety I’m worried about,” Ryan replied. “I’ve never been on the run from the law before, but I would think it’s fair to assume it involves not staying in one place for very long?”

“Don’t worry, Ryan,” Matt reiterated, speaking up for the first time since her story began. “I didn’t leave a trail, SHIELD won’t know where to find you. You’re safe for now.”

Sleep did sound good to Ryan. Possibly for the rest of her life, if it could be arranged. “Thank you, Matt. I promise, I’ll make it up to you all somehow.”

“Hey, none of that crap,” Karen interjected. “We’ll figure everything out once you get some rest.”

You’d think you’d have learned your lesson by now, a voice in Ryan’s head said sarcastically as she closed her eyes, the four others trooping away to talk elsewhere. Just watch. This will go south on you, too.

*** *** ***

“You don’t half-ass it when it comes to trouble, do you?” Claire noted dryly as they all went into the hallway for the time being. “Just had to rescue the girl with superpowers and the dark past on the run from shady government agencies.”

“Thank you for your help, Claire,” Matt replied, ignoring the jibe. “We’ll call again if she gets worse.”

“Change the bandage once a day and keep applying the antibiotics. I’d get you some real pain meds, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for that girl’s head to get fuzzy right now,” Claire remarked. “Considering she threw you across the room when she was still half-unconscious without laying a hand on you.”

Foggy sighed for what felt like the hundredth time that morning. “Matt, I… I’m not going to lie to you, I’m conflicted about this,” he admitted. “Look, she obviously needed our help, and you couldn’t take her to a hospital, but what if she’s on the run for the wrong reason? We don’t really know anything about her.”

“I know she’s a good person, Foggy. Same way I knew Karen was when we met, when she was a murder suspect,” Matt affirmed. “She hasn’t lied about her past, and she wasn’t lying at all then. I don’t know what she did to antagonize the Avengers, but we need to be on her side for this.”

“Can Nelson and Murdock help her, somehow?” Karen questioned. “I mean, she’s apparently resisted arrest or something, she’s going to need legal help.”

“Guys, wait a second,” Claire interrupted. “Just… be careful, okay? She said she can read minds and control people, for God’s sakes. She’s on the run from the Avengers, and she apparently can’t scent. Whatever her story is, it’s a hell of a crazy one.”

“She can’t scent because when I first met her, she was unpresented,” Matt replied bluntly. “Somehow, now, she’s an Omega, like me.”

Foggy sighed yet again. This is a lot more insanity than I ever want before breakfast again.
In Which Foggy is Everything and Matt is Not the Best at Dealing With Emotions (Oh, and Fitz-Simmons!)

Chapter Notes

Warning: there is a wee bit of bullshit science up ahead. I completely made it up, so don’t take it seriously at all. I’m a scientist in real life, so I don’t want anyone confused. And I haven’t watched this season of Agents of SHIELD, so just pretend Jemma got back from the alien planet and is doing fine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve awoke to a bright light abruptly glaring in his eyes as the door to the containment room swung open. The silver, geometric walls were supposed to neutralize superpowers, somehow, but it was a pointless gesture in their case; their abilities were entirely unaffected, as their strength and stamina were innate. Bucky was already sitting up in front of him, sandwiching him between his body and the wall on the cot as he slept. Steve didn’t think Bucky had moved an inch since they’d been left in here hours ago to watch as Natasha, Clint, and Tony told everyone their suspicions about Ryan from a video panel on the wall. Steve had forced himself to sleep afterwards so he wouldn’t do something stupid and reckless instead.

“Captain, Sergeant,” a woman’s voice greeted as the overhead lights flickered on.

“Who are you?” Bucky growled. He shifted slightly to make his metal arm more prominent, the other hand behind him on Steve’s chest. The woman seemed unfazed by his subtle threat.

“Special Agent Melinda May. I’m here to escort you into headquarters,” she explained briefly. The lines of her face were hard and impassive, but her eyes weren’t unkind. The dichotomy only increased Bucky’s distrust. He stared at her suspiciously, his eyes frigid and menacing, scent cold and stale, masking the undercurrent of silenced fury simmering in his bones. He would give SHIELD nothing.

“One agent sent to handle the Winter Soldier and his mate, Captain America? SHIELD is even less intelligent than before I took out its former leader,” he taunted in Russian, switching between languages effortlessly. He never spoke that tongue anymore except to intimidate when necessary; too many scarring memories attached to the lilting syllables. He still hated himself for his evil actions under HYDRA’s control, but he could feel guilty later. This time, SHIELD was the actual enemy, not him.

“That’s Special Agent, to you,” May countered in Russian as well. "And you won't be any trouble, you're supposed to be smarter than that." The Alpha knew better than to fear the Sergeant’s posturing, despite her knowledge of his history and capabilities. SHIELD had handled worse than potentially brainwashed super soldiers in handcuffs designed to deliver 50 milliamps at the first sign of tampering or trouble. “This way,” she ordered in English, waving out the door to the left.

Bucky and Steve stood up, Bucky giving her a small smirk as they did so. “Here, we won’t be needing these,” he taunted as he tossed the two shock cuffs hidden behind them through the air to May. It had taken him almost an hour to crack them, he was impressed. His metal hand was good for more than just destroying Stark’s suits, however.
May’s mouth tightened into a thin line, but she let them past without incident nonetheless. Steve followed closely behind Bucky, allowing May no access to his Beta as Bucky exited silent as a shadow. They emerged from the hallway to find the rest of the team already gathered by the cavernous exit of the plane, none looking well-rested or particularly at ease. Coulson stood next to two others Steve didn’t recognize.

“Everyone, this is Agents Simmons and Fitz,” he introduced, gesturing at a pale brunette in a feminine suit and a curly-haired blond in a gray sweater and slacks. Each nodded in turn, both looking just slightly in awe. “Jemma,” Coulson said, gesturing at the two.

“Yes, hello,” the girl breathed, a smile ghosting across her face as she stepped forward slightly. She fidgeted with a tablet in her hands, pushing her shoulder-length hair behind her ears. “I’m Jemma Simmons, and this is Leo Fitz,” she introduced again nervously, pointing at her colleague, who nodded again. Her accented voice was high and flutey, less sharp than the other SHIELD agents' had been. “We’ve been asked to administer a biometric polygraph test to each of you using our latest trial of short-wave scanning technology,” she continued.

“Lie detectors? Those won’t do a damn thing. Seriously, Coulson, those can be fooled by anyone,” Tony scoffed from his stance leaning against a metal table facing the exit, Pepper close beside him. “And what do you mean each of us?”

“We already know Ryan was messing with our heads, what’s the point of a lie detector in the first place?” Clint frowned. Steve’s jaw tightened along with one fist, but he kept himself in line.

“Our polygraph is a bit different,” Jemma explained. “Fitz and I have modified it to translate base autonomic functions into radiometric data to be interpreted in real time against simultaneous PET scans and EEG in order to distinguish slight anomalies in-“

“What Jemma means to say,” Fitz interrupted, his Scottish lilt overpowering Jemma’s British timidity, “is that we can figure out if you’re telling the truth whether or not you actually believe you are. So if anyone was under any kind of mind control…we should be able to tell.”

Silence met their pronouncement. Tony actually seemed impressed to Steve’s eyes. Steve looked back over at Bucky, whose hard stare was firmly fixed on Coulson, who stared right back, undaunted.

“Well, what’re we waiting for?” Sam spoke up. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Wait,” Steve said, drawing attention to himself for the first time. “Who is going to have access to the information you get from us? And have Ryan or Bruce been found yet?”

“All questions will pertain only to the events in the last few months, focusing on the, uh, incidents yesterday,” Jemma supplied quickly. “I’ll be interpreting the data and sharing the results only with Director Coulson, and Fitz will be present to monitor the machines.”

“And we’re following leads on each of them,” Coulson added, purposefully keeping any detail out of the explanation.

Bucky growled quietly, low enough for only Steve to hear. Steve laid a hand on his lower back. *Please be alright, Ryan.*

* * * * * *

"I can't do this anymore, I'm going back home," Karen announced, grabbing her jacket off the back of her chair and shrugging it on. The office had been empty all day except one walk-in that morning,
and she was crawling out of her skin.

"Kare, Matt'll be fine," Foggy insisted, grabbing his Beta's hand as she reached for her purse. "He's handled way worse than one injured girl on the run, and that was before he had us. It's only two-thirty; we have to act normal, or else we draw suspicion to ourselves and to Ryan."

"Foggy, this is insane," Karen argued. "I mean, going against Fisk's mafia was bad enough, but SHIELD? And we don't even know why Ryan's on the run, what if we're harboring a fugitive?"

"It wouldn't be the first time, technically," Foggy reasoned. "C'mon, Karen, has Matt ever been wrong about stuff like this before? The guy can practically read minds himself."

"I just- she said she can control people, and it scares the shit out of me," Karen confided. "Matt sure didn't tell us that back when he mentioned her the first time. I mean, god, all those dicks we took down were bad enough, and none of them had half the ability that one girl does! I know it's prejudiced as hell to just judge her like that, but-"

Foggy took Karen's face in his hands, looking pointedly into her eyes as her worried scent swirled around him. "What's the first thing I told you everyone learns in law school?"

"Lawyers have their reputation for being dicks for a reason?" Karen observed, a ghost of a smile playing across her lips.

"Everyone is innocent until proven guilty," Foggy stated. "You being protective isn't wrong whatsoever, but we can't assume just because she can do something evil that she is! Ryan needs our help, and we're her defense now, for better or worse. I don't know Ryan, but I know Matt, and I trust him when he says we should help her. He said the same thing about you."

Karen closed her eyes a moment, then leaned her head on Foggy's shoulder. She felt his arms wrap around her, and she breathed deeply to calm herself, scenting cedar and spice and home. "I know, I know. You're right. This is just- I mean, on top of everything else, how does someone go from being unpresented to an Omega? This is all just crazy."

"I know. But we'll get to the bottom of it, and everything will work out just fine," Foggy comforted. "SHIELD won't hurt civilians, there won't be another Mrs. Cardenas," he reassured, a twist of guilt and sorrow still churning in his gut at the memory of their friend. He leaned out of the hug, angling his face down to kiss her gently.

Karen's eyes stayed closed a second after he pulled back, and then she smiled for the first time that day. Glancing up at Foggy again, his adoring look made her blush. "Stop it," she muttered, embarrassed.

"Stop what? Being the world's most perfect Alpha? Taking care of my ridiculous mates who attract trouble like its their job instead of doing their actual one? Never," he teased, smirking as he stepped away to his office to get his coat. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"I thought you said we had to act normal," Karen pointed out, crossing her arms and returning the smirk.

"Screw normal. I want my mates together, and we need some questions answered."

*** *** *** ***

Ryan awoke to a seemingly empty apartment, still rather dark though it must have been hours later. Her pain was improved, although she was hungry and extremely thirsty. She tried to sit up, but
collapsed back down with a sharp groan as the tugging of her core muscles ripped through her side.

“Don’t try to move yet, Ryan.” Matt’s voice came from inside the bedroom. He appeared a moment later and headed into the kitchen, retrieving a bottled water and putting something in the microwave. He handed the water and some pills to Ryan, who gulped them down gratefully.

“What time is it?” she asked. She couldn’t see over the couch into the kitchen without shooting pains in her rib cage, and her phone had been left on her nightstand in the Tower after she went downstairs to the common room, what seemed like both five minutes and a lifetime ago. Guess it’s a good thing I forgot my phone for once, or they’d have already found me.

Matt pressed a button on his phone, and an automated female voice read out, “Two thirty-seven P.M.”

“Thanks.” She’d slept for ten hours, then. No wonder she was starving. Five minutes earlier 12 hours or so ago, and she’d at least have gotten those sandwiches. Figures.

“How are you feeling?” Matt asked, although he could guess the answer fairly accurately. He’d been beaten and broken enough times to intimately understand how Ryan’s injuries felt.

“Fantastic,” Ryan sighed sarcastically, putting the glass down onto the floor and staring up at the ceiling. “I almost died several times, can barely move, I’m being hunted like an animal, and I got bloodstains all over your couch, I think,” she listed. “Sorry. About the bloodstains, I mean.”

“They’re not the only ones. Look, I sent Foggy and Karen to the office today. I thought it would be easier if we spoke without an audience.”


“The only way SHIELD would know to question them is if they knew you were with us. And there’s no reason SHIELD would go after them if they could go straight after you.” Matt sat down on the coffee table where Foggy had rested earlier, unfocused eyes hidden behind dark rounded frames looking over her into the kitchen. “Can you tell me how you were injured, in detail this time?”

Ryan shook her head, then realized her mistake. “Sorry, I just shook my head. But I don’t think you can help me any more than you already have,” Ryan replied. “I know you and Foggy are lawyers, but it’s not like I can pay you, and SHIELD doesn’t work in the system anyway.”

The microwave beeped, and Matt stood to retrieve what turned out to be a bowl of chicken noodle soup. Sitting back as Ryan began to eat, he continued. “No organization is above the law. Even if it takes some work outside the law to prove it,” he declared. “You already know who I am and what I do. I do it because I got fed up with how things were for people in my city. Omegas especially. So you can run, if that’s what you want. Or you can fight back.”

Ryan huffed a small, ironic laugh between spoonfuls of soup. “I think it was doing both of those that got me into this mess,” she admitted. She swallowed back the panicked discomfort that rose up with being included as an Omega now. Another act in the shit show that is my life.

“Regardless, Foggy, Karen and I can help. But only if you tell us what happened.”

Ryan closed her eyes, wishing in vain for sudden amnesia, or perhaps a lightning bolt to just strike her down out of the blue. It didn’t seem out of the realm of possibility, given the past thirty-six hours or so, and reliving them was the last thing she wanted to do. She owed it to Matt, though. “After I… intervened, in the incident in Soho, Captain America and the Winter Soldier tracked me down
that night. They asked me pretty much the exact same things you did way back when, and I gave them the same answers. That same night, I was wandering around near 34th and 10th when I heard some girl screaming, and the same crap as always went down all over again. I swear, if I’d just ignored it for once…”

“That girl would have been raped or worse, and you would have carried guilt with you forever. You made the right call,” Matt affirmed quietly.

“Yeah, well, I guess no one told Hawkeye that,” Ryan sighed again exhaustedly. She tamped down on the muted panic that arose at the mention of rape. Not the time, Ryan. “He came up in the middle of it, and we hit it off, and I… went back to the Tower to play video games with him,” she laughed humorlessly at the end. “I moved in there, like I said, and apparently the whole time, they were all just trying to gain my trust. Because they thought I was trying to take down the Avengers from the inside.”

Matt digested the information, thinking through everything he knew about the Avengers and Ryan all at once. He wanted to reassure Ryan, to tell her that sounded insane. But after all he had seen, the evil he knew was possible from those who appeared entirely good, he had to admit he could understand their point. “Because of your powers, and the circumstances around your meeting?”

“Yes. I was hoping honesty would make me less suspect, but I should’ve lied, apparently.”

“It makes it easier now that you didn’t. Go on.”

“I… I can’t,” Ryan suddenly faltered, her voice dropping to a pained whisper. She felt increasingly cornered, trapped, wanting nothing but to run away and never look back at the events forever etched through fire into her very cells as she began to pant heavily. The spoon clattered on the floor from her hand, and her eyelids shuttered against burning tears. A warm, comforting pressure glided over her blanket-clad shoulder.

“Ryan,” Matt started, his voice softer and gentler than she’d ever heard it, “this is important, okay? You’re going to be alright. But I need to know what happened to you so I can keep you safe.” He didn’t know what else to do, what else he could say as Ryan’s scent became rife with turmoil and sorrow.

Ryan choked on a sob, the few contents of her stomach roiling in nausea as every repressed emotion burst forth at once. Icy fear, volcanic anger, harrowing loss as though her heart had been slashed with jagged claws, all tumbling with an overwhelming powerlessness that swallowed her up like a storm at sea. The petrifying terror of her assault, the agony of her heat, the unapologetic betrayal of her friends fast-forwarded through her mind, her breath coming in shorter and shorter gasps. The faces of Steve and Bucky as they lied to her flashed before her eyes, perfectly masking duplicity with supposed caring and concern, and Ryan screamed in lacerating anguish as tears gushed down her face beneath her hands. The windows to Matt’s left burst outward in a hail of shattered glass, raining to the alleyway below.

“RYAN!” Matt shouted, shaking her shoulder firmly. Suddenly, sounds he hadn’t detected before blew in with the cold December air, and he shot to his feet. “Stay here and stay down!” he barked, rushing to the hidden panel in the wall by the stairs. There were SHIELD agents out in the alley where he’d found Ryan, and they’d heard the window smash.

Chapter End Notes
I felt so bad about not updating in forever that I wrote this really quickly after the last update. Kind of the bridge to the next upcoming action. Also, I broke 100 kudos with that last chapter, and it really means so much to me. Like, over 100 people think what I wrote is cool? HOW COOL IS THAT?!!?!?! Thank you so much, everyone who's read this, and especially those of you who have left comments too, because those make my entire day every time.
Chapter Notes

Holy lord, this is such a long chapter, guys. I'm so sorry. It should probably be split in two, but...¯\_(ツ)_/¯
Also, beware the slightly bullshit legal-ese. I'm not a lawyer in any way, shape, or form.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Foggy heard the keening cry and shattering glass from the hallway and doubled his speed to the apartment door, Karen hot on his heels. Bursting inside and into the living room, he saw Matt digging through the trunk hidden inside the wall panel, tugging on the black mask and grabbing a wooden dowel. Ryan was in the midst of what looked like a panic attack, and the room was chilled with the dry air from outside.

“Hey hey hey, what’s going on?!” Foggy exclaimed, Karen rushing over to Ryan and murmuring softly to her.

“SHIELD agents across the street. Four, all armed. They heard Ryan break the window, they’re coming to investigate,” Matt explained briefly, deftly lacing on black combat boots.

“Wait, you can’t just go fight them! Let them come, we’ll tell them, I don’t know, you tripped or something!” Foggy insisted, grasping wildly at any idea to keep Matt from facing a group of deadly secret agents intent on arresting their new friend.

“I promised Ryan we’d keep her safe. SHIELD is a highly trained underground government agency, I won’t put you all in danger,” Matt declared. He pushed past Foggy to the remains of the window. “They’re in the alley, get Ryan out of here,” he ordered in a low growl.

“Wait! I have an idea!” Karen inserted suddenly. She quickly bounced up from beside Ryan, whose eyes and hands were glowing but was breathing deeply and carefully now, and grabbed the broken lamp from the floor where it had been left. “AND GET THE REST OF YOUR SHIT OUT TOO!” she screamed out the window, viciously hurling the lamp outside where it crashed to the ground below.

Foggy, Matt, and Ryan all stared at her like she’d lost her mind. Matt’s jaw was agape as he froze in the corner by the windows. “Kare?” Foggy whispered, eyes wide with concern and hands raised as though approaching a wild animal.

“Play along!” she hissed through her teeth, picking up the lampshade from the floor. “I COME HOME EARLY TO SURPRISE YOU AND I FIND YOU FUCKING SOME OMEGA BITCH?!” She chucked the lampshade out after the lamp, where it clanged against a metal dumpster.

“Oh!” Foggy suddenly caught on and ran to the window as well. “C’mon babe, please! You know you’re my girl! It’s not what it looks like!” he shouted, adopting a horrible Jersey accent.

“Not what it LOOKS LIKE?! My mother was right, I never should have mated such a lazy, pathetic, worthless excuse for an Alpha!”
“Oh, bringing up your MOM again?! Well maybe if your mom wasn’t so- so…” Foggy fumbled over his words, losing his rhythm. Karen frantically gestured for him to continue, jutting her head over to the window to remind him of their audience. “If your mom wasn’t so hot, then maybe I wouldn’t have banged her last month, too!” Foggy bellowed.

“WHAT??!” Karen shrieked, throwing her arms up in the air and now looking at Foggy like he’d lost his mind. “You told me you were on a business trip!” she continued improvising.

“I’M UNEMPLOYED!” Foggy yelled, shrugging his shoulders at Karen and looking entirely out of his element.

“That’s it! GET. OUT!” Karen screamed again. She looked around in a frenzy for something else to throw. She grabbed a pillow off the armchair, then put it back down and picked up a small wooden stool they’d been using as an ottoman.

“No, not the stool, my cousin made that!” Foggy whisper-shouted, snatching at the legs as Karen held the seat.

“Hurry up and yell something back at me!” Karen yanked the stool out of Foggy’s grip and tossed it out, more gently this time. It still splintered to pieces on the ground.

“Oh, like you haven’t been screwing Matt from your office ever since we moved in together!” Foggy yelled, gesturing at Matt, still standing in the corner. Matt was shaking slightly, but not from the cold or in fear.

“You said you wanted a threesome!” Karen shot back, her voice cracking slightly as she shouted at top volume.

“Guys, they’re gone,” Matt choked out, practically vibrating from repressed glee.

Everyone instantly collapsed in guffaws of laughter. Ryan laughed harder than she had in years, her side burning but the hilarity overwhelming her, all her pained emotions drowning in the ridiculousness. Foggy, Karen and Matt all fell to the ground, Matt laughing so hard he was completely silent while Karen had tears running down her cheeks. Foggy had his head thrown back and was snorting every few breaths. Despite the wind coming in from the window, the room was full of the overjoyed, relieved scents of all four.

“What,” Ryan started a few minutes later, then cut off as she chortled hysterically again. “What the hell, you guys. That was so stupid,” she eventually got out.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Karen cried, wiping the tears away from her face as she laid propped up against the wall.

“Me neither,” Matt agreed, wheezing with laughter. “Never do that again. You two are terrible actors.”

“Hey, we might not get an Oscar,” Foggy interjected, smiling bright with mirth, “but we got them to leave and no bones were broken. Speaking of broken, my mom’s going to kill you, Kare, she gave us that stool when we moved in,” he continued.

“We’ll find another crappy ottoman at a flea market, she’ll never be able to tell the difference,” Karen giggled, beginning to calm down at last.

Foggy got up and went into the kitchen, chuckling quietly still. Grabbing several garbage bags and some tacks and duct tape from a junk drawer, he set to work covering the broken windows,
darkening the room but blocking out the cold again. Karen moved to help him.

“I’m so sorry about the windows,” Ryan apologized, squirming guilt in her stomach beneath the quieting laughter.

“It’s alright. I can guarantee this will not be the last time they’re broken,” Foggy averred, smiling down at her. “What exactly happened, though?”

“I, uh, I kind of just lost it for a bit there,” Ryan hedged, ducking her head in embarrassment. “It won’t happen again,” she maintained.

Matt meanwhile got back up to his feet and took off the mask, his eyes bright and scent ringing with amusement. He put the Daredevil outfit back away, closing up the wall panel and then sitting down in front of Ryan again. “So,” he said simply.

Ryan smiled again, her cheeks hurting almost as much as her wound did. “That right there made all this shit almost worth it,” she commented, a note of laughter still in her voice.

“I’m sorry I pushed you before, I didn’t mean—” Matt began, but Ryan interrupted.

“No, no, it’s alright, I know I need to do this,” she said, the endorphin-fueled joy beginning to die down. “I think it’ll actually be easier to get it out now.”

“Whatever you have to tell us, we’re listening,” Karen promised, sitting on the floor by Ryan again and laying a hand atop hers. Ryan took it, holding on tight. Foggy finished with the windows and sat down by Ryan’s feet. She took a deep breath, and began.

“A few days ago, I started feeling like I had the flu or something. I was achy and kinda hot, but it would go away and I didn’t worry about it. Then, yesterday, it didn’t go away, and I left the lab early. I went to the kitchen with Dr. Foster for some tea, and I suddenly got crazy dizzy and fell over. She helped me back up, but it felt like I was burning all over and I could barely move. I was all wet for some reason, and everything smelled crazy. Jane got me to the elevator, but…” she dropped off a moment, but swallowed hard and continued. “Bruce was there. He was coming to check on me.” She huffed an ironic laugh. “He- he Hulked out.”

Karen gasped, tightening her grip on Ryan’s hand. Foggy’s jaw dropped. Matt’s jaw tightened. The words gushed out of Ryan, a swift ramble she couldn’t hold back. “I was sure he was an Omega- I didn’t know he was an Alpha, and I sure as hell didn’t know that would happen, I swear. I don’t even know why, but he knocked out Jane and went after me. I tried to hold him back, but he growled at me, and suddenly I couldn’t speak, I don’t know how. He ripped off my shirt, and I…” Tears flowed down her face once more, but went unnoticed by her as she continued on. “I-I don’t really remember what happened for a bit, but I think Bucky got me away, somehow, and then he left me again. Alone.”

“Bucky?” Karen asked softly when Ryan paused.

“Th-the Winter Soldier,” Ryan muttered, closing her eyes and swallowing hard. “D-Darcy came, Darcy Lewis, and she told me that I was…” She couldn’t bring herself to say it now. Speaking it out loud would make it irrevocable.

“She told you that you presented,” Matt finished quietly.

Ryan nodded, holding back her tears once again. She was determined to get it out, consequences to her psyche be damned. “Yeah. She said I’m an Omega.” With that, she fully burst into tears.
Karen wrapped her arms around Ryan’s head and shoulders, stroking her hair as she sobbed like her heart was shattered to pieces. Ryan’s scent, normally like lilacs and sunshine, was heavy with despondent sorrow and loss. Foggy felt his heart break for her, and he took Matt’s hand, who held on tightly despite his ever-present outward calmness. Together, they waited out the storm.

A few minutes later, Ryan’s shuddering breaths began to calm, and Karen leaned back again to let Ryan wipe her eyes. Foggy got up and grabbed a box of tissues, handing it to Ryan when she looked up again.

“S-sorry,” Ryan sniffled. “I think I killed the mood.” She blew her nose to distract herself a moment.

“No, god, Ryan,” Karen said, wiping away a stray tear of her own. “That—you have every right to be upset.”

“Oh, you ain’t heard nothing yet,” Ryan joked weakly, attempting a small smile. “I burned like the fires of Hades for the next 18 hours or so, and then it just- stopped. I was starving, so I went downstairs to eat something. Hawkeye and Black Widow came up in the elevator, and I guess they didn’t see me or anything, cause they were talking about how they were going to kidnap me and bring me to SHIELD.”

“Wha-why?” Foggy interrupted, looking flabbergasted.

“Because they thought I was mind controlling all of them,” Ryan stated bitterly. “I’m unpresented and have superpowers, so they never actually trusted me. They thought I was secretly a supervillain, trying to destroy them or something. I don’t really know. I overheard them and I just got so pissed, I- I was an idiot, is what I was.”

“But,” Foggy started again, still looking bewildered, “they just assumed, because...” His voice dropped off as he processed Ryan's words. Starting again, he exclaimed, “You said they invited you to live with them. Why would they do that?!”

Ryan shook her head, closing her eyes. “So they could keep an eye on me. Watch me 24/7, figure out what I was supposedly up to.”

“That- that’s sick,” Foggy declared, looking away into the wall.

“You said it was Tony Stark who attacked you. How did that happen?” Matt asked quietly.

“Like I said, I was an idiot. I lost my temper, confronted the two of them. Widow drew a gun, Hawkeye his bow. I broke them with my powers. Then Captain America and the Winter Soldier showed up, then Iron Man. I guess JARVIS must have told everyone what was happening or whatever. The Captain and Sergeant pretended like they didn’t know what was going on, tried to maintain their cover, somehow. Iron Man accused me of trying to kill the Hulk and Steve, and I snapped. I attacked them.”

“Did you use mind control on them?” Matt queried, his voice taking on the professional tone of an interrogating lawyer.

“No, I would never!” Ryan replied angrily, clenching her hands into fists. “I would never do that. I- I threw a table at Iron Man, and shoved Hawkeye and Black Widow back. I was trying to escape down the stairs. I almost got away, but Iron Man shot me with the light ray thing on his hand.”

“How did you escape, then?”

Ryan paused a moment, thinking through the memory clearly for the first time. “S-Steve and
Bucky,” she whispered. “They attacked Tony. I ran away while they were all distracted.” Ryan didn’t entirely know what to make of it anymore. No, no, she thought, shaking herself internally. They fooled you for long enough. Don’t fall for it again. “I got as far away as I could, but it was cold and it hurt, and I think I passed out.”

“I found you in the alleyway across the street. You made it a good distance, considering,” Matt commented. He stood up, looking as though his mind was far away.

“How did you know I was there? Were you coming back from… patrolling, or whatever you do?” Ryan asked.

“No, I could smell the blood after the snow died down. The blood, and the remnants of your heat. I knew someone was in trouble. I didn’t know it was you until you woke up.”

Ryan sighed. “Well, now you know everything. I’m on the run from the law, and it’s only a matter of time before they find me for real. You get now why I said you can’t help me?”

The trio was silent for a moment. Foggy and Karen looked at each other, and then to Matt.

Matt strode over to the wreckage of the windows, his back to the others, considering all Ryan had told them. There was always raging conflict in his mind between his actions and his morals, always the devil buried deep marauding against his conscience. He was at war with himself again now. Ryan’s presence put his mates in harm’s way; Ryan would rather put herself in danger than let them help her. Ryan was the enemy of the Avengers; Ryan had befriended him and his mates already.

Ryan was on the run from SHIELD, who were supposed to protect- and had, previously, protected-innocents from perils far worse than they could handle; Ryan had saved the lives of the two Omegas and more. Ryan had exceedingly dangerous capabilities beyond anyone’s he’d ever heard of; Ryan hadn’t lied to them once. Ryan could kill with a snap of her fingers or a word from her mouth; Ryan had never abused her powers to their knowledge. Ryan had defeated him with a thought; Ryan had almost died in his arms. Ryan had a dark, tragic past; Ryan wanted to move on with her life. Ryan was shrouded in suspicious circumstances; Ryan was a victim of circumstance.

She could be controlling, manipulating, tricking us. Or she could be telling the truth. Matt came to a decision, and crossed himself unconsciously. If he was wrong, he’d be putting not only his life, but the lives of his mates in untold danger. But faith had brought him this far. Faith, and a lot of pain. He hoped he could minimize the second this time around. “We can help. We’re on your side, Ryan,” he vowed.

Ryan closed her eyes a moment, overwhelmed. “I don’t know what to say. Thank you, for believing me.” Karen took her hand again, smiling at her.

Foggy went up to Matt and pulled him into his arms, bringing Matt’s head to his neck to make him scent him. Matt relaxed for just a moment in his Alpha’s embrace. Foggy knew Matt was conflicted and worried, but he trusted him with all of their lives. Foggy might be their Alpha, but Matt was the thread that wove their family together. Which meant he needed their support as much as they needed his. Releasing Matt, Foggy turned back to the room at large. “We need to come up with a game plan,” he pronounced.

“I don’t know what to do,” Ryan admitted softly. “SHIELD won’t stop until they find me, and I don’t know how we could ever fight back against the Avengers and win.”

“We play to our advantage, and their weakness,” Matt stated.

“What’s that?” Ryan asked.
“The law. Ever since the HYDRA incident when SHIELD’s files were leaked, they’ve had to go entirely dark to keep operating. But since we know their endgame here, we can bring them back into the light.”

“What do you mean?” Karen spoke up, standing to join her mates by the window.

“I think the best course of action now is for Ryan to turn herself over,” Matt said quietly.

Foggy growled, low in his chest. “What the hell, Matty? We just got those agents to back off, and now you want to us to go flag them down again? What happened to keeping Ryan safe?”

“They already shot her! You just said they were underground, we have no idea what else they’ll do!” Karen added angrily.

“No, he’s right,” Ryan breathed, a look of intense concentration on her face. Foggy and Karen looked over at her in surprise. Gritting her teeth through the pain, Ryan sat fully up, feeling the bandage pull slightly and squirming carefully to adjust so she didn’t start bleeding again. “I wish I could just forget this whole thing, but I can’t. And if I keep running now, I’ll have to do it forever. I can’t do that either. But the last thing SHIELD wants is the public eye on them. I don’t know what they’d do to me if they caught me alone, but they’re secretive about everything they do for a reason. If I have actual legal representation, hopefully that all changes.”

“It’s not like they read her rights the first time, how are we supposed to help when they’re whisking her away to their secret lair?” Foggy questioned Matt, a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

“We make it happen on our turf. We know the whole story now; with Nelson and Murdock behind Ryan, both SHIELD and the Avengers will have to be above board on everything, or else face unwanted attention and the wrath of the public. Their history is already common knowledge. They can’t lie to come out of the shadows like Fisk did.” Matt spoke low, sounding sure and confident. “Ryan is innocent. The Avengers pulled weapons first; all her actions were in self-defense, superpowers or no. There’s no proof of mind control, and we can use Ryan’s past actions to prove her intentions were harmless.”

“Proof of mind control? How would that even work? That’s impossible to get,” Karen pointed out.

“Exactly. It’s a dead end without solid evidence; it’ll essentially be hearsay. Whatever they bring up, we can counter.”

“Matt, wait,” Ryan interjected, running her hands through her hair absently. “If this goes public, then that means my abilities go public, too. I can’t let that happen.”

“We don’t intend for this to go to trial,” Foggy reassured her. He’d thought Matt was crazy at first, but he was starting to get on board. “But if we make them work according to procedure, you’ll be treated fairly, and we can get the accusations dropped before formal charges are filed. We have judges we can trust, and SHIELD won’t want your powers common knowledge either. It’d cause a panic.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Ryan muttered bitterly. She shook her head slightly, thinking back to all those months ago when terror had rained from the sky like a bad sci-fi movie. She’d been heading through Soho into the library early to change her clothes and read for a while before her shift, but that had been derailed when she’d heard all kinds of screams and commotion from a block away. The next thing she knew, she was face to face with the Winter Soldier after she’d saved his life, hearing him assess her for weaknesses in her mind. It had been terrifying. Her mask of confidence had been more securely in place back then, however, and she faked absolute ease, distracting him with
mentioning the safety of his equally famous and danger-loving mate. Then, in just a few months somehow, the two men had gone from being Captain America and the Winter Soldier, celebrity superheroes with mysterious pasts, to Steve and Bucky, her close friends. Her best ones in her entire life, if she was being honest with herself. Now they and their team, their family, the Avengers, were trying to take her down because it was all a lie.

“SHIELD can't do anything illegal with us there; you'll be safe. You have the legal right to an attorney, Ryan,” Matt reminded her. “Foggy and I will be with you the whole time.”

Ryan nodded her head, standing up slowly for the first time in 12 hours. Her injuries pulled and ached, but she could handle it. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

* * *   * * *    * * *

“Ryan? Could we talk for a minute?” Karen approached her later that night, after they’d eaten Thai takeout for dinner and Matt and Foggy went back to the office to continue working on the case. They had to know as much about SHIELD’s recent actions as possible to best help Ryan, and that would mean some long nights before she came out of hiding.

“Yeah, of course,” Ryan answered, looking up from the book she’d been reading at the kitchen table. She knew she should be lying down and resting, but the generic painkiller meds were dulling the pain effectively so long as she didn’t breathe too deeply, and she was already sick of being trapped on their couch. Thankfully the shallow cuts on her arms didn't hurt much, just itched a little. Karen had loaned her some clothes, and Foggy liked The Lord of the Rings novels, so she’d borrowed one and tried to distract herself. Karen sat down across from her, wearing jogging pants and a long sleeved t-shirt instead of her formal business attire of earlier, long blonde hair straight down her back. She was beautiful however she was dressed, Ryan noted.

“I don’t mean to pry,” Karen started, “but from your story earlier… I got the feeling you don’t really know much about, well, being an Omega.”

Ryan looked down to her book again, lips tightening a little. “No, I don’t,” she confessed. “Are you an Omega, then? I figured Foggy was the Alpha, but I don’t know about you or Matt.”

“No, I’m a Beta,” Karen replied, looking down to the table as well. “Matt’s the Omega, but I thought it might be easier if we talked. You know, woman to woman?”

Ryan gave her a small smile, but it was more sad than anything else. “Look, this isn't something I like thinking about. My parents were both unpresented, and I… I don’t feel any different than before. I don’t even know how this happened to me, and I’m never going to mate with anyone regardless, so it’s whatever.”

“Well, you said you can scent now, right?” Karen persisted, her eyes sympathetic. “But you don’t seem to instinctually understand it.”

“It’s instinct to everyone else?” Ryan was mildly shocked. “To be honest, I didn't know people could. I never could. I thought everyone just figured out others' presentations like I did, and it was just something people didn't really talk about. I just, I literally never even thought about how...well, how people find mates, I guess.”

Karen stayed silent a moment, thinking hard about how to approach this. She’d never met an unpresented person before, and knew next to little about them beyond the fact that they didn’t have a scent and didn’t mate. A thought suddenly jumped to the forefront of her mind. “Wait, both your parents were unpresented?” she said in surprise.
“Yeah, that’s how I always knew I was. I mean, I don’t think specifically being an Alpha or whatever is passed down genetically, right? But how could I ever present when they didn’t?” Ryan shrugged.

“But- how did they…” Karen trailed off. “If they were unpresented, then why would they want kids together? They couldn’t mate, so…why were they together?”

Ryan gritted her teeth, taking a deep breath to try to calm herself before responding. “People can love each other without being sex crazy, you know,” she snapped. “I’m pretty sure wanting kids doesn’t mean you have to want to mate, and they loved each other for who they were, not how they smelled.”

“No, no, of course,” Karen backtracked, feeling horrible for accidentally insulting Ryan's parents. “I’m sorry, I really didn’t mean to imply anything. I just don’t know anything about unpresented people, really.”

Ryan sighed. “It’s fine. It’s nothing I’ve not heard my entire life,” she lamented quietly. “It’s not like unpresented are automatically incapable of falling in love and wanting to spend the rest of their lives with someone. Some want it, some don’t. Some don’t ever fall in love. It’s not that crazy; not every Alpha, Beta or Omega wants a mate either. We might be different, but we’re just living our lives. We’re all just… people.”

They were both silent for a few moments after Ryan stopped speaking. The wind rattled the garbage bags over the windows, the plastic billowing inwards and then settling again. “You’re right,” Karen said softly, looking contemplative and a little sad. “I know there’s a lot of prejudice out there against people like your parents, and I know it’s wrong, but… it’s really easy to misjudge someone who just sees the world so differently than you do.”

“Tell me about it,” Ryan quipped. “I used to look down on pretty much everyone around me back in middle and high school. I thought they were insane, all so obsessed with the next notch in their bedpost.”

“A lot of people were,” Karen admitted with a small smile. “What changed your mind?”

“I don’t know. I grew up, I guess,” Ryan replied. “I know it sounds like I probably hated everyone, but I didn’t, really. I’ve always liked people in general, I just didn’t always understand them. The Avengers were the first group of friends I thought I had, but I’ve had other good people in my life. There were two or three amazing teachers over the years that helped me, and a real friend here and there. When I was on my own, I had more important things to worry about, but I had fewer worries when there were people on my side. I know it sounds crazy, but being on the streets gave me a lot more faith in humanity than any of the times I’ve had a home.”

“How so?” Karen was intrigued. Ryan had been through so much, but it seemed it had only made her kind.

“I know it’s because I’m a decent looking young girl,” Ryan said as she rolled her eyes, “but there was always someone there to help when I really needed it. Back in Boston, right after I was kicked out of the girl’s home when I graduated, I had nothing and nowhere to go. I was sleeping in a park the next morning when someone’s dog got away from them, and I caught him. The woman was so nice to me, even though it was obvious I was a street rat. I ended up walking dogs for her entire neighborhood all that summer, and I got enough money for a gym membership and a no-contract cell phone. There’s been shelters when I’ve really needed them, and I’ve done more odd jobs here and there for people kind enough to give me a chance. I even nannied for a family through the winter one time. There have been times I’ve been hungry and sick and dirty and cold, but I’ve survived.
Lately, I've even been able to give a little back to people I know need the help. I'm a lot more lucky than most.”

Karen shook her head in disbelief. “You lost your family, you had to go through the foster system, you’ve been homeless most of your adult life, and you’re literally running for your life. You still call yourself lucky?”

“I calls ’em as I sees ’em,” Ryan shrugged with a smile. “My mother used to tell me to be grateful for every single day, because every single day was its own miracle. My dad would always make fun of her, and then wake me up for school the next morning by jumping onto my bed and yelling ‘It’s a Festivus miracle!’ To this day, I still don’t know what the hell Festivus is.”

Karen burst out laughing, covering her mouth with one hand. “It’s from a TV show,” she snickered. “Your parents sound incredible.”

“Yeah. They were the best,” Ryan said, the familiar shadow of nostalgic grief ghosting through her heart.

Karen smiled at her again sadly. “I’ve lost people, too. It never goes away, does it?”

“No,” Ryan whispered. She cleared her throat. “Anyway…”

“Yeah, sorry, got a bit off topic there,” Karen said. “Well, look, if you have questions about… anything, just ask, ok?”

Ryan looked away for a moment. “Could you…” she cut off, sighing. “Look, I don’t really know if it’s weird to ask this, but I honestly don’t know. How do you tell what someone’s presentation is?”

“Scenting,” Karen responded promptly but kindly. “You said before that everything started smelling crazy right when you presented?” Seeing Ryan nod, she continued, “What did it smell like?”

Ryan thought back to when Jane had helped her back up. “Jane- Dr. Foster, I mean- I didn’t connect it at the time, but I guess it was her. She smelled like wildflowers and chocolate.”

“She’s an Omega, then,” Karen supplied. “Omegas almost always smell sweet in some way.”

“What about when they don’t?” Ryan asked, confused. “How do you tell then?”

“Um…” Karen paused. “I don’t really know how to explain it, I’ve never really thought about it before. It’s instinct to everyone from birth, except for unpresented, I guess. Maybe you’ll be able to tell in time?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Ryan conceded. “What about Betas and Alphas, then?”

“Betas are less sweet, and more earthy, sort of?” Karen described. “Like, nature, or homey scents, somehow.”

“Claire smelled like the ocean. The nice part, not like salt marshes,” Ryan supplied.

“Yeah, yeah, she’s a Beta,” Karen nodded. “And Alphas are kind of spicy. And like, strong, but not because the scent is strong, you know?”

“Don’t tell him I said this, but Foggy kinda smells like Christmas trees,” Ryan divulged, cheeks reddening just a tad.

“Don’t worry, I thought the exact same thing when we first met,” Karen laughed.
“If you don’t mind my asking, how did you guys all meet?” Ryan questioned. “I mean, I saw in Matt’s head that night we met that he was mated to you guys, but I didn’t get much more than that about you two.”

“Um, it’s a long story,” Karen faltered. She didn’t mind telling her, but it wasn’t exactly the meet-cute you could tell your parents at the holidays. “Matt and Foggy were friends from law school, and they opened their practice together. I was accused of murder a while back, and they helped me get the charges dropped. They both saved my life, a few times over. I went to work for them, and everything just sort of fell into place. We mated right after Fisk was put away.”

Ryan nodded. “I heard all about Fisk. You were so brave.”

“It was Matt and Foggy, really. And Ben,” Karen reminisced, still mourning her friend. Fisk would rot in prison and then in hell, and good riddance, but it was bittersweet revenge. She’d rather have Ben back.

“I have one last question, if that’s okay,” Ryan continued.

“Yeah, of course.”

“So… people just smell- or scent, I guess- and want to bang other people? What is that even like?” Ryan didn’t know if she was being crude or insulting somehow, but she was honestly clueless.

“Well, scent is only a part of it,” Karen explained with a chuckle. “I guess scenting tells you right away if they’re a compatible potential mate. And it obviously helps people grow closer. Wait, I guess you wouldn’t necessarily know,” she assented. “When people feel extreme emotions, it’s reflected in their scents; it’s a noticeable change from the norm. Did you catch anything weird, the night you… got away?”

“No, the windows were smashed, and wind was blowing everywhere. Plus I wasn’t really paying attention, I was kind of distracted,” Ryan replied sardonically.

“Well, scenting helps in knowing what another person is thinking or feeling, to a certain extent. And it’s easier to tell the subtler changes when you’re close to someone. But, I guess real attraction is deeper than that. It’s kind of like… like a warm, tingly feeling inside, a wanting to be close to someone in that way. You want them near you all the time. Their scent can comfort you, or even make you excited. It’s the way they look, the way they make you feel. You just… know.”

“You know, you keep saying that,” Ryan smiled, “and it doesn’t exactly help me much, cause I really don’t know.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Karen smiled back. “I’ve never had to try to describe it to someone before. You’ve really never felt like that? About anyone?”

The smile slid off Ryan’s face. She wasn’t positive, but she at least had an inkling that she’d experienced something like that. Faintly, perhaps, and just the once. “I- maybe. I don’t know.”

Karen reached across the table and took Ryan’s hand again. “I’m sorry. I can’t even imagine. This must be so weird and confusing.”

Ryan shrugged. “I know I’m technically not anymore, but I… I’m still unpresented. On the inside, I guess. I’ve never wanted a mate and I highly doubt I ever will. Honestly, I was just planning on forgetting about all of this as best I could.”

“It might not be that simple,” Karen advised, her voice gentle. “You were right earlier, there are still
shithead Alphas out there, and Omegas still get hurt every day. You’ll have more heats, unless you get on really strong birth control. And people will be attracted to you now, if they weren’t before just based on your looks alone.”

“Yeah, I never got much attention before. At least, I don’t think I did. I wasn’t really paying attention. I guess people must have assumed I was just a really chill Beta,” Ryan joked. “But, somewhat thankfully, I do have experience in the shithead Alpha department. I’ll figure something out for the birth control.”

“There’s clinics where you don’t need insurance. It might be expensive, but we can get you help if you need it.”

Ryan squeezed Karen’s hand before letting go. “You all have already done more than enough. I can never even repay you.”

“Repay us by showing SHIELD that they can’t screw with people just because they have powers,” Karen stated firmly. “It’ll help keep Matt safe in the future, and that’s something we can never repay you for.”

“I will,” Ryan vowed solemnly. “But, Karen, this plan... it puts Matt and Foggy in danger. A blind guy from Hell’s Kitchen connected to a girl with superpowers? It’s not a big leap from there to Daredevil. Everyone knows about the guy now, thanks to the papers.”

“You worry about yourself. We’ll worry about Matt’s secret,” Karen replied. The door opened just then, and Matt and Foggy came back into the apartment. Karen stood to greet them, kissing them both after they took off their coats. Ryan watched them not-so-surreptitiously. They looked so happy together, despite all the crazy shit she’d put them through in the last day. Their scents, now that she recognized them individually, blended together into a comforting aroma, harmonious notes in a major chord.

“Ryan, we think we have everything we need on SHIELD,” Foggy said, coming over to sit next to her. “We’ll be ready to go tomorrow, after we get the deposition on you.”

“Already? That was fast.” Ryan was surprised, and getting more and more nervous.

“What can I say? We’re the best damn avocados this side of the Hudson.” Foggy grinned as Ryan frowned in bewilderment. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. I think being stuck in the cold helped with the burns, they don’t hurt at all. It’s just the ribs, really,” Ryan reported. “As long as I don’t breathe too deeply or move too quickly, it’s manageable.”

“Good. Your heart sounds are back to normal, there aren’t lasting effects from the hypothermia,” Matt said, standing beside Karen next to the table. He took off his dark spectacles, looking weary but accomplished.

“Alright, look, guys... if we go through with this, it puts all of you on SHIELD’s radar. It’s not a place anyone would want to be, I’m guessing,” Ryan pointed out, carefully not meeting their eyes. “I can still try to run, and you all can forget Matt ever found me.”

“Not a chance,” Karen reprimanded.

“We’re not doing this only for you,” Matt stated. “This will be a precedent for other powered people in the future. The Avengers aren’t the only ones with abilities out there. We can help keep them from being persecuted.”
“That all backfires if they find out about you,” Ryan countered. “They’d think we were secretly in league, or that I was controlling you. Yeah, they’d go with that one.”

“This isn’t the first empire we’ve faced,” Foggy insisted. “S.H.I.E.L.D. might be after you, but they’re not the Russian, the Chinese, the Japanese, or the Fisk mafia. Jesus, did we really go up against all of them?” He shook his head, smiling. “It’ll all work out. We just need you to be entirely honest with us.”

“About what?” Ryan queried.

“We need more information about your past. Every incident involving your powers,” Matt clarified. “Even when we prove you’re innocent of what they’re accusing you of now, they could try to use your past as justification to keep you on a tight leash or worse.”

“That’s fine. Just promise me,” Ryan said, “promise me that if this goes south, you two won’t do anything stupid. Get yourselves away and forget about me. I’ll be fine.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D. isn’t supposed to be evil, Ryan,” Karen comforted. “We’re only preparing for the worst because we have to. They don’t trust you and we don’t trust them, but we’ll show them you’re a good person. If they have any sense at all, they’ll see.”

Natasha and Clint and Tony sure didn’t. But this is still the best hope we’ve got. “Ok. Could I get some sleep before we do this, though?”

“We could all use the rest,” Karen affirmed. Reaching out a hand to Ryan, she gently helped her to her feet. “C’mon, we’ve got a spare toothbrush here someplace.”

Matt stiffened suddenly, a far away look passing over his features as he listened to something in the distance. “S.H.I.E.L.D. They’re back.”

A loud banging sound came from behind them as something small and metal tore through the garbage bags and clattered onto the floor. Matt dashed over to the living room, but suddenly the device emitted a piercing sonic screech, and he collapsed to the floor in agony, his super hearing causing extreme pain before he passed out. The other three got their hands over their ears, but Foggy and Karen quickly followed Matt into oblivion. Ryan could feel herself blacking out, and she squeezed one hand weakly into a fist with her last shred of consciousness. The device crumpled in on itself, the sound abruptly ending as Ryan fell on her back to the ground. The sound of stomping footsteps hurrying upstairs went unheard as they all laid helpless.

Chapter End Notes

Oh god, I don't even know anymore. This was all over the place. To those who have stuck around this long, you're saints. Please accept this trash offering.
“Alright, Mr. Barton, if you’ll just answer a few calibration questions for us, we can begin.” Jemma Simmons was not a coward. She’d survived an extraterrestrial viral infection, an undercover stint at HYDRA, being trapped at the bottom of the ocean in a tin can, and a horrifying extended stay on an alien planet forever shrouded in darkness. But none of that meant she was thrilled to watch Fitz strap the world-renowned superhero spy who had probably toppled powerful dictators and oppressive regimes single-handedly into essentially a high-tech dentist’s chair, covering him with electrosensors, a heart rate monitor, brain-wave scanners, and a host of other biometric recording devices. Especially not with the sour look on Barton’s face and his deliberately muted scent. And Sergeant Barnes is next…

The young Beta had been surprised enough when Director Coulson told them the Avengers were all coming in to headquarters, and then to be told she and Fitz had been working on the polygraph to interrogate them because of a potential security breach in the form of a girl with incredible superpowers? It was nerve-wracking to the core. Jemma cleared her throat as Fitz sat beside her, adjusting something on the monitor facing them before beginning. “Please state your full name, presentation, and mating status for the record.”

“Clinton Francis Barton, Beta, mated to Natasha Romanov, Alpha, and Darcy Lewis, Omega,” the man replied curtly. “And speaking of my Alpha, she beat Fury’s lie detector that he spent six months developing specifically for her even after eight hours of interrogation. Good luck detecting mind control with this hunk of junk.” Clint was tired, stressed, worried, and inundated with guilt; he was not in the mood for an interrogation. Darcy hadn’t spoken to him or Nat since their fight, and it was wearing on him.

“I’d always wondered if she’d beaten it, Koenig never did tell us,” Fitz muttered to Jemma before turning to Hawkeye and crossing his arms. “Simmons completely recalibrated the scent response, pupil dilation, and biofeedback sensory mechanisms to be approximately 116% more accurate, not to mention her brilliant design of the parameters for the simultaneous brainwave scan comparison methodology,” Fitz responded with a note of defensiveness. “And there were no less than thirty-seven bugs and loopholes I discovered in Fury’s idiot programmers’ original work that I fixed in the first three days of working on this ‘hunk of junk’. Trust us, we can detect mind control.”

“Please, Mr. Barton, this will go much more efficiently with everyone’s full cooperation,” Simmons smoothed over, shooting a pointed look at Fitz. He dropped his eyes, fiddling with the touchscreen a moment. “Now, then,” she continued. “What is your eye color?”

“Blue.”

"The end date of your last SHIELD mission?"

"Currently ongoing."

“Your opinion on toe socks?”

“…what?”
“What is your opinion on toe socks, Mr. Barton?”

“They’re a disgrace to both feet and fashion. Why the hell do you want to know?!”

“Proper calibration of the instruments requires some seemingly non-sequitur psychoanalysis, sir,” Jemma explained with a smile. “Lastly, if a car was traveling at the speed of light and then switched on its headlights, would the light travel out ahead of the car at twice the speed of light, remain traveling alongside at the speed of light, or would there be no light emitted?”

Clint stared blankly. “I have no freaking clue. Can we get on with this, please?”

“For the future, it’s a trick question; only photons can travel at the speed of light, and any particle of matter would be compressed into zero space. Therefore the car would no longer exist,” Fitz informed. Clint leveled a deathly glare at him, and Fitz dropped his gaze again.

“Alright, that should be enough,” Jemma reported, adjusting a few of the output monitors on the touchscreen. “Now, please give a brief description of your first interactions with Miss Green. When did you first suspect her, and of what, specifically?”

“I heard about her first from Rogers and Barnes after she got away the first time. We didn’t know she had mind control then, so we just tracked her down like we would anyone else. Those two met with her and came back saying she had been honest about her abilities, and that everything was fine. I didn’t like it, but I trusted my team. Then, later that night, I went… out, and I ran across her in an alleyway. She almost killed three Alphas using her powers.”

“Could you go into greater detail on that incident?” Jemma was the definition of professional, despite the story rattling her somewhat. A small light caught her eye. She glanced down, and saw a minor alert on the screen. It seemed there was a small mistruth in there, someplace…

“There was an Omega girl cornered by the Alphas- no, wait, it was two Alphas and a Beta,” Clint corrected.

The alert immediately switched off. Eureka! Jemma thought excitedly. Not that she’d doubted Fitz’s engineering ability for an instant, but it was always nice to have confirmation outside of trial runs.

“I saw a flash of blue light, and I remembered what Barnes had said about the robot she’d destroyed. I went down to investigate, and she used her telepathy to tell I was there. She had the guys pinned to the wall, choking, and she only let go after I told her to.”

“Your exact words, as you remember them?”

“Um… I was angry that the Omega was being threatened, so I said something like ‘You should let them go, although I wouldn’t mind so much if you didn’t,’” Clint admitted.

“Thank you. What happened next?”

“Ryan was scaring the Omega girl, but didn’t seem to realize it. I figured out later it was because she was unpresented and couldn’t scent. The girl ran off, and Ryan and I talked for a bit. I was… comfortable with her, right from the start, and back then I didn’t question why. But it struck me after that she was using her powers to influence us.”

“What evidence led you to that conclusion?”

“First, she used her powers to supposedly save Barnes from the robot, but Barnes’ back was turned
and he couldn’t know either way. Then she gets away, no problem. Later, she meets with Cap and
Barnes, and they come back saying there wasn’t even a need to bring her in for debriefing after
learning she can control people. Then I meet up with her later that same night, doing another
supposedly good deed? It was too many weird coincidences for me.”

Another alert had been flashing the past few questions. Fitz glanced over at Simmons, a slight frown
on his face. “Was there any other aspect to your reasoning?” he asked.

“What, it’s not enough that she can play with your head like a puppet on top of everything else?”
Clint shot back sarcastically. Fitz and Simmons merely waited quietly. Rolling his eyes, Clint
continued, “Look, I almost killed my own mate when Loki brainwashed me. I wasn’t about to let it
happen again, to anyone else!”

"Of course," Fitz nodded at that, understanding his reasoning there. The alert still silently blinked on
the monitor. Deciding to move on for now, he questioned, “You invited her back to the Tower after
that, then?”

“Yeah. We played video games, and I kept an eye on her. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but
it never does in the beginning. Darcy came down for breakfast, and Ryan used her powers again in
the kitchen before I got in there. Considering she’d said she never used them except in emergencies,
I was pretty suspicious. She stayed for breakfast, and then left afterwards. I told Natasha and Tony
about Ryan’s actions that morning, and they agreed with me she was up to something. Ryan moved
in a few weeks later at Cap and Barnes’ request. That was what made me positive she was trying to
get on the inside, take us down.”

Another alert, in addition to the first one still present. Jemma studied them for a minute. “Would you
excuse us a moment, please?” Jemma smiled lightly, motioning for Fitz to follow her back out into
the hallway, leaving the door slightly ajar. “Fitz, these alerts aren’t detecting mind control, right?”
she questioned softly for her own reassurance.

“No, no, they’re describing something else,” Fitz reported. “He’s not outright lying, more like…
swaying the data to his own interpretation. It’s a normal enough bias, but he’s still not telling us
everything.”

Jemma thought hard for a few moments, her eyes far away. “I’ve got an idea,” she murmured,
turning back inside. “Mr. Barton, how did you work out that Miss Green was unpresented?”

Clint’s frown, perpetually present since the fight with Darcy, deepened further. “I already told you,
because she scared that Omega girl and didn’t realize it, and because she didn’t have any scent.”

“Why did you form that conclusion? She could have been a Beta on the pill,” Jemma led him on.

Clint wasn’t fooled. “I have an especially sensitive sense of smell. I can always tell. So what?”

Jemma decided on the direct approach. “Did the fact that she was unpresented factor into your
suspicions about her motives in her interactions with the Avengers?”

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“No fucking way.”

Steve had mostly broken himself of the habit of constant profanity he’d picked up in the 1930s.
What with Bucky working odd jobs down at the docks when they needed the money, Steve picking
fights with every other Alpha he passed by causing trouble, and both of them joining the Army in
WWII, they’d both had exceedingly dirty mouths when they’d awoken in the 21st century. The first time Steve had stubbed his toe in the old SHIELD headquarters in D.C. and let loose an unconscious yet vehement “Motherfucker!”, he’d been on the receiving end of a litany of shocked expressions and a lecture from Fury himself on his public image. He’d worked to tone it down since, and Bucky had limited himself to swearing under his breath in Romanian when they were in public. When it was just the two of them, both their Brooklyn accents and their foul tongues emerged in full force. But in this case, the public cursing was merited.

“I’m sorry, Captain, but this is the only option we have,” Coulson articulated firmly. “There’s no telling what kind of subconscious triggers are still left in Sergeant Barnes, not to mention the possibility of new ones added since your exposure to Ryan. The restraints are for his safety and everyone else’s.”

“You want to tie him down into that fucking chair and force him to answer your questions while covered in- in whatever the hell all that shit is, and you think that alone won’t fucking trigger him?!” Steve shouted, gesturing with his re-cuffed hand into the power containment room where Fitz-Simmons were recalibrating the polygraph machine. The soundproof glass of the window kept them from hearing Steve’s outburst, thankfully.

“Barnes already broke you two out of your restraints and hasn’t spoken a word since threatening Special Agent May,” Coulson countered. “Both of you were in the most direct contact with Ryan since the beginning, it’s imperative we-“

“Maybe if you stopped treating Bucky- and Ryan, for that matter- like goddamn wild animals, they wouldn’t feel the need to lash out to protect themselves!” Steve growled. He and Bucky had been separated after Coulson’s introductions with everyone this morning, and he’d waited in a power containment room alone for hours without a clock or a word of news. Coulson had eventually come to inform him that he was up next after Bucky, and Steve had convinced him to show him the machine. A few mumbled words about the memories of the agonizing pain of Howard Stark’s contraption and Coulson had caved. It had gone downhill from there. It didn’t seem like Coulson was going to capitulate on this, though.

“Right now, Ryan is a fugitive,” Coulson shot back. Steve’s Alpha scent was out in full force over the potential threat to his mate, but Phil had dealt with a lot worse. “And like it or not, the fact is that between his version of the super-serum and his extensive training, Sergeant Barnes is the most dangerous member of the Avengers, second only to the Hulk. Neither of you have acted out of the ordinary since Ryan escaped, but we can’t take any chances. And Fitz-Simmons are the only ones who can work that machine; I will not have my team put in unnecessary danger.”

Steve just shook his head. “You and the others created the danger yourselves,” he contended. “I told Fury the same thing two years ago about those fucking death machines. You holding a gun to Bucky and Ryan’s heads for everyone else’s protection isn’t any better. The punishment’s still supposed to come after the crime,” he finished, his voice low.

“You're right. No one’s being punished here, though,” Coulson maintained. “I told Stark we needed to bring Ryan in from the start for debriefing. Barton and Romanov made a different call, and we backed their play. Then Ryan set the Hulk loose, who attacked Dr. Foster, Stark, and you. She then attacked Barton and Romanov, while you and Barnes attacked Stark- which is why you and your mate are in shock restraints- so she could get away. Even if she’s somehow innocent of everything suspicion my top two spies have against her, she’s not innocent of that.”

"We did it because-" Steve cut himself off, clenching his jaw. He wanted to argue further, but realized it was futile right now. Ryan would only be acquitted with his cooperation. “Let me be in
there with Bucky, then. It’ll keep him calmer. Your agents won’t be in any danger from either of us, I swear.”

Coulson considered the proposal a moment. “I’ll run it past Fitz-Simmons. Until then, we need you to be patient, please.” His phone buzzed in his pocket just then. Taking it out, he saw an alert for a video conference in his office. “Fitz,” he called into the room as he opened the door. “Please bring Captain Rogers back to his room. Simmons, come with me, please.”

Fitz looked calm enough on the outside, but his scent was equal parts nervous and awestruck. “Erm, right this way, uh, Captain,” he stammered as he gestured down the hallway the opposite direction of Coulson and Simmons’ path.

Neither of them spoke as they walked, but Steve could tell he was making the agent more nervous by doing so. He felt bad, but not bad enough to make small talk. He was still seething over SHIELD’s decisions and his teammate’s actions. He wished he could ask himself how Natasha, Clint, and Tony could ever do something like this, but to be honest, he wasn’t that surprised in the end. All three had always kept secrets, and were easily the most suspicious of the Avengers. It was for good reason; Natasha and Clint had both been brainwashed themselves in the past, and Tony still harbored immense guilt for putting the world in danger from his past actions. He wouldn’t expect any of them to inherently trust Ryan at first, but he had hoped they would at least trust him. They had accepted Bucky; why not her?

“Er, sorry, about all this,” Fitz apologized as he opened the security door a minute later. Rogers’ scent had been slowly changing from angered back to normal, but Fitz had been around enough trained soldiers and agents now to know it could be masked.

Steve didn't reply at first, entering the bare, windowless room once again. “Wait a second,” he called out as Fitz made to lock the door. “When you’re interrogating Bucky, he’ll...probably spit back a lot of angry Russian at you. If you can get anything out of him at all. But he won’t hurt you, I swear. Just—just tell him I said… tell him December 18th, 1941. He’ll know what it means.”

Fitz nodded solemnly. “I really am sorry about all this. I know what it’s like to have a… friend, betray you.”

Steve merely nodded. He did feel betrayed, but not by who the younger Alpha likely thought. “Could you tell me the time, please?”

“Two forty-eight pm, Captain.” With that, Fitz locked the door and went back to the polygraph machine, unease twisting through his core. Captain America and the Winter Soldier locked up? Fitz-Simmons having to scan the brains of the Avengers for mind control? All because of one girl with the ability to manipulate reality in ways never before seen and entirely unexplained. Fitz was not a coward. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t scared.

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“Agent Johnson, I could use some good news.” Coulson sighed. Simmons had just left, having advised him against bringing Captain Rogers into the interrogation room with Sergeant Barnes, as it could possibly skew the results to have his mate in the room with him. She had also said there were some interesting results of Barton’s questioning, but the final conclusions were as yet unready.

“Well, it’s not really good or bad news, kinda just neutral,” Daisy replied, her face in a slight frown on the giant video monitor. “We picked up Ryan's trail, but it just disappears again, somehow. And there was a weird incident nearby right when we were investigating, but we’re not sure if it’s related.”
“Weird how?” Coulson asked.

“The trail ended next to a dumpster down in- Mack, where are we, exactly?” Daisy turned around to look at her partner behind her.

“Annie’s Diner, 45th and 11th, three blocks from the scene,” he reported back. “We asked around if anyone had seen her, and we were told she used to frequent this place sometime back. Also, it’s freezing outside.”

“We’re freezing our balls off out here. I hate winter, Coulson,” Daisy agreed.

“The weird incident, guys?” Coulson reminded them.

“Oh, right. Right after we found the dumpster, we started scanning for more blood or scent trails, and then a window just blew out over the alley across the street. The weird thing was, I would normally sense the vibrations right when it was happening, but I didn’t. We ran over there, but then this girl started screaming in an apartment and chucking stuff out the broken window. Something about her Alpha cheating on her, or whatever. That could have just been it. But it was weird that it happened right when we were there, is all.”

“Did either of you have visuals on the alley, or the window when it broke?” Coulson asked. “We still don’t know the mechanics of Ryan’s powers, but Agents Romanov and Barton reported occasional flashes of blue light when she uses them.”

“There was a weird light, I just barely caught it in the corner of my eye. I didn’t think anything of it ‘til now,” Mack answered. “Looks like we’ve got her. And she’s got help again.”

“I’m sending backup. Do not engage until they arrive,” Coulson ordered. “Use the sonic grenades, and bring in her accomplices; they’ll be mind controlled as well, we’ll need to break her hold on them. Daisy, you’re backup. If Ryan gets out somehow, keep back and use your powers only as a last resort. The last thing we need is her gaining control of more powered people.”

“Got it,” Daisy replied. “We’ll keep further back for now; I don’t know how she figured out we were there, but she can obviously tell.”

"What if she tries to disappear again?" Mack frowned.

"She was injured and out in the cold for hours. I doubt she'll be going anywhere fast," Coulson said. "Even with the help she procured, if she hasn't left yet, I doubt that's her end game."

"What is her end game, then?" Daisy questioned.

“Whatever it is, we'll stop her. Backup will be there in a few hours. Good work, both of you,” Coulson praised. He shut off the video conference, feeling apprehensive but more confident than before. *Got you.*

Chapter End Notes

I think I'm finally becoming a writer! Because I hate everything that I write. But I love all of you!! Thank you for reading the story <3 And happy new year everyone! I wish you much less anxiety and much more fresh air <3
“Phil, can we talk for a minute?” Melinda May asked softly from the doorway to Coulson’s office.

The man looked up from the papers strewn about his desk. The disorder was a fitting metaphor for how his day was going. “What is it?”

“All this about that Ryan girl,” May said, closing the door behind her. “Why didn’t you tell anyone before the incident in Avengers Tower yesterday?”

Phil didn’t want to keep secrets anymore, but as the Director of SHIELD, it was a constant necessity. He told May so, but she just shook her head.

“Try again,” she ordered.

Coulson sighed. Everyone who wanted could know the most intimate details of SHIELD’s history now, thanks to the D.C. incident ending in all of SHIELD’s files posted online forever. The secrecy was pretty much moot now. “Look, I didn’t want to cause a panic. There have already been enough incidents in both the Avengers and SHIELD’s past with mind control. Various forms of it, but still. Loki and his scepter made Barton try to kill his future Alpha, and he hurt a lot of other people besides that. Romanov herself was brainwashed too, growing up in the Red Room and assassinating for the KGB.

"Then HYDRA was hidden inside SHIELD, and we all found out we’d been lied to for forever. Barton and Romanov are the best spies in the world, and their team was infiltrated under their watches before. SHIELD had every justification to investigate Ryan. If she can actually do everything she says, then she’s the most powerful person on the planet.”

“I’m not denying any of that; it’s all true,” May agreed. “But we would have been better prepared if you’d told at least some of us what was happening from the start. Fitz-Simmons barely finished the machine on time, and now Daisy and Mack are out there trying to bring her in without any idea what they’re really up against.”

“I know. But Stark promised me they’d handle it, and I didn’t see any other way,” Phil admitted. “It seemed best at the time. I mean, that’s not even all of the mind control nonsense they and we have had to deal with. Sergeant Barnes was brainwashed by HYDRA to kill Captain America, the TAHITI disaster and the Kree technology that messed with me…there isn’t any training for this. We’ve never had to deal with the possibility of mind control on this magnitude before, and we don’t have a good track record with it. And whether she’s innocent or not, Ryan still endangered the lives of all the Avengers with whatever actually happened yesterday. We need to get the situation under control before it goes any further.”

Melinda’s eyes softened in understanding. She had almost had to fulfill her promise to Coulson to take him down if he lost control of himself once before. She didn’t want that to happen again. “Was there ever any indication of Ryan misusing her abilities?”

“Not that we could tell,” Phil confessed. “But we have no idea if that means anything at all. We only had Barton and Romanov’s reports and video surveillance to go off of. If her powers work
telepathically, then everyone in the Tower and more could have been compromised. If it’s some sort of verbal cue, or even a non-verbal one, then it could be transmitted through video as well. There’s no telling. Except for Fitz-Simmons’ gadget now, hopefully.”

“Could she really be that powerful? She’s only human,” Melinda debated. “Well, in theory. She’s not Inhuman, at least.”

“No, not with her powers’ origins. Unless that was a lie too,” Phil replied, as he rolled his eyes. “All of this just goes in circles until we can get some trustworthy answers.”

Melinda pondered for a moment. “What if we’re entirely wrong about all of this? If she’s really an entirely upstanding citizen- has never hurt a soul with her powers or otherwise- what then?”

“Then we apologize, and we thoroughly debrief her on her powers and history anyway, and then continue to watch her,” Phil answered. “SHIELD monitored everyone on the index, even the weakest pyrokinetics or just people with unbreakable skin. Ryan is no different in that regard.”

“It’ll have to be one hell of an apology,” Melinda said dryly.

“Yeah. The usual muffin basket probably won’t work,” Phil joked back. “If all that is true, then hopefully she’ll be reasonable enough to understand that this is our job. Someone with Ryan’s abilities could just waltz inside the White House and kill the President, if she wanted to. No one could stop her. We have to be prepared for that kind of eventuality now that we know it’s possible.”

“And if Ryan has hurt others with her powers in the past?”

“Then we’ll watch her even more closely, probably in a power containment room, for a very long time.”

“That doesn’t exactly line up with the Geneva Convention for civilians, you know,” Melinda pointed out sarcastically.

“Innocent before proven guilty by a jury of your peers isn’t really as effective when you can make the judge literally forget your case,” Coulson responded in kind.

“Regardless, we can’t screw this up,” Melinda argued. “The stakes are too high with someone with her capabilities.”

“We’re having her take the ultimate lie detector test. There won’t be any question of her guilt or innocence in the end,” Phil replied. “Special circumstances merit actions that are otherwise extreme. We’ve always had to bend the rules when powered people are concerned for everyone’s safety. I know it looks risky, but all we’re doing right now is bringing her in and debriefing her.”

Melinda stayed silent, which worried Phil even further. “Where is this coming from? You haven’t worried about any of this before,” he pointed out.

“Normally we’re better informed before we go after a target.”

“Normally the targets aren’t half this dangerous. Ryan beat Romanov in single combat without any training, and was shaking the entire Tower before she escaped, according to JARVIS. And those are only the incidents we know about; who knows what else she’s capable of? If we don’t keep the world safe, who will?”

“I’m on your side, Phil,” Melinda asserted. “If nothing else, Ryan did attack the Avengers and resist arrest. I agree it looks guilty.”
“I know. I’m sorry,” Phil sighed. “I just didn’t think my tenure as Director could get more crazy than HYDRA, my protégée getting superpowers, my top scientist being sucked through a portal to an alien world, and Hunter and Bobbi’s back and forth ‘romance’."

Another video call popped up on the screen just then. “Speak of the devil,” Coulson said, accepting the call. “What news, Bobbi?”

“We’re on Banner’s trail, sir,” the blonde reported back. “It looks like he went via car away from the city, heading northeast. We’re trying to follow the car now, but Stark’s vehicles are almost impossible to hack, and he likely disabled the tracker.”

“He’d be a bloody idiot to not disable the tracker, especially after doing his best to disappear from the safe house,” Hunter interjected from somewhere off-screen. Bobbi rolled her eyes.

“Stark didn’t mention a car being missing before. I’ll ask him about that, and I’ll have Daisy try her hand at tracking down the car,” Coulson replied. “Be cautious, but bring in Banner as soon as you can. Good work, you two.”

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Natasha didn’t dwell much on the past. Useless nostalgia only weighed her down. But all of the craziness of the last few months hit a little too close to home to ignore the parallels.

Little girls in red dresses. Sleeping handcuffed to the metal bedpost. Defeating fully grown men, soldiers, dictators, each other. Harsh orders in her native tongue to obliterate every threat, spare no one. The dead left behind. Made into a weapon, a gun to be pointed. Discovering she could get whatever she wanted, do whatever she pleased. She was strong, trained, capable. No one could stop her. As long as she outsmarted them. If she didn’t outsmart them, she wouldn’t survive.

Her dancing master after her final ballet lesson. The only compliment she’d ever received. “There is no creature more powerful than woman, Natalia. And you...most powerful of all. You will shape the world.”

But it wasn’t true. Men, then monsters, then magic had invaded and reshaped the world in their image instead. Gods and demons of a different, more literal meaning than ever before had almost broken her, and had broken others. The man she’d loved on sight- more than her duty, her revenge, her life- had been stolen from her, enslaved. She’d had to watch helplessly as his legs marched, arms shot, head strategized for then the most powerful being ever known, as Loki tried to subjugate the world to his will. All she could do was try to fight.

And now, a single girl. So much stronger than Loki and his alien army, than all of HYDRA, than she. Natasha now had two mates and the rest of the world still to protect yet again. It was nothing she had ever trained for. But she wasn’t about to repeat the mistakes of the past. Absolute power corrupts absolutely; she’d seen it time and again. It was why SHIELD existed, why she worked for them. The red in her ledger was often the blood of men who had sought power for their own gain. If regular men fought and destroyed and killed and died for merely coveting that power, how much more so would someone who already had a taste? History showed her to be right. The Avengers were the only obstacle in the way for someone like that. Someone who could shake the Tower to its foundations without even breaking a sweat. Someone who could crush a gun could crush a bone, a heart. And why wouldn’t she? It would be effortless. No one could resist the lure of that kind of
power. In her experience, no one ever had.

She continued preparing for her own interrogation, going over every detail of her memories of the last few months, waiting alone in a secluded corner with chairs and a couch by the sick bay. Darcy was still angry at her, choosing to wait with Jane and Thor elsewhere. Clint had been selected to go first, as it was he that pieced together the initial threat. Not that Natasha hadn’t been suspicious from the start; she certainly had been. But it was supposed to be SHIELD’s job to monitor powered people, even though she barely trusted the organization still after the HYDRA fallout. She had chosen to trust her team in its stead. Until Ryan had come into her home like she owned it, and them. Natasha knew the difference between a person and a threat. Sometimes, though, even she forgot that the hellscape she’d spent her life fighting through had taken its toll. Trust issues were the least of her inner problems.

Damn, I’m melancholy lately, she thought wryly. It felt like it had been forever since she had been able to just make a fossil joke about Cap or sneakily pull a prank on Sam with Darcy. She’d had other SHIELD business on top of watching Ryan, and the work had consumed her. It wasn’t fair to her mates or herself. She was ready to put all this behind her. She stood up, stretching out her stiffened back. The familiar smell of pine boughs wafted towards her, and she turned to see Clint approaching.

“That took longer than I expected,” she greeted him softly.

“The questioning itself only took about an hour. The machine wasn’t ready when we got here, apparently,” he replied grudgingly, collapsing onto the couch and covering his eyes with one arm. He hadn’t slept in almost two days, and he was wrung out in every way possible.

Natasha knew he couldn’t talk about the interrogation in any detail, but she also knew him better than she knew herself. “Come on,” she said, tugging the arm back off his face. “Let’s go find Darcy.”

“Why, so she can chew us out for doing our jobs again? No thanks,” Clint snarked.

“So, what, you’re going to just sit here and sulk?” Natasha taunted.

“Yes. I think I’ve earned it,” her incorrigible mate responded.

“Nope. You’re coming with me.” And with that, she let her playful side loose a moment as she scooped her arms under his torso and deadlifted him over her shoulder, fireman-style.

“H-hey! What the hell?!?” Clint spluttered as she began walking away. “Since when are you even this strong?”

“I love you, babe, but you’re exactly 163 pounds, and I’m a trained assassin,” she smirked. “You’re a twig compared to the guys I’ve fought.” Her hand was pressed firmly on his ass, and Clint rolled his eyes as his cheeks reddened.

“It’s 163 pounds of pure muscle, thank you very much.”

“Of course, dear.”

*** *** ***
Bucky’s chilling glare hadn’t altered since he had been retrieved from his cell until he saw the polygraph machine for the first time. Every instinct in his body told him to destroy, to fight, to make a break for it and go on the run, to eliminate the threat or get away. He wouldn’t have his memories, his autonomy, his life ripped away from him again. He battled against himself, his rational mind telling him HYDRA was in the past, SHIELD had helped him, he was doing this for Ryan. But he still couldn’t move from the doorway. His metal hand clenched to a fist, his eyes wild and scent approaching panicked. The agent that had brought him there reached for his icer gun.

“Uh, sir? C-Captain America told me to tell you something,” Fitz stammered nervously, awkwardly positioning himself behind his chair instinctively. Bucky’s eyes flickered to his, hard and unyielding but not masking the torment beneath. “He said you would know what December 18th, 1941 meant?”

Bucky’s eyes widened, then looked down and away as he thought back through his still somewhat scattered memories of before the war. A vision of their old apartment, chilly and dark in mid-December, flashed through his mind.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Rogers?! If the army finds out you’re trying to register under a fake name-”

“I have to try, Buck! I already got denied at the recruiting center downtown, I didn’t have a choice-“

“Why are you so fucking ready to get yourself killed, huh?” Bucky yelled as he shook the 4F paper in Steve’s face. “You’re a 110 pounds soaking wet, you almost break a rib every time you sneeze, and you already pick fights with every jackass Johnson you pass on the street! Now you want to go get yourself blown up in a trench in goddamn Germany?!"

"Lay off, Bucky," Steve fumed, a hint of Alpha voice leaking through. Bucky pushed past it, though, too angry to entirely register its presence.

"What, you think gotta go prove yourself, show the world you're a real he-man? Or is the old apple pie life with me just too fucking boring?!"

“I HAVE TO PROTECT YOU!!” Steve screamed, Alpha voice in full effect. Bucky startled, taking an unconscious step back as his mouth clacked shut at Steve’s words. “You think I don’t know how dangerous it is? Shit, my father got killed in the great war, Buck!” Steve continued. “I’m not just some blind patriot! But I’m not going to live in a world where an asshole dictator gasses innocent people like you just for loving an idiot like me.”

Bucky shut his eyes, running his hand across his face. “There’s other things you can do, Stevie-“


“If by some miracle you do get a 1A stamp, when they find out you’re mated to a queer-“

“They won’t find out, I won’t tell no one,” Steve interrupted again. “But we both know you’re going to get drafted, I’m not letting you go over there alone.”

“Yeah, they won’t find out, for sure,” Bucky said sarcastically. He sighed then. He hated fighting with Steve, more than anything in the world, except for seeing Steve get himself hurt. He couldn’t let his Alpha do this, not for him. It’d break his heart. “Babydoll, please,” he breathed, his eyes starting to water and scent rife with sorrow. “You’re everything, my whole world, I- I can’t lose you
“Hey, hey,” Steve soothed, wrapping his arms around his mate. He pressed his lips into the mating mark by Bucky’s collarbone, already a few years old but seemingly still so new. “We’re gonna be fine. You take care of me every day, and now I’m gonna make it back for you. You and me, ‘til the end of the line, right?”

“That line’ll be a hell of a lot shorter if we both end up getting shot full of holes over there,” Bucky mourned.

“Don’t talk like that,” Steve admonished, holding him even tighter. “I know this is the right thing to do, just like I always knew you were the only one for me. I’ll fight a million Nazis and swim the ocean itself to get back to you.”

Bucky clung to his Alpha, so much smaller than he, ghosting his lips over the matching mark he’d left on Steve’s neck. The scent of his Alpha calmed him, and he held to the hope in Steve’s vow like a lifeline. “Okay,” he sighed. “When we get home, though, you’re finally going to art school. I don’t care if I work the docks the rest of my life.”

“Anything you want,” Steve promised. “But you’re too smart for that. We’ll get you an office job, something respectable. You’ll wear a suit and tie every day.”

“Don’t matter. You’ll be a famous artist, drawing pictures of every big cheese in the Big Apple. We’ll be able to afford it then.”

“We’ll move to some swanky high-rise, ‘buddy bachelors’ to the end,” Steve joked. “Who knows? Maybe there’ll be some dime piece dame what catches your eye, we’ll have a few kids.”

“Please, dollface, you’re more than I can handle already. Plus, you’re just as pretty as any blushing broad, what do I need one of them for?”

“Shut your trap, jerk. You never know. Maybe someday, there’ll be an Omega out there for us. And I know for a fact you want kids, running around making trouble, running ‘n calling you Daddy when you get home.”

Bucky pulled back out of Steve’s embrace, taking his face in his hands instead. Pale, milky skin, light blond hair, stunning blue irises all shone back at him, reflected in the dim light of the city outside. “Like you don’t want your own little angel, punk, gazing up at you all wide-eyed like you hung the moon for her. It’ll have to be some live wire, though, getting involved with two guys already mated. Especially saps like you and me.”

Steve stood on his toes and kissed him thoroughly, his heart almost bursting with how much he loved his mate. He could see their future together in Bucky’s eyes, and it was all he’d ever wanted. “She’ll be something real special, Buck. You wait and see,” he whispered against his Beta’s lips. “Although hey, it could be a fella.”

“Right, like we need more knucklehead in this relationship!”

Bucky blinked back to the present to see slightly concerned expressions on the two agents’ faces in front of him. He’d gotten the message loud and clear, though. Silently, he brushed off his guard and walked over and sat in the horrible chair. It would be alright. Steve was always with him, and Ryan needed them both. It couldn’t be about him right now.

Fitz looked over at Simmons, surprised at the sudden turn of events. She shrugged, and Fitz approached the Sergeant cautiously to hook up the sensors. “I’m supposed to, uh, use added
restraints,” he said to Barnes, who was breathing carefully and not watching Fitz’s movements at all. “But I think we’ll be alright without them, yeah?”

Bucky nodded. “’M sorry about that,” he muttered, his voice scratchy from his extended silence.

“Quite all right, Sergeant,” Jemma chirped cheerfully, pressing buttons on the screen as the machine warmed up. “We’ll make this as quick as possible. And it’s entirely painless, I promise.”

Bucky nodded again, his expression cautiously blank. Taking this as a sign to begin, Fitz sat back down behind the monitor again and said, “We have a few calibration questions first. Please state your full name, presentation, and mating status for the record.”

“Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, Beta, mated to Captain Steven Rogers, Alpha.”

“What is your eye color?”

“Brown.”

“Your age when you were drafted into the Army?”

“22 years old.”

“Your opinion on the Harry Potter series?”

“…those are the movies about the wizard kid, right?”

“Yes, they’re books as well,” Jemma cut in. “And lastly, will the reaction of propanol and sulfuric acid at 180 degrees Celsius result in elimination to an alkane product, substitution to an ether, or will there be no reaction?”

Bucky frowned slightly, looking confused. “Some of us went to war instead of college, kid,” he said, quirking up an eyebrow.

Jemma’s cheeks reddened. “I’m so sorry, sir, we had to ask a trick question, I didn’t mean to imply-“

Bucky waved her off, giving her a small smirk. “Don’t worry about it. I was always useless at science, anyway.”

“Well, in case you wanted to know, it actually results in a single nucleotide elimination to an alkene product,” Jemma said quickly, clearing her now flaming-red throat after. “Moving on. Can you please describe your first interactions with Ryan?”

“…wait, you’re not just going to ask me if I’ve been mind controlled? Can’t you tell with this machine?!”

“We can, sir, but we need the whole story as well,” Jemma explained. “It’s imperative we compare the stories and results of the scans between all of the Avengers. Additionally, we have no current understanding of the scope or breadth of Ryan’s abilities; hopefully, from yours and other’s experiences, we can begin to piece it all together.”

“Well, for the record, then, I’m not nor have I ever been under mind control. By Ryan, that is. I was previously for sure,” Bucky added darkly. “And the first time I ever saw her was when she saved my life.”

Fitz and Simmons looked down to the monitor simultaneously. No alerts. Their eyes met, and they turned as one back to Bucky. “Can you elaborate, please?” Fitz asked.
“It was the robot attacks down in Soho back in late August. I was using my sniper rifle to pick them off from above when one snuck up behind me. I couldn’t hear anything over the noise below, until Ryan yelled for me to get out of the way. It would’ve blasted me to bits if she hadn’t. I saw the robot frozen in blue light, and then it was crushed to pieces a second later. Ryan was standing all the way across the roof by the stairs. We talked, and I figured out she could read minds as well.”

“How did you come to that conclusion?”

“I was analyzing her. She commented on it.” He gave just the slightest upturn of his lips, thinking back to the time. “She said my smile was probably nice.”

“She did not mention mind control at the time, correct?”

“Correct. She did bring it up herself, though, when Steve and I questioned her later that night. She was 100% honest, as far as we could tell, about her powers and her history.”

“Can you give us the abbreviated version, please?”

“Parents died in the Tower attacks when she was 11. Developed telekinesis as at age one, telepathy around six, and mind control at 13. Doesn’t use them normally, shuts off the telepathy, never uses mind control except in life-threatening circumstances.”

“Wait, her powers developed over time? And not all simultaneously?” Jemma repeated, her voice tinged with excitement.

“Yeah, that’s what she told us,” Bucky confirmed.

“Fitz, I need to talk to you for a moment!” Jemma exclaimed, tugging Fitz hurriedly out the door.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Do you know what this means?!?” she continued as soon as the door shut behind them. Simmons had dragged Fitz at top speed into the nearest broom closet, where she stood next to a bucket of mops and floor cleaner with an elated expression on her face.

“It sounds like her powers- I don’t know, evolved, somehow?” Fitz pondered, looking to Jemma for confirmation. His mate was never more radiant than when a new scientific discovery was close at hand, and he watched her practically glow as she paced back and forth. The scent of her excitement, like starlight and summer air, swirled around them in the confined space.

“Exactly! Evolution, it’s the adaptation of a population over time, correct? But it’s almost never truly seen on the individual level, it can only even be observed on a visible time scale when there’s some sort of drastic change that dramatically increases fitness in the subsequent generation. The fit genes will be passed down at a higher frequency, and the gene pool allelic frequency alters accordingly. But that inciting change is almost always environmental in nature, and the fit individual just happened to have the luck of the draw for the advantageous trait already present in the population, albeit perhaps previously silenced. It’s why intelligence evolved as a dominant trait, as those who could alter the environment to the population’s needs would be more likely to survive. But Ryan, oh!” She clapped her hands together in excitement. “Ryan could quite possibly be changing herself to fit her environment over time! An entirely new evolutionary strategy! Imagine, her own DNA rewriting over and over to somehow give her the ability to-”
“Wait, wait, Jemma,” Fitz interrupted, starting to pace himself. “Are you saying that Ryan’s superpowers developed to fit her needs? That her only real power is… adaptation?”

“It’s entirely possible!” Jemma exclaimed. “Think about it! At age one, the biggest obstacle in an infant’s life is motility; they pick up language rapidly, their cognitive skills increase daily, but their fine motor skills are still abysmal. Ryan counters that with telekinesis! Age six, the barrier is interpersonal skills and understanding social patterns as they begin to interact with their peers outside the primary sociological group of the family when they start formal education!”

Jemma’s voice was getting higher and faster as she explained, almost giddy with excitement. “Ryan counters that problem with telepathy, so she can understand everything a person is thinking and doing! Age 13, puberty is well underway, and teenage rebellion often takes hold as the individual prepares for adulthood. What would make the transition smoother than always being able to get exactly what you want, to do whatever you wanted to do? Especially in a situation like hers, so varying in circumstance?”

“Oh god,” Fitz breathed. “She was unpresented that whole time, according to Agent Barton. Both her parents were unpresented, there shouldn’t have been any way for her to, much less at age 25. But when she moved into the Tower…”

“She adapted yet again! She wouldn’t have presented earlier, she was never in a stable situation where it would be an advantage for a long enough time period as a teenager, according to Agent Barton’s testimony. I would suspect it happened now because she felt some level of attraction to one of the unmated residents, or at least there was an unconscious recognition of biological compatibility, and finally given enough time, voila! Ryan presents as an Omega! And on top of that, her scent was apparently irresistible- she was incredibly fit for mating!” Jemma looked like Christmas had come early, her eyes beaming as bright as her smile. Fitz didn’t seem excited by the potential discovery though; in fact, his face and scent were downright stormy. “Fitz? What’s wrong?”

“Jemma, sweetheart, listen to me, please,” he insisted, taking her face gently in his hands and looking her square in the eye. “We can’t tell anyone about this yet.”

“What!? No, no no no, the last time we kept any kind of secret from our team-”

“This isn’t our secret to tell!” Fitz interrupted, releasing her and sitting on an upturned bucket. “You heard Sergeant Barnes in there, you saw the monitor. He and the Captain were the two most likely to be under Ryan’s control, and he’s not. Agent Barton’s results were negative as well. Which most likely means that there was never any danger to begin with.”

“Of course I know that, Fitz! It’s fantastic news!” Jemma proclaimed, still high off the excitement. “So there’s no need to keep anything from anyone!”

Fitz stood up straight again, running his hands through his hair. “No, no, you don’t understand,” he insisted, beginning to pace himself now. “Even if all of the Avengers and Director Coulson all accept these results, no problem, if we tell them that Ryan’s true ability is to evolve-”

“Oh, no,” Jemma breathed, as the implications struck her all at once. “No, you could be right. All the real suspicion seems to have begun when Ryan revealed she could control people. If they find out she could gain other abilities still as well-”

“-they’ll never even let her out of sight again,” Fitz finished. “I mean, it was bad enough, all the suspicion that Daisy had to endure when she developed her powers. We’re a bit more used to powered people now, but not of this caliber- the Inhumans don’t have anyone like Ryan. I’m not saying we should be afraid of her, but… it might be prudent to be a little afraid of what she can do.”
“But, Fitz, that’s ridiculous, we’re not the bad guys,” Jemma pleaded. “Reacting from fear in face of the unknown is completely counteractive to scientific advancement. You and I can help her understand her powers better than she ever has! And Coulson wouldn’t just lock her away forever on principle, it’s unethical.”

“Coulson ordered us to restrain an Avenger for fear of latent effects of mind control that might not even be present anymore,” Fitz pointed out. “Loki controlled minds, HYDRA controlled minds, and a lot of other evil people have all tried to control minds. And this girl can just do it, no problem! History is not in Ryan’s favor about this. SHIELD has always taken the ‘Intervention’ and ‘Enforcement’ parts of the acronym most literally; if there’s even the possibility of another incident like New York, Greenwich, Washington D.C.-“

“I know, I know. We’ll try to stop it before it starts,” Jemma cut in. “But there’s currently no evidence that Ryan would attempt anything like that.”

“Just because no country as of yet has launched a nuclear strike since Nagasaki doesn’t mean the codes aren’t still kept top secret,” Fitz theorized. “The world is so dangerous that preemptive strikes are the norm nowadays. The NSA screens your calls, the CIA tracks your browser history, and SHIELD monitors the index.”

“Monitoring the index is a far cry from keeping Ryan caged up just because she has these powers,” Jemma argued. “Again, it’s entirely unethical, Coulson would never do that.”

Fitz shook his head. “I'm not saying he would, but... think about it like this. Say, some mystical alien artifact was discovered, and it let you destroy whatever you want, let you read people’s minds, let you control their every move, had powers you’d yet to discover. You’d be essentially unstoppable. Would you really just leave it alone? Regardless of how it had been used in the past?”

Jemma was silent a moment. “Ryan is a person. It’s entirely different.”

“You and I can afford to think so. SHIELD can’t, I don’t think,” Fitz replied sadly. “SHIELD did leave Ryan alone at first, just monitoring her actions quietly- albeit with ulterior motives- and then the incident at the Tower happened. It’s the question of the rights and freedom of the individual at the risk of everyone else. It’s ancient philosophy, it’s always been an impossible decision.

“It’s why things like gun control laws or the Patriot Act exist. They’re not always popular, but for some, what does it matter if they save lives? And even if Ryan would never do anything evil on her own, has never abused her powers even once, what if someone discovered her abilities and blackmailed her, bent her to their will? Imagine if the last remains of HYDRA got ahold of someone like her. In some ways, all this is for her protection too.”

“That was quite the monologue, dear,” Jemma retorted, looking away through the shelves of cleaning supplies. There was a reason she’d stuck to science all these years; there was always a right answer, as opposed to with problems like this. “You’re not wrong, but this is all still hypothetical. We need more information about her abilities before we can make any firm conclusions,” she continued.

“Jemma, please. You know how SHIELD works as well as I do. We might be the good guys, but there’s no easy answer here. We’re not perfect, but neither is Ryan. And her potential mistakes are a lot more dangerous,” Fitz concluded. “I’m not making moral judgments here, because I don’t have a solution yet. And I don’t know what’s going to happen, either. But you and I don’t need to add fuel to the fire, regardless,” he decided. “Please, let’s keep this under wraps, at least for now.”

A knock on the door startled them both. Fitz quickly reopened it, smoothing out his shirt
unconsciously. The guard that had been stationed outside the door to the interrogation room smirked
at them. “Sergeant Barnes is still waiting, if you two are done… talking.”

“Yes, ahem, of course,” Jemma said briskly, her face blushing cherry red as she quickly strode out of
the closet and back down the hall, Fitz close on her heels. “Under wraps, for now,” she muttered
low.

“Thank you,” Fitz whispered back. He grasped her hand as they walked back to the interrogation
room. It was only four-thirty in the afternoon, and they all still had a long way to go. After Sergeant
Barnes, Captain Rogers was next.

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Ryan stirred briefly, her head groggy and confused. It was cold, wherever she was, and her side
ached with pain again. She managed to pry open one eye halfway, her vision blurry and swimming.
Her surroundings were dimly lit, but it looked like she was in an otherwise empty, silvery-walled
room. Too exhausted to stay awake, her eye dragged itself shut again, while her ears were filled
with a loud mechanic rushing sound. Her only coherent thought before unconsciousness was that
she’d never been on a plane before.

Chapter End Notes

I am a lot more satisfied with this chapter than the one before this. Ironically, it goes
along with what I’m learning in my J term class right now... the homework for which
I’m avoiding by doing this instead. Let me know what you think! <3
“So sorry for the delay, Sergeant,” Jemma said breathlessly as she and Fitz hurried back into the makeshift interrogation room, the guard behind them closing the door after entering. “There was, erm, a minor issue we had to discuss,” she continued as she began fiddling with the touchscreen stand in front of the room again. Fitz went back over to the chair to recheck all the sensors and equipment.

Bucky rolled his eyes internally as the scientists went about their tasks. He wasn’t even remotely fooled; he knew those two had just figured out something important about Ryan’s powers from his testimony. He did not, however, have the expertise to duplicate the breakthrough on his own. What he did have was 70 years’ worth of intelligence training and experience.

The girl, he decided. Intel direct from the source. Both are from the UK. Simple enough.

“Gan imní, a chara,” he lilted. His posture was open, his face friendly and hands relaxed.

Both Fitz and Simmons’ heads perked up from the monitors at the unexpected syllables. “Labhraíonn tú an Gaelacha?” Fitz askedinterestedly.

“I speak a lot of languages,” Bucky answered casually. “I learned that one from Steve’s mother when we were young. She was an Irish immigrant through Ellis.” Step one: Be deliberately vulnerable to invoke idea of submission.

Jemma’s scent was practically buzzing with excited curiosity; the history of SHIELD was fascinating enough, but the history of Sergeant Barnes himself? No one knew anything of true substance about Captain Roger’s early life, and even less about his now equally-famous mate. “Fitz is almost fluent in Scots Gaelic, aren’t you?” she pointed out.

“A bit different than Irish, yeah, but there’s overlap,” he said modestly. “And I’m not fluent, I just learned bits and pieces growing up from my grandmum.”

“Is e ’n t-ionnsachadh òg an t-ionnsachadh bòidheach,” Bucky rattled off easily. Step two: find common ground to establish trust.

Jemma looked quickly to Fitz for translation. “The lessons learned young are best,” Fitz muttered to her with the slightest frown. He thought it odd that a half hour ago, the man was ready to destroy the polygraph machine with his bare hands, and now he was conversing with Jemma like they were having a tea. No reason to worry his mate, though. “If you’re ready to continue, then, Sergeant…?”

“Of course,” Bucky nodded slightly. “Like I said, Ryan got her powers when she was just a kid. God, I can’t even imagine.” Women often have greater compassion for children.

“Imagine what, sir?” Jemma inquired.

Step three: lay the bait. “Having to read people’s minds until she learned to shut it off? The girl was six years old, she must’ve been terrified. Not to mention she had to keep it all a secret, and on top of that, not knowing what might be coming next?” Bucky was reaching a bit here; he didn’t know how Ryan’s powers worked beyond what she had told them that first night in the diner. It wasn’t her favorite conversation topic, given the fact that she was obviously terrified of her own abilities. Silencing them for years at a time, not to mention the sparring incident with Natasha; it didn’t take
Stark-level genius to figure it out.

Everyone had seen Ryan didn’t know she had the ability to instinctively react to telegraphed movements in a fight, and he had concluded then it was an extension of the telepathy. After the apparent breakthrough his interrogators had a few minutes ago, though, he was rethinking his theory.

“Mm, yes, although no one could really know what she would develop next,” Jemma replied unthinkingly, trying to keep up the rapport she seemed to be building with the Winter Soldier of all people.

Fitz cleared his throat, the tips of his ears red. He loved his mate endlessly, but she couldn’t lie to save her life. “Anyway, please continue.”

No one could know what she would develop next. Not inborn and latent abilities, then. But we could know she would develop more? Implies an underlying cause to the effect, non-spontaneous. And by what mechanism of development? Bucky calculated it all quickly, his mind flowing easily to the cool logic of threat analysis drilled into him. “Ryan answered all our questions. All of that information should be in the report sent here afterwards. After that, she ran into Clint that same night, saved another life, and then came to the Tower afterwards.”

“There was nothing unusual at in that time period that you noticed, then?” Simmons questioned.

“No.” Bucky was about to continue when he saw both of them glance downwards at the monitor. He’d raised some sort of alarm. As planned. It wouldn’t do to have them believe he was perfectly honest; that would only be suspicious. “Well, there was that bit with the coffeepot, but I didn’t witness that.” He watched both eyes return to him. “It was only strange in that it was the most comfortable I’d ever heard of her being with her powers. She’s always been afraid of them, and for good reason, apparently.” Step four: spring the trap.

“What do you mean by that, sir?” Fitz inquired, keeping his voice as politely level as possible.

Bucky shrugged guilelessly. “Just that we don’t know the source or cause of her powers. It’s nothing to hold against her, but I can understand why she’d be scared. Especially when she turned 13; life’s hard enough then, but having more abilities pop up out of nowhere? Unless something caused them, somehow.”

“Well, cause and effect is the basis of all science,” Jemma commented off-handedly. “What happened next?”

Science, cause, effect. Something caused her powers, but it wasn’t a singular external event because they developed over time. Internal response to external stimulus most likely. Internal processes… fuck. Biology? Chemistry? Bucky hadn’t been lying about his lack of scientific knowledge; the subject was light-years ahead of its level back in the 20s and 30s, and it hadn’t been necessary for his training beyond learning to make a bomb without killing himself in the process. Answering aloud, he said, “Steve found her sleeping in a park a few weeks later, and we got her to live with us. She worked with Bruce on whatever he does, and life was… normal.”

Another alert, again intended.

“You noticed no… unusual events, strange actions by anyone?” Fitz supplied.

Bucky pursed his lips a moment. “I noticed Natasha and Clint were suspicious of Ryan about something, but I thought it would all blow over. I didn’t think they were officially spying on her, just
keeping a close eye.”

It seemed he hadn’t satisfied the machine, though. “There was nothing unusual specifically about Ryan, or perhaps your relationship to her, though?” Jemma tried.

Memories flashed through his mind in nanoseconds. Ryan smiling at him and giggling when he teased Steve for being confused at which of Stark's 18 TV remotes to use. Ryan swearing profusely when she lost against Clint and Thor at whatever video game. Ryan having no poker face in their card games. Ryan bursting out laughing at the book she was reading. Ryan trying not to talk her way through movies and failing. Ryan working out in clothes older than he was. Ryan volunteering with Sam and retelling veterans’ stories. Ryan in his arms when he taught her to dance. Ryan in his arms when she smelled like heaven come to earth.

Ryan isolating herself by habit, thinking no one would miss her. Ryan covering the pain in her voice with a stupid joke. Ryan running from her past. Ryan divulging a terrible secret of her weakest moments. Ryan hating herself and thinking she could hide it. Ryan’s vicious temper when finally stirred at her friends’ betrayal.

“Ryan is my friend. She has her secrets. I didn’t care. I don’t care,” Bucky stated, his voice low.

Fitz and Simmons looked at each other again, practically reading each other’s thoughts through their expressions. Fitz nodded slightly, and swallowed nervously when he looked back at the man in the chair. “Can you please tell us the nature of your feelings for Miss Green, sir?”

Shit. “She’s my friend. I keep friends safe.” Bucky evaded as best he could. He didn’t entirely know the answer himself yet.

His and Steve’s reactions in the common room. Abandoning Ryan on the stairs while wanting to scent, taste, kiss every inch of her. Steve, the love of his very long life, licking and biting and moaning as they hurriedly fell into bed. Pleasure so intense he saw stars. Because of Ryan. Oh, he knew how his body felt about Ryan when she’d been in heat, no question. But he wasn’t about to investigate his heart right now.

The half-truth didn’t appease Fitz, Simmons, or the machine. But they could surmise the answer well enough, Fitz decided. “Thank you, Sergeant Barnes. Just a few more questions.” The clock ticked past five, and the interrogation continued on. At some point, the guard slipped out quietly.

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“Darce, you need to go talk to your mates,” Jane asserted suddenly. “I’m not dealing with your mopey-ness anymore. Go fix the problem.”

“What happened to being the cool friend instead of the mom friend?” Darcy complained. For lack of a better option, they had been lounging about watching some ridiculously sappy Hallmark Channel movie about - what else? - a love triangle, miscommunication between the Omega girl and the Alpha guy, and a big dramatic breakup. They were about to reunite and live happily ever after, though, and it was making Darcy even grouchier. Her normal scent, carnations and sweetness, was slowly wilting to burnt sugar.

“Darcy, you are our dearest friend,” Thor began, tearing his riveted eyes away from the screen for the first time. “We do not wish to see you suffer, when the issue is quite easily remedied.”

“Quite easily remedied’?” Darcy spat back at him, the frown lines on her forehead deepening. “They lied to me for months and almost got Jane killed, you think we can just kiss and make up?!”
“Darce, girl, you know why they did it,” Jane interjected. “And I’m fine, not even a concussion! We don’t know what really happened then yet, so blaming people is pointless.”

“It doesn’t matter, they still lied to me,” Darcy sulked, although her voice was less venomous than before. She sighed deeply. It wasn’t like she wanted to be angry with her mates. But those two had been together for years before she met them, had made an instant love connection, and worked together every day to save the world. Without her. Always left at home, left waiting for them to return, like a pathetic 1950s housewife. She’d never wanted to just make a home and settle down forever; she wanted some adventure, too!

Instead, she had to watch as the two people she loved most kissed her good-bye and then left with each other. There was no way she could compete with what they had. She’d found herself wondering more and more on her lonelier nights after the regular - obligatory? - FaceTime with them why they’d even mated with her in the first place. They had each other; they didn’t need her. And now, everything with Ryan? It was her worst thoughts, all the insecurities shoved in the back of her mind, come to fruition. Her eyes began to water as she thought of Natasha’s words on the plane ride over. There was no way it could be true.

Jane shrugged herself out of Thor’s embrace to pull Darcy into her own. Darcy had confided in her about some of her worries in the past, and Jane knew they would be preying on her now. “It’ll be okay,” she comforted, not really knowing what else to say. Thor’s massive arm reached around the back of the couch to rest across Darcy and Jane’s shoulders as they huddled together.

“You know, you could put me down and we’d get there faster!” Clint’s voice sounded from someplace far off down a hallway. Darcy lifted her head off Jane’s shoulder, eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

“I like you just where you are,” Natasha’s voice followed up, coming closer every second. The two of them came into view a moment later, Natasha smirking with a red-faced Clint thrown backwards over her shoulder. Darcy almost smiled, despite herself.

“Oh, we’re here, let me go!” Clint demanded petulantly. Natasha finally obliged, dumping him unceremoniously backwards onto the floor head-first. Clint tumbled to the floor, grunting when he landed. He glared up at Natasha, whose smirk hadn’t faded as she rolled her shoulder to loosen it again. “Hi, Darce,” Clint mumbled, getting to his feet.

“I don’t want to talk to you guys,” Darcy grumbled, crossing her arms and staring resolutely at the TV again.

“I didn’t want to talk, either. But I had a lot of time to think on the way over—” here he paused to glare daggers at Natasha yet again, then continued, “-and, please. I don’t want us to fight anymore.”

“Please, sweetheart,” Natasha half-whispered. “Can we at least apologize better this time?”

Jane not-so-subtly nudged Darcy. “You already know the ending,” Jane teased, motioning to the TV. “It’ll be okay,” she breathed in Darcy’s ear again. Darcy finally stood up and walked away, looking for a quiet space for the inevitable shouting match to come. Natasha and Clint followed her silently into an empty meeting room.

“So? What did you want to say?” Darcy intoned, arms folded across her chest.

“We’re sorry we kept Ryan and what we were doing a secret,” Natasha answered softly. “It wasn’t fair to you.”
“We just wanted to protect you,” Clint added.

Darcy rolled her eyes as she shook her head. “I don’t need your protection!” she exclaimed, dropping her fisted hands to her sides. “I know you think I’m weak, but I can take care of myself! I can be more than just a third wheel. But that’s obviously all you two see me as.”

Clint felt his heart splintering in his chest. “Darce, no, no,” he whispered, taking an unconscious step closer to her. “God, no, we don’t think that!”

“Then why -“ Darcy cut off, her voice about to break. She swallowed hard. “You didn’t trust me with this, you’re always leaving me behind for your top-secret missions together, and I - this is ridiculous, I’m leaving.” She tried to push past them, but Natasha gently caught her hand.

“We thought you understood,” Natasha voiced quietly, her scent and tone equally shocked and saddened. She’d had no idea Darcy felt that way in earnest, and horrible guilt rose up like a poisonous wave. “Darce, it kills us to be away from you as much as we are. You’re our everything, don’t you know?”

“Every morning we wake up and you’re not there, everything feels wrong,” Clint tacked on, unable to even look at his Omega. He’d never doubted Nat or Darcy’s love for him, and he thought they both knew how much he needed them, too. Somehow, Darcy didn’t. He absently ran his hands through his hair, feeling like half his soul was shattering. “We both love you so much, babe, how could you even think we don’t?”

“You two literally fell in love at first sight! You were together for forever before I even met you,” Darcy replied, a traitorous tear trailing down her cheek. “You’re literally Mr. and Mrs. Smith, and I’m - god, why would you even mate with me in the first place?”

“Listen to me, Darcy,” Natasha ordered, Alpha voice ringing in her tone. Darcy looked up at her face, but closed her eyes, more tears leaking out the sides. “Everything ounce of love I feel for Clint, everything,” Natasha articulated, “I feel for you just as strongly. And he feels the same.”

Clint rifled through his pockets for his cell phone, opening up a notepad app and scrolling down to the one hidden at the bottom. “Every time we have to leave,” he confessed softly, putting the phone in Darcy’s hand, “I write down something else about you. And I read them all the time when we’re gone, because I can’t wait to come home to you again.”

Darcy scrolled down the note. There were hundreds of them.

 Damn, I can’t wait to eat Darcy’s cookies again, how does she make them so fucking good?

 I had a stupid dream where I was just tickling Darcy, and god, her cute little laugh! I gotta come up with more jokes to tell her for when we get home. Not hearing her laugh every day is killing me.

 The bed smells so wrong without Darce here, I can’t even sleep.

 It’s so cold back home compared to here, Darcy would be so jealous. We’re taking her here as soon as possible and literally having sex on a beach.

 Nat is so irritable today. I miss Darcy too.

 Darcy would have loved those stupid street performers, banging on their trash cans and bins and whatever, jesus I miss her so much.

 I can’t believe we had to leave again so soon, I was going to finally teach Darce how to shoot.
Darcy better not have watched the new ep of Real Housewives without me, she promised! Damn show’s no good without her commentary.

Jesus, Natasha and I can’t even spoon without Darcy anymore, we just wake up with two feet of space between us cause that’s where she’s supposed to be.

That flower shop had nothing on Darcy’s scent, god, she’s so damn perfect.

I just lost another Scrabble game to Nat. God, she and Darcy are so much smarter than me. And they’re the pretty ones, too! I’d say life isn’t fair, but… I’m okay with it.

It’s our 21-month anniversary today.

We’re having filthy marathon sex for the next two days when we finally get home, I don’t even care how much work Darcy has.

I wonder what Darcy’s doing right now. I wish we were there too.

Darcy couldn’t read the rest, as her eyes filled up in earnest and her vision blurred. “C-Clint,” she choked out, and she dropped the phone as he crushed her in his arms. Natasha wrapped around them both from behind, and Clint and Nat each tucked their heads into either side of Darcy’s neck.

“I don’t write them down, but I do pretty much the same thing,” Natasha professed over their shuddering breaths. Darcy let out a laughing sob, and breathed in her Beta and Alpha’s scents as deeply as she could. Several minutes later, they all finally calmed down enough to extricate their individual limbs.

Darcy wiped her hand across her eyes, sniffing thickly. Clint wiped his thumb across a last lingering tear as Natasha kissed her hair. “We’re going to make this up to you, Darce,” Nat vowed quietly.

“No, there’s nothing to make up, I was being stupid,” Darcy refuted.

“No, you weren’t. You were absolutely right, we’re not being fair to you,” Clint averred, taking Darcy’s face in his hands and kissing her forehead reverently. “We’ll figure it out, I swear.”

“No more secrets?” Darcy asked, although she couldn’t imagine the answer being yes.

Clint paused, looking over at Natasha. They both knew they couldn’t promise that. “You know there are some things we can’t tell anyone,” he said softly, stroking her cheek.

“And we’re going to protect you, forever. It’s our job, whether you like it or not,” Natasha added. “But… we can promise less?”

“Less?” Darcy repeated, confused.

“Fewer secrets, and then we’ll always tell you why we’re keeping something from you. And absolutely no more supervillains in our home,” Nat clarified with a half-grin.

“And we know you can protect yourself,” Clint acknowledged, “but if you think for one second we wouldn’t put everything on the line for you, you don’t know us very well.”

“Yeah, I know,” Darcy admitted. “It’s one of the reasons I fell in love with you both.”

Natasha felt the gashes in her heart start to knit themselves up. “Clint and I might have been together before you,” she said, “but you made everything we didn’t know was missing complete.”
“And we’re going on fewer long missions now, for good,” Clint avowed. “We can’t stand being away from you that long, and it’s not fair to leave you behind like we have been, either.”

Darcy reached up to Clint’s face, pulling him in to kiss him deeply. “Thank you,” she muttered as she pulled away, turning around to repeat the action with Natasha. Clint sighed happily at the sight of his mates, their discord not fully solved, but abated for now. Finally, something was going right again.

*** *** *** ***

“I cracked the hardware in the Stark car,” Daisy reported, “and Hunter and Bobbi are close to Dr. Banner. The extraction went perfectly, and we’ll be arriving in the next few minutes.”

“Is Ryan still unconscious?” Coulson asked.

“Yeah, I’ve gotta thank Fitz, his improvements to the sonic grenades worked great,” Daisy replied. “Ryan managed to destroy it, but she still got knocked out. There were three other people in the apartment with her, a mated trio by the scent. One of them’s blind, I feel awful,” she admitted.

“I think they’ll forgive all of you, considering they were potentially being brainwashed,” Coulson responded with a smile. “Keep Ryan gagged and blindfolded, just in case. And two shock cuffs; if she has to take them both off at once, it’s more likely she’ll screw up.”

“Got it,” Daisy affirmed. “Clear the east entrance and hallways to the power rooms, that’s where we’ll enter. See you in a minute.”

*** *** *** ***

“Let me do the talking, Hunter,” Bobbi reminded him as they entered the coffee shop. It was small and dimly lit, but with a cozy feel, full of books and the smell of fresh java. They were only an hour outside the city, on the Jersey side.

“You want to tussle alone with the green monster, be my guest,” Hunter replied. “I’ll just stand back and look pretty.”

Bobbi rolled her eyes, then spotted Dr. Banner, sitting alone in a back corner with a mug of tea and a notepad and pen. They approached cautiously, but openly. “Dr. Banner? May we join you?” Bobbi asked softly. Soft brown eyes looked back up at her, and the man nodded and gestured to the seats across from him. “I’m Special Agent Bobbi Morse, and this is Agent Lance Hunter,” she introduced as they sat down.

“I’m aware,” Bruce responded with a small smile as he put down the legal pad. It was covered in notes neither Hunter nor Bobbi understood whatsoever. “I’m not actually trying to dodge SHIELD, you know. Just needed some alone time.”

Bobbi and Hunter were both surprised. Dr. Banner’s scent was calm, like sweet lavender and chamomile, and neither of them had been expecting him to cooperate so easily. “Why did you run, then?” Bobbi inquired.

“The other guy,” Bruce answered sadly, his voice barely above a whisper. “I thought Ryan was a Beta, I don’t know how she went into heat, but… he had never scented anything so potent. I lost control.”

“Yes, we saw the footage,” Bobbi affirmed. “You don’t have to feel guilty, Doctor, it wasn’t your fault.”
“Please, call me Bruce,” the man replied. “And yes, it is my fault. That’s not why I left, though. The other guy… also used Alpha voice to silence Ryan, when she was about to use her powers to get away. I…” His voice died off as he shook his head. “I would never have been able to live with myself if he’d raped her. It was only Steve and Tony that stopped him, though. I wanted time to process, and to find a way to make sure it never happened again.”

Hunter looked over at Bobbi, who met his troubled gaze. Alpha voice didn’t give total control whatsoever, but it was still instinct for Betas and Omegas to obey. It was an evolved trait to keep families safe and establish authority. Of course, times had changed, and the idea of Alphas being entirely dominant and having to be obeyed was vehemently denied, but that didn’t mean Alpha voice wasn’t still used for awful things. The law could only do so much to protect people. Alpha voice was more effective on mates, by far, but non-mated people could still be influenced. And coming from the Hulk? It was likely that much stronger. Ryan couldn’t have resisted.

Bruce watched them sadly as they processed his story. “I assume that you’re here to take me in to SHIELD. I’m not sure why, though.”

“Yes, Doc - Bruce. And there was more that happened after you were unconscious,” Bobbi explained.

“In a nutshell, Ryan was probably mind-controlling at least some of you, and she attacked Romanoff, Barton, and Stark,” Hunter spoke up for the first time.

Bruce’s eyes widened. “No, that’s impossible,” he asserted. “Ryan would never…”

“I’m afraid it’s true, sir,” Bobbi assured him. “And Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes also attacked Stark in her defense. We have them detained, and we’re trying to figure out the extent of Ryan’s control over them.”

Bruce frowned. “And SHIELD was also concerned I was under her control, somehow,” he surmised. “That I had disappeared under her influence.”

“Nail on the head, Doctor,” Hunter replied. “But if you’ll come with us now, we can get everything straightened out.”

Bruce nodded as he stood up, gathering up his work and sliding his jacket back on. “Lead the way.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry I haven't updated in forever, I took a January term class and it was SO. MUCH. WORK. More regular updates in the future, hopefully! Last semester ahoy!!

Also, god, Bruce is just such a sweetheart, I love him so much.
Matt’s head was aching, pounding, *throbbing* as he awoke to the jostling of a plane landing quite unusually. Instead of touching down and rolling to a stop, it had slowed to a halt without landing and then dropped down vertically, like a helicopter. That explained why he wasn’t restrained, except for a strange metallic cuff on his left wrist. He sat up slowly as the blood rushed from his head. He was on a bed in the front a room with solid metal walls, and Foggy and Karen were still unconscious on cots of their own beside him. He sniffed the air; wherever they were, it was far from Hell’s Kitchen. Over the unpleasantness of the recycled cabin atmosphere, he caught five separate scents; two Alphas, a Beta, an Omega, and- yes, Ryan was there too, still unconscious in a separate room. He breathed deeply a moment, willing his head to stop hurting like Stick had taught him so long ago. The pain began to slowly drain away.

“Foggy? Karen? Can you hear me?” he muttered quietly, reaching over to Karen, who was nearest, to shake her shoulder gently. She groaned softly, and Matt heard her blink herself awake.

“Jesus,” she hissed, putting a hand to her forehead. “Your head feel like it’s about to explode?”

“It’ll die down soon,” Matt assured her. “Hopefully. Wake up Foggy, someone’s coming.” Matt stood up fully, positioning himself in front of his mates facing the door.

“Nngghh,” Foggy moaned, pushing his hair out of his eyes as Karen laid her hand on his shoulder. “What the hell?” he breathed, looking up at the silver walls and vault-like door. “Where are we?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t been out of the Kitchen in years,” Matt admitted. “I don’t recognize any distinctive sounds or smells.”

“No, I meant where are we right now? What is this room, a high-tech cell?” Foggy inquired.

Karen opened her mouth to say something, but was cut off by deadbolts unlocking from the opening door. Looking over, she saw a female Alpha, only a bit younger than they, wearing all-black combat gear and long, fingerless black gloves interwoven with metal. She had shoulder-length brown hair and smooth tanned skin, but her face was marred by suppressed worry. Matt was still standing between the girl and them, his posture mildly threatening to the trained eye.

“Glad you’re all awake,” the girl said, her tone friendly but detached. “Sorry about the headaches. Bad side effect. Oh, here, we found your cane, sir.” She placed a white and red cane against Matt’s hand, who took it with a nod.

“Who are you?” Matt asked, his voice approaching unfriendliness.

“My name is Agent Daisy Johnson, with SHIELD,” she replied. “If you’ll please -“

“If you could show my colleague some identification, Agent Johnson,” Matt interrupted, flowing seamlessly into lawyerly professionalism. “And then we’ll need to meet with Miss Green right away, if you could point us in the right direction.”

Daisy blinked. “I’m sorry, let me explain what’s happening,” she began, thrown for a loop by the man’s unexpected demands. “We -“
“Have just arrived at SHIELD headquarters after being taken against our will, where Ryan will be detained without charges filed in proper court for her actions in her own self-defense,” Matt supplied coolly. “We’re well aware of the situation, Agent Johnson. We’re Miss Green’s lawyers. Now, if you could please take us to our client?”

“No, hey, you don’t understand,” Daisy replied, her voice getting harder. “We’re pretty sure Ryan is controlling you. We don’t know how she does it, but we’re trying to help you. SHIELD took you to make sure you’re free of her influence, and you’ll be free to go right after.”

“Ryan isn’t controlling us,” Foggy chimed in, exasperated. “If you had stopped to ask instead of kidnapping us, we could have explained. And what are these silver things on our wrists?!”

“And you can’t just knock people out with - with screeching bombs or whatever the hell that thing was, and then throw them onto a plane to God knows where and tell them it’s for their own good!” Karen snapped, her headache and their situation infuriating her.

Daisy looked at Matt, standing still as a statue in front of his mates with an impassive expression, then over to Foggy and Karen’s less guarded and more annoyed faces. “Look, I can’t take you to Ryan,” she reiterated firmly. “The cuffs are to make sure that if there are any latent commands for you to hurt yourselves or anyone else, you won’t. Now please, we’d appreciate your cooperation.”

“Ryan has a right to legal representation,” Matt stated bluntly, “and if you continue to deny her that right, we will make sure SHIELD is shut down for good. Foggy, do we still have Evans’ number from the ACLU?”

“Indeed we do,” Foggy replied with alacrity, pulling out his cell phone from the inside of his suit jacket. Daisy’s eyes had widened at Matt’s words, and in a moment of panic, she thrust out her left hand. Foggy’s phone vibrated intensely for a moment, then suddenly shattered to pieces. Foggy and Karen jumped back in surprise, the broken shards falling to the floor from Foggy’s hand as Karen let out a small shriek. Matt whipped his head back at the sound, anger flaring viciously. He took a deep breath, barely holding himself back from dropping Agent Johnson to the ground and getting his mates out of there.

“Sorry, but we can’t have any unauthorized outside communication,” Daisy rattled off, becoming more and more unsure of herself as she continued. She’d been trained to deal with HYDRA, aliens, and regular old terrorists and dirtbags, but lawyers were a different kind of danger. “Now please, we need to get inside.”

Three sets of stormy eyes looked back at her, but at Matt’s curt nod, all three of them made their way out of the room.

“I don’t think I like SHIELD agents,” Foggy muttered to Karen as they left. She nodded her agreement.

They traveled down a hallway, out the plane’s large hatch exit into the cold, where it was a brief walk into a large military compound that seemed to be dropped down in the middle of nowhere, only snowy evergreen forest visible outside. Inside, it was a mix between an underground top-secret laboratory, a modern office, and a New York apartment: there were groups of colorful couches pointed toward TVs on the wall across from boardrooms with office chairs and coffeepots, glass-walled medical facilities down myriad hallways, and a garage full of tools and workbenches and technology, all encased in red brick walls. Foggy led the way after Daisy, with Matt sandwiching Karen between them as they found themselves standing in a comfortable waiting area. Another Alpha, looking about the same age as Agent Johnson, was waiting for them.
“This is Agent Leo Fitz,” Daisy introduced, the man giving a half smile and wave. “He’ll explain what’s going to happen next.” With that, she took off at a fast walk to go find Coulson. Despite all the circumstances they’d anticipated, Ryan lawyering up still managed to be an unpleasant surprise.

“Right, then,” Fitz started as Daisy retreated. “You can just call me Fitz,” he said, sticking out his hand to Foggy to shake. The two men were wearing fitted suits and ties, he noticed, but the woman was in track pants and a loose sweatshirt. He felt bad that they had obviously been snatched at an inconvenient time.

“Foggy, and this is Karen and Matt,” Foggy replied with a friendly smile.

“Yes, right, lovely to meet you,” Fitz acknowledged, shaking Karen’s hand as well and then reaching out for Matt’s. His face turned bright red, then he dropped his hand quickly and wiped it awkwardly on his pants, clearing his throat and stepping back.

“He just tried to shake your hand,” Karen supplied Matt with a suppressed smirk. She knew that he knew, but they had a cover to maintain.

“Sorry,” Fitz stuttered, looking mortified.

“Happens all the time,” Matt smiled. “Agent Johnson mentioned some sort of test to clear us?”

“Yes, that’ll be ready in just a moment,” Fitz said hurriedly, shuffling his feet a bit. “We’ve developed a thorough polygraph test to be able to detect the possibility of mind control. It seems as though none of you have any latent triggers, or they likely would have been set off already, but as soon as the machine’s available we can get it done, and you’ll be free to go.”

“Wait - a polygraph test?” Foggy repeated incredulously. “Polygraphs aren’t even admissible as evidence, they’re just props for convincing a jury. And you can’t force anyone into one. Our client is no different.”

“Your client?” Fitz parroted, his tone as disbelieving as Foggy’s. “Wait, you’re lawyers?”

“Miss Green’s lawyers, yes,” Matt emphasized. “And I can guarantee that the only way you’ll convince Ryan to take the polygraph test - even if it is as reliable as you claim - is if we can give her counsel first. She hasn’t been informed of her rights, but she knows them. You’d have quite a job forcing her into it,” he supplied coolly.

Fitz frowned slightly, considering the man’s words. He and Simmons knew that Ryan was almost certainly innocent, and these three seemed convinced of it as well. But to allow them to see her before she was tested? Coulson would be furious; it was a dangerous risk. Fitz also wasn’t supposed to reveal any information until everyone had been questioned and the results compiled. He wasn’t one to judge SHIELD’s policies; they had saved millions of lives over the decades, and that had to be worth a few violated rights here and there. But in this case… “I can clear one of you quickly and bring you to her,” he muttered to the ground, his voice low and secretive. “But no one can know. You’ll have just a few minutes with her.”

Good enough for now. “Thank you, Agent Fitz,” Matt replied, matching Fitz’s tone. “I’ll go, if that’s alright, Foggy?” He asked just for the act. Both he and Foggy knew Matt could help Ryan better than any of them should anything go wrong.

“Of course,” Foggy acquiesced, “We’ll wait here.”

“Hang on, I’ll remove your shock cuffs,” Fitz said, glancing up and down the hallway first. “Don’t make it obvious they’re gone, yeah?” He pressed a code into the side of Karen’s, and the silver band
unlocked with a soft click. He collected Matt and Foggy’s, pressing another code to make them lie flat and shoving them into his pocket. With that, Foggy and Karen sat down on the chairs against the wall, and Fitz quickly led Matt away.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Thank you, Captain, I think that should be all,” Simmons smiled. His interview had been almost exactly identical to his mate’s, no signs of mind control whatsoever. Although, he hadn’t expressed the same… sympathies, she supposed, for Ryan that the Sergeant had. His demeanor had been entirely professional, sticking to the facts with just enough detail, like a mission report come to life. Even still, it was clear he cared about Ryan a great deal, from more than just his testimony. His scent had been radiating protectiveness and concern almost constantly, his answers just a little too perfect. But she was beginning to become suspicious about the Sergeant’s behavior in light of the Captain’s; why was the Winter Soldier, of all people, so much more open?

“Thank you, Agent Simmons,” Steve replied shortly, removing the various wires and striding towards the door.

“Wait, just a moment,” Jemma called back, thinking hard. “If you don’t mind my asking, did Sergeant Barnes learn Irish Gaelic back in the 1920s or so? From... from your mother?”

Steve turned to look back at her, a strange look on his face. “Yes, he did,” he answered slowly. “Why? Was he speaking it?”

“Yes, sir, and he told us that’s where he learned it. I just wanted to confirm,” Jemma replied warmly, masking her increasing unease. He was deliberately building trust. He was manipulating us- for what purpose?

Steve’s lips tightened briefly. He knew exactly what Bucky had been up to. I’ve gotta to talk to him. “Is there any way I can see him? It’s been hours, I just want to make sure he’s okay, you know, after all this.”

Jemma’s eyes softened in understanding. “I believe it would be alright for you two to wait together again,” she nodded kindly. The same guard that had been watching over all the interrogations - I should really learn his name, I feel awful, Jemma thought - took Steve’s arm, and Simmons watched them leave. When the door closed again, she yawned profusely, collapsing down into her chair and dropping her head to the desk a moment. It had been a long day, and it was going to be a long night. Suddenly, the door slammed open, and she let out a high-pitched yelp as Fitz came barreling in, leading a blind man just behind him. “Fitz! You scared me!” she admonished, a hand clapping over her racing heart.

“Sorry, dear, but we’re in a hurry,” Fitz said, leading Matt over to the chair and beginning to set it up.

“What’s going on?” Jemma demanded, confused. “Who is this?”

“Matt Murdock,” he introduced himself, nodding briefly at her. “I’m one of Ryan’s lawyers.”

“Ryan was found with him and two others, we have to clear him quickly so he can help her,” Fitz explained, rushing back over to the monitors to reset the programs.

“Leo! If Coulson finds out-“

“Ryan is innocent!” Fitz hissed quietly through his teeth, pulling Jemma away so Matt wouldn’t hear. “She’s about to wake up bound and gagged and alone in a power containment room and be
forced into a polygraph test without a single choice in the matter unless we help her. I was okay with Coulson’s choices until we found out she didn’t do anything wrong. We’re supposed to help people like her.”

They know she’s innocent already. Of course Matt heard the agents’ whispered words, but there was nothing he could do at the moment besides rein in his anger. He knew how to control his scent, and he made sure both that and his face were impassively benign. He needed to cooperate to be able to effectively help Ryan. For now.

“We can’t take sides in this, Fitz,” Jemma rejoined. “We have to let the truth come out on its own, or we’ll just cause all sorts of new problems!”

“What if it was Daisy?” Fitz whispered back, his eyes pleading. “She’s our best friend. What if Daisy had gotten mind control instead of her powers? You heard the Sergeant and the Captain. She’s their Daisy, if not something more. We’re the only ones who can help.”

Jemma closed her eyes a moment. “This is going to get us into trouble,” she sighed.

“I know. I’ll be right there in it with you,” Fitz vowed, kissing her on the cheek. “Alright, Matt, this will just take a minute.” He finished calibrating the machines, and began. “Please state your full name, presentation, and mating status for the record.”

“Matthew Michael Murdock, Omega, mated to Franklin Nelson, Alpha, and Karen Page, Beta.”

“What is your eye color?”

“They used to be blue. I’m not positive anymore, I haven’t asked anyone since the accident.”

Both Fitz and Jemma’s cheeks reddened, and Fitz closed his eyes and grimaced at himself. “Sorry, again, it’s a standard question,” he apologized, gritting his teeth.

“Please, let’s continue,” Matt said shortly.

“Where did you attend law school?”

“Columbia University.”

“What is your opinion on the musical Hamilton?”

“I don’t really go to musicals. The rapping is impressive, though.”

“And does the human body generate enough electricity to power a 10 watt, a 20 watt, or a 40 watt light bulb?”

“None of the above. The average human generates less than 100 millivolts.”

Jemma and Fitz looked up at each other, surprised and impressed. “Congratulations, Mr. Murdock, you’re the first to answer the trick question,” Jemma praised. “Have you studied biology or physics much?”

No, but I can sense the voltage you’re giving off right now, along with the output of every machine in this room and the lights outside. “No, just a fan of trivia,” Matt shrugged.

An alert showed on the screen. The first outright lie they had detected. Jemma looked up at Matt, confused as to why he would be untruthful about something innocuous like that. She decided to shrug it off; there were more important things to worry about. “Alright, well, are you now - and
have you ever been - under Ryan’s control in any capacity?”

Matt heard the change in her tone, detected the slight reaction in her scent. It seemed the polygraph was as potent as promised; he was regulating his physical reactions to the peak of his abilities, and it had still detected his lie. It was a good thing his profession dealt in convincing people of the truth, or else his secret wouldn’t stay one much longer. “Ryan has not used mind control on either me or my mates, to the best of my knowledge,” he replied diplomatically.

No alerts. Fitz breathed a tiny sigh of relief. “Alright, you’re cleared,” he pronounced, standing to release him from the machine.

“Wait,” Jemma dictated, a look of concern on her face. “How did you meet Ryan?”

Matt’s heart rate increased just the slightest amount despite himself. “The circumstances of our meeting are irrelevant to the case in light of the nature of the charges against her,” he supplied.

The machine noted the change, and Jemma’s frown deepened. “Mr. Murdock, I can’t in good conscience allow you to see Ryan if you can’t be honest with us about yourself.”

Matt sighed through his nose, frustrated. It seemed he couldn’t fool the machine, but he couldn’t tell the truth, either; it would put other people in danger. “Please,” he muttered, his voice no longer the calm, confident tone of a defense attorney but rather softened and pleading. “My mates and I are only here to help Ryan. We bear no ill will toward anyone in SHIELD or the Avengers.”

It seemed he was telling the truth. “Alright,” Jemma conceded. “Ryan should be in AA-23 on the east hall by now. Fitz will take you there. Go through the garage, no one should be in there now.”

Fitz finished releasing Matt, then drew Jemma into his arms and kissed her briefly. “Thank you, my love,” he breathed against her lips. “If anyone asks, I’m… making us sandwiches, or something.”

“Please, Fitz, everyone knows I make the better sandwiches,” Jemma teased. “Now go!”

* * *   * * *   * * *

The guard had escorted Steve to Bucky’s cell and left them alone. He had more important tasks than to spy on Captain America and his mate. He returned to the door to the interrogation room, looking to the world like he was simply doing his job, overhearing Matt’s testimony and Simmons’ instructions before walking away casually. Reaching into a hidden pocket inside his jacket, he pulled out a cheap burner phone. He pressed one and held. “Sir?” he said when the line picked up. “She’s arrived. Rendezvous at the west entrance in two minutes. Polaski will bring you to her, room AA-23. I’m taking care of the others.”

Chapter End Notes

So, i had been feeling conflicted about continuing writing this story right away. I LOVE all the comments, I'm so grateful people have been leaving their thoughts and kudos, but from what I could tell by their content, a lot of the points I was trying to make really just weren't being understood. And that made me upset with myself, because this is a story I care about and if I couldn't tell it right, then maybe I shouldn't be telling it at all. Then, I thought, screw it. Everybody interprets things differently, and even if I'm the only one who understands what I'm trying to say, then that's good enough for me. So thank you
to all my loyal readers that comment on like every chapter, I'm so glad you're all invested in and are enjoying the story! I hope you continue to like it.
Everything hurt. Not just her side, not just her head, but what felt like every bone in her body ached on some level now. Maybe she was getting sick. Wouldn’t that just be the icing on the cake? Ryan groaned deeply, but was then confused; why was the sound so muffled? Consciousness filtered slowly back, but it seemed she couldn’t open her eyes. Everything was dark, no matter how hard she tried. Her wrists were bound in an uncomfortable position behind her back, and they couldn’t move a millimeter apart. She took a deep breath, trying to riddle out the enigma of her circumstances. She wriggled around a bit, and finally full awareness of touch came back. It’s a blindfold, she realized, and a gag, and... weird handcuffs, or something. She was on a bed, though, laid on her side, and her left arm was falling asleep. Shifting herself slowly, she managed to fully sit up without too much added pain. The wound in her side was hurting more than before; she hoped it was only because the painkillers had worn off, and not that anything had started bleeding again.

She knew trying to get out of her bindings would only increase suspicion of her, but the gag was giving her dry mouth, and she really wanted to be able to see again at least. Taking a breath, she moved the blindfold up- wait, what the hell? She tried again, and still nothing happened. She tried to remove the gag, and it didn’t even stir. She reached out with her mind, switching on the connectedness to others’ psyches, but everything was silent. Shit, fuck, fuck, shit, fuck! Somehow, her powers weren’t working. She was completely at SHIELD’s mercy.

No, it’s okay. Okay. You’re okay, everything’s okay, she repeated to herself as a mantra. But the pain had her almost on the verge of tears, and in the past few days she had been shot, half-frozen, and kidnapped; it could be excused if she started to cry. No, no, enough crying, she berated herself as the blindfold absorbed the first few tears. You were going to turn yourself in anyway. You can tell them you want Matt and Foggy as your lawyers, and they’ll help you. And then you can leave fucking New York City behind for the rest of your life.

A memory, long since suppressed, suddenly jumped out of its box in oblivion and into her head.

“I don’t want to move, Mom! My friends are here! The Red Sox are here! New York is dirty and smelly and gross!”

“Ryan,” her mother sighed, pushing back her shiny auburn hair behind her ears. “Please, baby. I know this is hard, but this is a great opportunity for us. Both mine and your dad’s new jobs pay great. You’re going to a nice private school, and there will be tons of new kids to be friends with. And we’ll go to every Red Sox/Yankees game we can.”

10-year-old Ryan sniffed back her tears, wiping her hand across her face and then on the front of her pink shorts. She knew her mom and dad were doing what was best for all of them, but that didn’t make it any easier. “W-what if someone there finds out about me?”

“Baby, no,” her mom reassured her, kneeling down and pulling her into her arms. “No one’s found out here, and that won’t change over there. You’ve never lost control or even just used your powers in front of anyone. Come on, why’re you worried about that?”

“I don’t know,” Ryan cried, burying her face into her mother’s shoulder. “I almost messed up wh-
when I was little, what if it happens a-again?”

“Ryan, you listen to me,” Mary Green admonished, hugging her daughter even closer. “You are so special, and your dad and I love you so much. We’ll be right there with you in New York, baby, and if it turns out you can do anything else amazing, we’ll all deal with it just like we did before.”

Ryan pulled back from her mother, wiping her eyes and looking down at her feet. “How did you keep people from finding out about me when I was a baby?” she questioned. Somehow, the thought hadn’t really crossed her mind, before. When she had woken up one day and heard her dad’s voice inside her head imagining her mother naked, she’d screamed and stayed home from school for a week before figuring out how to control it completely. But that had been when she was almost seven; she didn’t remember being a baby.

Her mother smiled nostalgically. “You had just turned one,” she recalled, sitting cross-legged on the floor and looking up at her daughter. “I put you to bed in your crib and left your night-light on, but the lights in the room kept turning on as soon as I closed the door. I guess little you wanted to stay up late,” she joked, tapping Ryan on the nose and making her giggle. “Then, the next morning, I came in to get you, and your stuffed bunny was bouncing in midair next to the crib, trying to make its way inside. Nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Sorry,” Ryan said, a half smile shrugging onto her face.

“Yeah, well, your father heard me yelling, and he thought someone was trying to murder us or something, so he comes pounding up the stairs with a baseball bat, screaming to high heaven,” her mom laughed. “He saw the bunny just floating there, and he starts swearing in Spanish about evil spirits and demons and smacked it down to the ground, beat the poor thing to an inch of its life. You were wailing and crying, and all of a sudden, your little hands flashed blue, and the bunny scooted away from your dad all by itself. We figured it out pretty quick after that.”

“Yeah, but how did you stop me doing it?” Ryan asked again. “Gray and Pop-Pop must’ve found out, they babysat me, didn’t they? Before they… well?”

“Yes, they did, but... we sorta just turned into extreme helicopter parents for a little while. Didn’t leave the house with you, didn’t let anyone visit for a few months. Said you were sick, or we were going out of town, or whatever. Gray and Pop-Pop thought we’d gone crazy,” Mary admitted. “It was awful, we hated having to shut you away like that. But you were always so smart,” she praised, “and you learned to talk so quick. Once you started doing that, we taught you not to use your powers, and you got the message alright. By the time you were two, you’d stopped, and we let other people around more often.”

“How did you teach me?” Ryan asked incredulously.

“By spanking you every single time you did it,” her mother smirked. “Oh, you learned pretty quick from that.”

“Thanks,” Ryan frowned, sticking out her tongue.

Her mother laughed, leaning in to kiss Ryan’s forehead. “I promise, baby, it was the last thing we wanted to do. But there aren’t exactly any parenting books on what to do when your kid suddenly gets superpowers.”

“I remember, like, only half-knowing that I had them, for a while,” Ryan admitted. “I always knew I could do it, but I… didn’t, too? I don’t know.”
“I’m not surprised. You really didn’t use them again until you were five or so, and then we could explain it to you properly,” Mary replied. “And look at you now. Almost all grown up.”

“Jeez, Mom, I’m only ten!” Ryan laughed. She sobered again then, looking worried. “But…”

“What is it, baby?” her mother said, the picture of patience.

“What if I just, I don’t know, start flying around a classroom, or make the teacher’s chalk explode or something?!” Ryan burst out. “People will find out and think I’m a freak!”

“Honey, that’s no more likely to happen in New York than it is here,” Mary reasoned calmly. “And what have I said about that word in my house?”

“But Mom, I am one!” Ryan insisted. “You and Dad are normal, everyone else is normal! What if I’m an alien or something?!”

“Oh, no, baby, you’re 100% mine and I have the stretch marks to prove it. You wanna see?” her mother dared her, reaching to lift up her t-shirt off her slim frame.

“Ew, no!” Ryan yelled, covering her eyes with her hands. Mary laughed again. She laughed so often.

“Ryan Adelina Green, you are practically perfect in every way. And since my name is Mary, I’m allowed to say that,” her mother declared. “People have been calling me and your dad freaks for years, and we know they’re wrong, just like you’re wrong about thinking you’re one, too.”

“Why do people hate you guys just because you’re unpresented?! It doesn’t even make any sense!” Ryan fumed, forgetting her own troubles for a moment at the reminder of her parents’.

Her mother sighed, laying a hand on Ryan’s shoulder and rubbing it gently. “The world is a wonderful place, baby, full of so many kind and generous people,” she reassured her. “But there are some people that choose to believe in the worst instead of the best, even when a person is good through and through.”

“How does that make the world a wonderful place, then?” Ryan argued.

“Because there are always the people that will see and believe in the good,” her mother smiled. “And even if someone sees only the bad, there’s always hope for them to change.”

Ryan didn’t entirely understand, but she believed her mother anyway. The door to their brownstone house opened just then, and her dad called out, “Lucy, I’m home!” in an exaggeration of his normal accent.

“Hi, Daddy!” Ryan called out as her father came into the kitchen. “Guess what?”

“You dug your way to China and back during recess today! No, you discovered you can lift a car and saved a poor, helpless kitten from a tragic end! No, you got an A on your spelling test! That would be the real miracle,” her dad proclaimed, crouching down to lay a huge kiss on her mother’s cheek. Alejandro Ramon Guerra, going by Alex Green once he got his citizenship, was always the life of the party and then some.

“No, Dad,” Ryan said sarcastically, rolling her eyes at his antics. She gave him a small smile. “We’re moving to New York City.”

Her mother’s eyes filled up with tears, while her dad gave her a big bear hug and swung her around
in circles. “That’s right, angelita!” he cried, overjoyed at his daughter’s acceptance. “Staaaaaaaart spreading the neeeeeeews!” he sang out, pulling Ryan in against his chest to dance a dramatic tango. “We’re leaving TOOOODDDAAAAYYY!”

“Daddy!” Ryan squealed, laughing as he pulled her around on top of his feet. He threw her back into a dip, and she saw her mother smiling and shaking her head at them upside-down.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Ryan was sobbing in earnest as the memory faded to black, her whole body shaking with her tears. Mom, Dad, I know you can’t hear me, but I really wish you were here, she thought as her heart throbbed with pain instead of her body for once. God, I sucked up, I sucked up so bad, and I don’t know what to do anymore. I know you told me I could never tell anyone about my powers, and I didn’t listen, and now I’m in a shit ton of trouble. God, and somehow I presented, and now we don’t even have that in common. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to! Oh god, please, please, I miss you so much.

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Fitz and Matt were halfway through the garage Fitz managed when all of a sudden, the lights shut off. Fitz startled, looking back and forth for any source of illumination. There was none.

Matt could tell the lights were off, and he rolled his eyes at having to keep up his façade. “Why did we stop?” he asked, his voice low.

“The lights just turned off, I don’t know why,” Fitz answered quickly, rummaging around for his cell phone to use as a torch.

Matt heard a door open at the far end of the garage ever-so-quietly, the smell of synthetically masked scent reaching his nose on the vibrations in the air, and they were followed by the sound of a man pulling out a gun from its holster. “Get down!” Matt yelled, knocking Fitz to the floor and then rolling himself away, throwing his cane to the side. He grabbed a screwdriver off a bench and launched it across the room at the attacker, hearing the point wedge itself into the man’s leg before the agonized shout came. Shots rang out over their heads, and he pushed Fitz behind the bench and found cover. He yanked off his suit jacket for mobility and wished in vain for his mask. Nothing terrified his enemies more than seeing blind justice coming for them.

“What the hell? How did you-“ Fitz cut off, finally yanking out his phone and getting the flashlight function on. He shined it out into the room, barely peering over the bench to see the guard that had been with him in the interrogation room - god, what was his name? - whip the gun around and shoot again. “Hey!” he screamed, “It’s Agent Fitz! Stop shooting!”

The man stumbled in the dark over a toolbox, trying to make his way over in the crowded maze of Fitz’s organized chaos. Another shot fired, and Matt waited exactly one and a half seconds before launching towards the man and disarming him. The guard howled in pain as Matt dislocated his wrist and twisted the same arm behind his back before kneeling him in the stomach, shoving him to the floor a second later. Matt yanked him onto his back, kneeling over him to punch him ruthlessly across the jaw. The man’s nose broke at the next hit, and blood spurted across Matt’s hands and torso. “Who sent you?!” Matt demanded, his voice rough and deep, as he grabbed the man’s collar and shook him viciously. The man simply laughed, a cold, deadened sort of chuckle.

“What - you’re blind, how -“ Fitz trained the light on the pair as Matt thrust his arm across the man’s throat, cutting off his air supply. The lawyer’s shadowed face was splattered with blood, and more was pouring down the front of the guard. Fitz was too shocked to react even as the man choked and
thrashed, the scent of his panic rising each second.

“I’m going to let you breathe in a moment,” Matt growled low, his voice laced with perilous threat, “and you’re going to tell me who sent you. Or the next screwdriver goes through your eye.” True to his word, he let up on the man’s esophagus a moment later. But the guard simply barked out the same evil-sounding laugh. It echoed chillingly off the walls.

“The devil,” the man jeered, blood and spittle spraying out at his words. He looked not the least bit frightened or remorseful. “The devil is here, and he’ll come for you all. And once he gets his hands on the girl -”

Matt struck the side of the man’s head, and he fell silently unconscious. The vigilante rose to his feet, feeling rattled to his bones. If the man’s words were true…

Father Lantom’s whispered warning from long ago passed unbidden through his mind. The Devil takes many forms... Matt was blind, but still he had seen the Devil before, reflected in Wilson Fisk’s soul. Reflected in his own. He had barely survived his first struggle with the demon, but it seemed he was being called into battle once more. Matt straightened his back, his resolve strengthening. If it was on him to face the Devil in man once again, so be it. He had persevered before. This time, he would conquer.

“Stay hidden, I have to get to Ryan,” he ordered Fitz shortly. Fitz was transfixed, jaw agape, at the terrifying vision above him. The blind man’s knuckles, clothes, face were stained deep, shining scarlet, a striking contrast to his pale skin, whitewashed in the harsh light glaring on him from the phone. His gray eyes were expressionless, deadened, his lethal hands curled in fists at his sides. The airy gingersnap scent had gone stale, tainted with copper and rust. The outline of his head was haloed against the swirling, surrounding darkness, an avenging angel come to life.

“W-Who are you?” Fitz managed to get out, unable to hide the fear in his voice and scent.

One side of Matt’s mouth quirked up, just the tiniest motion. “You might know me as Daredevil.” With that, Matt swiped the gun from where it had crashed to the floor and took off at a run across the garage, neatly avoiding every obstacle and entering the hallway beyond.

Fitz sat in shock a moment longer, then gritted his teeth and made his way out, leaving the unconscious man behind. He headed quickly and silently for the circuit breaker room, hoping against hope that no other nameless agents were in his path. Suddenly, the alarm for a major security breach sounded off, long wailing tones loud enough to split eardrums. He broke into a sprint.

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Steve sat still as Bucky worked on his shock band, having already removed his own again. “Tell me exactly what Agent Simmons said, again,” he asked. He had informed Bucky that Ryan had probably arrived, surmising from Coulson’s sudden exit earlier, and Bucky had in turn told him his gleanings from the agents.

“All I got out of her was ‘no one could really know what she could develop next’, and ‘cause and effect is the basis for all science,’” Bucky reiterated with a note of self-directed annoyance. “Her mate was getting suspicious, he finished the interrogation real quick.”

“No, it’s fine, it’s just…” Steve trailed off, thinking hard still. There was just something, one single piece he knew he was missing, and then it would all snap into place. “They knew she could develop more from what you said. How could they know that she would change, but not know specifically how?”
“Well, not that she would ‘change’, exactly. Just gain more powers like she did growing up,” Bucky corrected. “They thought it was some kind of internal thing, and that they could understand the mechanism if they studied her.”

“Develop, gain, change… change, change!” Steve repeated, eyes widening. “Bucky, she was changing, and gaining, and developing! They think Ryan’s evolving her powers, somehow!”

“What, evolving? Like snakes turning into birds?” Bucky asked, his eyebrows creased together as he looked up at Steve disbelievingly.

“No, that’s not how it works, it’s more like… like if a kid had brown eyes when both the parents had blue, or something. It’s a genetic thing. Or like how the serum affected us and changed our genes. Ryan’s changing her genes herself, somehow, and that’s how she’s getting her powers.”

“Alright, I’m not even going to pretend I understand at all how that’s possible,” Bucky replied, fiddling with the cuff one last bit until it released with a small clicking sound.

Steve rubbed his stiffened wrist with his other hand, eyebrows furrowed. “I don’t know, Buck, I don’t get it either,” he admitted. “But it’s not the craziest thing we’ve found out about the future.”

“Nah, that’s still that a jug of milk costs $5 from the corner store,” Bucky smirked. As soon as he finished his sentence, the lights in the room and the hallway beyond suddenly clicked off, and they were thrust into total darkness. “What the hell?”

Steve felt a sudden rush of dread in the pit of his stomach. He didn’t know how, but he knew something bad was about to happen to Ryan. “Help me get this door open,” he ordered, feeling around for structural weaknesses.

“Stevie, we gotta sit tight, Ryan - “

“Now, Buck!” Steve’s Alpha voice rung out, and Bucky joined him instantly.

“Steve, what’s wrong?” Bucky demanded even as he grasped one of the hinges with his metal hand. Steve never, ever used Alpha voice to order him around like that, but he trusted him that it was for a good reason.

“I don’t know how I know, but Ryan’s in trouble, we’ve gotta help her,” Steve insisted, aiming a kick at the lower hinge.

“We’re not even sure she’s here yet, or where she is if she is,” Bucky grunted, pulling down on the hinge with all his strength.

“She’s here. I can feel it.” Steve kicked at the hinge again carefully. It bent under his force, and then broke off entirely a few hits later. Bucky ripped off the other, and together they kicked the door out and took off down the hall in the dark. An alarm started blaring after them.

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“Bruce,” Tony greeted with uncharacteristic softness. “How are you feeling?” The two agents Tony had seen in a file someplace had just shown Bruce to where he and Pepper had been waiting with Sam, getting antsier by the minute as the hours slowly ticked by. It was a relief just to have a change.

“I’m fine,” the man reassured him, returning Pepper’s hug gently. “I’m sorry for what happened, I’ve been - “
“Nope, stop that train right there,” Tony demanded, clapping a hand onto Bruce’s shoulder. “It wasn’t your fault, don’t even try to blame yourself for this one.”

“It wasn’t Ryan’s either, Tony,” Bruce said softly as he grasped Sam’s hand.

“Yeah, I think we’re starting to figure that out,” Sam replied. The three of them had been talking, and Tony had finally admitted his doubts somewhere along the way. Neither Sam nor Pepper judged him for his actions; it was obvious they had been born out of wanting to protect his team. But that didn’t do anything to assuage their collective guilt.

“We’ll make it right,” Bruce promised. Just then, the lights flickered off, plunging them into darkness.

“Jeez, SHIELD overloads all their circuits at once? I thought it was supposed to be geniuses that worked here,” Tony griped. He pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight, Pepper’s and Sam’s joining his after.

“They’ll get it back on in a few minutes, I’m sure,” Bruce said mildly. A few moments passed, however, and suddenly a loud, piercing alarm like an ambulance’s wail startled them. Tony itched to have his armor with him, but he’d left it on the plane per Coulson’s orders, and his tech was dampened in here. He still had to find out what was happening, though.

“Pepper, babe, stay here, please,” Tony said, concern marring his face. “You brought your taser, right? Sam, stay with her, please?”

“I’ll be fine, Tony, relax,” Pepper reassured him.

“Stay with her!” Tony ordered Sam again.

“No problem,” Sam nodded. Tony looked to Bruce, and together they jogged off in search of Coulson. Pepper and Sam looked at each other, each with a single eyebrow raised. They followed a few moments after.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Matt should have been back by now,” Foggy worried. They had been waiting for almost an hour, and although there had been numerous agents or employees or whoever passing by at first, most had gone home or settled in for the evening, it seemed, and they had been alone for some time now. The quiet emptiness was only increasing Foggy’s nervous unease.

“Yeah, I know,” Karen agreed, her scent marred with mild anxiousness like sour lemon. She took Foggy’s hand, trying to reassure herself and him. Right as she touched him, though, the lights all turned off at once.

“Okay, no, this is great. Everything’s fine. We’re trapped in a secret government agency’s headquarters, and the lights are dead. Now all we need is a maniac with a chainsaw.” Foggy was a nervous talker.

“Sweetie, calm down,” Karen ordered. She pulled out her phone to use as a light when suddenly, from somewhere down the hall, there sounded the rapid-fire banging of gunshots.

“Matt!” Foggy yelled, leaping up and taking off down to the garage in near blindness. Logic told him to run the opposite way from the guns, but his gut said his mate was in trouble.

“Foggy, wait!” Karen chased after him, lighting her way forward with her phone. “Hey, they went
down this way!” she called as Foggy turned in the wrong direction at the end of the hall. Together, they ran off in search of their mate. A blaring alarm began to sound.

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After their talk, Nat, Clint, and Darcy had all returned to join Jane and Thor and the inane television as they continued to wait. When the lights went out, the TV went dark as well.

“Aw, c’mon, it was finally getting good!” Clint moaned dramatically. Darcy thumped him lightly on the chest, and he pulled her closer in his arms in response.

“I vow on the gates of Valhalla that this blackout was not caused by me, this time,” Thor promised solemnly as Natasha and Jane pulled out their phones to use for light.

“We know, babe,” Jane replied, pecking him on the cheek.

“I’ll find out what’s happening,” Natasha volunteered, stretching out as she stood. A minute or two later, when the alarm went off, Clint grabbed Darcy and took off, Thor and Jane right behind them.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Daisy? What possessed you to destroy the lawyer’s phone?” Coulson’s day was not destined to get any less chaotic, apparently.

“He was about to call the ACLU! I honestly didn’t know what else to do,” she responded. It had taken her some time to track down Coulson. He had been hiding out in the car garage, trying to relax in the back of his red convertible Lola for a few minutes. She didn’t blame him, honestly, but now they needed to take care of the situation at hand.

Coulson sighed. “It’s alright, we’ll deal with it,” he said, sitting up fully and wiping his hand across his face. “Where are they now?”

“I left them with Fitz to start their interrogations. They’re probably almost done by now.”

“Good. I’ll meet with them right after.” The lights suddenly shut off, bathing them in blackness. Coulson sighed again. “Right after I get someone to check the circuit breakers, apparently.”

“The new generator system Fitz worked on was finished, right? The backups should be on already,” Daisy worried.

Coulson’s jaw tightened. “Come on. We’re going to check on Ryan.”

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Ryan hadn’t noticed the lights going out, as she was busy having her eyes covered with a blindfold and soaking it through with salt water. A few seconds later, though, the door to her cell abruptly opened, startling her enough that her tears momentarily ceased.

“Hrrrmnnvrrrr,” was all she managed to get out around the gag; she had been trying to ask who it was. She sniffled loudly, trying to keep the crying under control. She wished she could wipe her nose, but her hands were still trapped, and she couldn’t bring her knees or legs up to her chest without breaking the butterfly stitches in her side.

“Oh, don’t, it’s unbearable when women cry. Much nicer when they smile,” a slightly nasal British accent called out from just outside the cell. “You there, get her up, we’re on a schedule.”
Heavy footsteps approached her and yanked her up by the arm, an unpleasant scent like cloves mixed with gunpowder filling her nose. Ryan cried out through the gag, trying to break free, but to no avail. She didn’t know from where, but the commanding voice sounded vaguely familiar, and it filled her with a sense of impending dread.

“Stop squirming,” the voice sighed, sounding insufferably bored. Ryan kept struggling, stomping at her captor’s foot as hard as she could and missing. Her fighting instincts that she’d discovered with Bucky and Natasha were silenced in the mysterious room as well, it seemed.

“I said, stop fighting him!” the Brit shouted, the apathy in his tone transformed into confused anger. Ryan tried to scream, and the man holding her got an arm around her throat, cutting off her air supply. Ryan instinctively stilled, and the pressure loosened somewhat.

“Take off her blindfold,” the voice demanded curtly. The cloth was ripped away, and Ryan yanked her head to the side and screwed her eyes shut against an onslaught of brightness from a flashlight glaring at her face. “Look here,” the Brit insisted. Ryan didn’t move.

“Well. This is… interesting,” the voice mused, sounding equally annoyed and intrigued. “How are you doing that?” he wondered, his tone making it sound rhetorical. “Wait a second… we know each other, don’t we?” he added, his voice rising with surprised elation. “Bring her closer and turn her head to me.”

She was dragged forward a few steps, and she was forced to support her weight or choke. Ryan’s chin was grabbed by the man’s other hand, and she was forced to look into a pale, handsome face topped with styled brown hair but sporting a maniacal grin. Her eyes widened with recognition.

“Nn, nnn, rrgggnnhmm!!” she screamed through the gag, resuming her desperate fight to no avail.

“Oh, yes. More and more interesting,” the man continued, the grin spreading even further. “You know, I don’t think we were properly introduced the first time,” he tacked on casually, though his purple eyes flashed with excitement. “It’s quite wonderful to officially meet you, Ryan Green. My name is Kilgrave.”

Chapter End Notes

Surprise!
No. No. No. Ryan’s vision was swirling, breathing panicked, limbs weak and frozen. She’d thought being entirely helpless and at the mercy of SHIELD was the worst that could happen. She had never been more wrong.

“Well, what a weird, wide world this is,” Kilgrave commented lightly, his delighted expression giving way to a thoughtful one. “No one’s ever been able to resist me before, and now it happens in the girl sharing abilities like my own? Incredible. We’ll have to find out what changed from before. But, for now…” he paused as his eyes took on a darker expression. He gestured to the hallway where he and three other guards stood. “Your powers will reactivate the moment you join me out here. You will not use them. You will not fight my men, call for help, run away, or try to escape in any form. Boys, if she does, shoot yourselves through the head. You understand, love?”

Ryan felt her heart stop dead, then redouble its pace, trying to pound itself out of her chest. It was her worst nightmare come alive. It had been seven years since the night she’d last seen his face, and she’d tried to convince herself for so long that it hadn’t even been real that she’d come to silently believe it. But there was quite literally no escape for her now. She slowly nodded her head.

“Good girl,” Kilgrave praised patronizingly. “Turn off the shocking mechanism in the cuffs, but keep them on,” he barked at the man beside him. He instantaneously obeyed.

Just as the man finished, an alarm suddenly sounded off, loud and wailing. Kilgrave rolled his eyes
dramatically. “You there, go track down Peters and remove his fingers one by one,” he yelled to the man standing to his right. The guard stalked off immediately. “Simply incompetent. I pay the man a fortune for a quick, silent operation and now this. Well, come on, let’s go, then!” With that, he pointed his arm down the hall, and Ryan submitted. There was nothing else she could do.

Her captor released her face and neck and shoved her forward. The moment she stumbled out of the room, a switch clicked on in her brain, and she instinctively knew all her abilities were under her control again. It made no difference. She couldn’t force innocent, brainwashed men to kill themselves to save herself. With a strength she didn’t know she possessed, she forced herself to look up at Kilgrave in front of her. He closed his hand in a vice grip around her arm, as her hands were still trapped behind her back.

“Smile, Ryan,” he said. “You’re quite lovely when you smile.” He began to pull her along at a fast walk down the darkened hallway, lit only by the beam of a red-tinted flashlight the guard behind them held aloft. The brick walls turned bloody in the glow, and the screeching alarm turned to wailing screams in her ears. They could have been traveling through the depths of hell.

A minute or so later, Ryan was blinded when the overhead lights unexpectedly returned, burning onto her retinas the image of a large, open space in a four-way crossroads of hallways just ahead. The sirens reset themselves simultaneously. Kilgrave increased his pace, only to stop short at the sound of rushing footsteps coming from the hall to their left. Ryan whipped her head around, eyes wide.

“Stop there!” Kilgrave called out, and the footsteps ceased abruptly. Still pulling Ryan along, they fully entered the open area to see Steve and Bucky frozen in place, identical looks of shock in their eyes reflected in their scents. Ryan’s stomach dropped, and even more panic flooded her veins with icy terror. No, not them, please, anyone but them, please…

“RYAN!” Bucky shouted, not a muscle inching forward no matter how he commanded his legs to move. The strange British man’s words somehow incited a burning will to obey, down almost to the depths of his bones. Only the smallest corner of his mind was left to his own desperate thoughts.

“LET HER GO!” Steve roared, unleashing the full power of his Alpha voice as he’d never attempted before. Even if Kilgrave was a mated Alpha, he still had to try. Upon Steve’s inhale, though, a wave of cold dread swept through him. Ryan’s perfect, wonderful Omega scent was inundated with reeking fear, and the masked guards whose guns were trained on them were employing synthetic scent blockers to hide their identities. The man who had Ryan, though, had no scent whatsoever.

“Oh, do shut it,” Kilgrave snapped, and both Steve and Bucky’s mouths clapped shut. “What, were these your boyfriends or something?” he scoffed at Ryan, a disgusted look on his face as he considered their reactions. “Some lovers, leaving you in a cell to rot. Time to go, say good-bye, then,” he finished, abruptly releasing his grip and jerking the gag down.

Ryan gasped in pain, then looked up. She met first Steve’s eyes, then Bucky’s. Her voice failed her, and all she got out first was a small rasping sound. She had to follow Kilgrave’s orders, though, or he would likely kill them next. “Good-bye,” she whispered shakily. Suddenly, more footsteps came from the other side, and she whipped her head around to see Matt, sans suit jacket and cane but coated all over in blood, sprinting up the opposite hallway. Jesus, no, run! she thought desperately.

“Stop,” Kilgrave repeated pointedly. Matt froze haltingly, standing fast as Steve and Bucky did. Then, he took a single struggling step forward. “I said STOP!” Kilgrave commanded again, a shade of nervous disbelief in his tone and expression.
Matt managed another half step, breathing heavily and grunting with the effort. He’d never encountered anything like this, the inexorable need to capitulate induced at the man’s words. He fought with every iota of his mind that was still his own, and he held on to his lucidity with every fiber of his being. *The Devil takes many forms. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you.* Struggling with all his might, the dam suddenly burst, and Matt shot forward again, his mind free and clear.

“Matt, no, stop!” Ryan cried desperately, the words exploding out of her as Kilgrave yanked her in front of him. “He’ll kill them!!”

Shots fired from the two remaining guards at Matt, who dropped into a roll to dodge them and sprung up, pulling out the gun he’d stolen from the other guard. Quick as lightning, he shot both guards once through their thighs and shoulders, and they collapsed with shrieks of agony. Ryan screamed as they fell, her expression that of pure, unadulterated terror. Matt then trained the gun at Kilgrave’s head, the only part of him not being blocked by his hold on Ryan. “Let her go,” he ordered in a furious growl.

“My, how dramatic,” Kilgrave lilted. “Blondie, take him out.”

“No!” Ryan shrieked, horrified at seeing Steve immediately rush in Matt’s direction, clenching both hands to powerful fists. Matt simultaneously aimed the gun at Steve’s shoulder. “STOP!” Ryan screamed, her voice instinctively ringing with power, her eyes radiating cerulean. Matt immediately dropped his arm, face going blank, and Steve stumbled over his feet, coming to a clumsy halt.

Ryan’s command reverberated in Steve’s head, growing in intensity and contrasting, battling, grappling excruciatingly with the mysterious man’s order. He had to kill the blind man; he had to freeze in place; he had to fight and clash and destroy; he couldn’t move. He grabbed his head in his hands, agony ripping through his mind and coming out as shouts of torment as he collapsed to his knees from the pain.

Ryan gaped, her breath coming in panicked gasps as she realized what she’d just done. As always, her telepathy turned on with the use of her other powers, and tormenting pain she thought was coming from the guards was emanating out of Steve’s mind. Instantly, she released her control on both him and Matt, and Steve passed out face-first on the floor. Matt stood unmoving, seeming dazed and confused.

“RYAN!” Kilgrave shouted, turning a furious look upon her. She quailed under his gaze, trying to gasp out an apology, but she seemed to have lost control of her lungs.

Just then, shouts of “What the hell?” “Hey!” and “What’s going on?!?” were quickly followed by “Matt!!” as suddenly, from the three hallways besides the one behind Ryan and Kilgrave, people began to pour into the central hub where they stood. From Ryan’s right came Foggy and Karen, sprinting towards their mate, while from the left came Tony and Bruce, and in front of her were Coulson, Natasha, and Daisy. Daisy raised her right arm, while Coulson and Natasha pulled out guns. Tony and Bruce reached Bucky, their countenances confused and concerned, as Kilgrave rolled his eyes with a dramatic, sighing groan. His grip on Ryan’s arm tightened painfully.

“Hands in the air! Get on your knees!” Coulson ordered in a shout, aim pointed at Kilgrave’s head. Ryan watched in horror as even more people poured onto the scene behind the first wave: Thor and Jane, Clint and Darcy, Pepper and Sam. In seconds, everyone was gathered in a circle around her and Kilgrave. It was too much all at once; Foggy shaking Matt’s shoulders and looking terrified at his blank expression, over a dozen pairs of eyes all taking in the gruesome scene of the whimpering, bloodied guards, Bucky and Matt frozen in place, and Steve’s prostrate form helpless on the floor.
“ENOUGH!” Kilgrave yelled, and the din was suddenly silenced. “No one moves a muscle except to breathe until I say so. Good god,” he expressed, shaking his head. Then he sighed. “Well. That’s almost all my plans gone to shite, then,” he directed casually to the room at large. “Go in, grab the girl, get out without all this hullabaloo. Grab a tea on the way home. Instead, it’s a veritable who’s who of the Avengers, SHIELD, and… whoever the hell you three are,” he added, waving aimlessly over at where Matt, Foggy and Karen stood, all still as statues. “I don’t know how you disobeyed me back there, but one more step out of line and I’ll have your friends slit their own throats with their fingernails,” he directed at Matt.

No. No. This can’t be happening, no, no, no… Ryan screwed her eyes shut a moment, breath still coming in keening gasps. She wasn’t under Kilgrave’s control, by whatever miracle, but she was still as paralyzed as any of the others. Even Matt appeared to be back under his spell.

“No. Let’s see if I’ve got all this. You would be Director Coulson then, yes?” he said, releasing Ryan and turning his gaze back to where Coulson stood with the gun still held out, Daisy and Natasha mirroring the pose beside him. “Thank you for publishing everything about your organization online, it was quite helpful. And you must be the protégée, the ‘Inhuman’. I have to say, I was considering coming for you,” he informed Daisy with a wink, “but then I heard about Ryan here, and, well, you and your cohorts simply pale in comparison.” He looked back at Ryan, gazing down on her with an almost paternal smile, his previous ire towards her seemingly gone. His expression only sickened her further.

“Natasha Romanoff, assassin extraordinaire, and her lovers, Clint Barton and Darcy Lewis, all… well, heroes of sorts, I suppose,” Kilgrave carried on. "Tony Stark and Pepper Potts, the ‘power couple’ of technology and industry! The Asgardian demigod and his little woman; I must say I was not a fan of how you two almost destroyed Greenwich, scenery’s quite nice there.” Kilgrave was circling around, looking each person in the eye as he taunted them.

“Bruce Banner! Hardly recognized you. Green is definitely more your color,” he smirked. “Sam Wilson, loyal sidekick to the celebrated Captain. And yes, finally, the great Captain America and his mate, the mythical Winter Soldier!” He finished standing directly in front of Bucky, sneering at him. “Oh, pathetic little HYDRA wished they could control minds like I do.” With that, he turned back to the guards still lying on the floor in their own blood. “Now, to business. Boys, you might have missed it with your caterwauling down there, but our Ryan did indeed use her powers just now. You know what to do.”

“NO! No, no, please, I won’t do it again!” Ryan shrieked, trembling uncontrollably as the men slowly dragged themselves across the floor to reach their dropped guns. “I didn’t mean to, it was an accident! I’m sorry!!!”

“Mistakes have consequences, Ryan,” Kilgrave condemned simply, his gaze on the guards. Two loud bangs followed a second after, and Ryan let loose a horrified scream, unable to tear her eyes from the frothing pools of gory blood coating her shoes on the floor. She collapsed to her knees on the ground, her legs unable to support her any longer, and she slapped a hand over her mouth to keep from vomiting. Dry sobs ripped their way out of her chest as her head spun with vertigo.

“Next,” Kilgrave continued, as though nothing had happened. “I could have all of you simply kill each other here and now, but how anti-climactic, am I right?” he relayed, holding up both of his arms in a shrug as he grinned. “We have so much more to look forward to. So, then. None of you will follow or track us. No, no, wait… let’s make this more exciting,” he proclaimed, clapping his hands together. “Feel free to track us! Follow to your heart’s content! But,” he cut off, turning back to where Bruce stood just behind Bucky. “If you do, Dr. Banner will stop you. Cut loose, have fun with it!” he smiled maniacally. “Oh, and Agent Johnson, Thor, you both will assist. Let’s see how
“Please,” Ryan quaked, unable to raise her voice past the faintest whisper as she shook her head desperately. “Please, please…”

“What was that?” Kilgrave asked pleasantly, looking down to Ryan. “Oh, come now, it’s just a bit of blood,” he chided, seeing her panicked eyes and pale, trembling skin. “You should probably get used to it, considering. Up now, time to go.”


Bucky immediately strode over and jerked Ryan into his arms, easily lifting her bridal-style and following after Kilgrave as he strode past Coulson, Natasha and Daisy. “Oh, you’ll be free to move in 15 minutes! Have fun!” Kilgrave yelled back as they disappeared.

Bucky tried with all his might to let Ryan go, to attack the unknown man, to just stop walking. The little of his own willpower left, shoved far in the recesses of his psyche, was screaming and fighting, enraged at his volition being stolen from him again. He would destroy this man, bleed him slowly until he begged for mercy, then cut out his tongue. But instead he kept moving forward, a shaking, quivering Ryan in his arms. Dimly, he recognized the scent of her paralyzing, sickening fear, and fury rose afresh in his mind. It wasn’t enough. He kept walking.

Ryan was too shocked to cry, too terrified to move. All she noticed was the scent of waterfalls and evergreens. It was dim and muted, but still detectable. For whatever reason, it comforted her, and her spasming began to relax somewhat. A blast of cold hit her as Bucky followed Kilgrave outside into the darkened evening. She turned her head blankly, and saw a long, black limousine parked a few yards away.

“Put her in there,” Kilgrave said shortly as the chauffeur opened the door with a tip of his hat. “Go back inside and wait with your friends. It’s going to be quite the show, I’d expect.” With that, he entered the vehicle and had the door shut behind him, and Ryan was sped away into the night a moment later.

Bucky obediently returned inside, coming to a stop when he reached the silent mass of people. None had moved an inch. The empty silence was chillingly eerie.

“What the hell?” a new voice sounded down the hall. Fitz ran up in a panic from where Ryan and Kilgrave had first come, having just finished repairing the circuit breakers as best he could; the wires above the main box had been shot clean through, and his new backup generator system had been disconnected as well. He automatically checked the pulses of the men on the bloodied floor to no avail. “Oh, thank god,” he sighed in relief when the Captain’s pulse was still steady and strong, though he was now coated along his front with the seeping blood.

“Director Coulson? Daisy?!?” Simmons’ voice called out as she jogged up to the scene. She waved a hand in front of them both to no avail; they remained like petrified figurines.

“Jemma! Are you okay?!” Fitz interjected, jumping up from the floor to rush over to her.

“Yes, yes, dear, I’m alright,” she insisted, brushing away his hands as they roamed her over, searching for harm. “But what on earth happened here?”

“I have no idea,” Fitz confessed, shaking his head. “I got the lights back on and turned off the alarm, and was coming to find you. They’ve all just been standing here frozen since I found them, I don’t
“Give me your cell phone,” Jemma instructed, checking Daisy’s pulse at her neck. Fitz handed it over, and she switched on the flashlight function and quickly shined it into Daisy’s eye and pulled it away. “Pulse is fine, breathing unobstructed, scent is only partially diminished, and…pupil response is normal,” Jemma reported, relieved. Her face was concerned and her scent tinged with fear when she turned back to her mate, however. “Fitz, the alarm… did Ryan do this to them?”

“No, no, it can’t have been her,” Fitz replied, shaking his head definitively. “She and I haven’t met yet, but I was cornered in the garage when the lights went out, and the guard that was with us in interrogation room tried to kill me.”

“LEO! Are you alright?! When were you planning on telling me this!?” Jemma shouted, immediately checking him all over for injury.

“I’m fine! Jemma, love, I’m fine, I got away,” he insisted, catching her frantic hands in his own. “But it couldn’t have been Ryan, why would she have sent someone after me?”

“No, no, you’re right, but what happened to everyone, then?” Jemma questioned, waving her hand around at the circle of frozen people around them, pointedly ignoring the mysterious guards dead on the floor. Considering the nature of their wounds, she didn’t even want to think about what had happened to them.

“I don’t know yet, but come on, we have to figure out how to help them.”

All of a sudden a loud gasp came from behind them, followed by a series of heaving breaths. Fitz and Jemma whirled around to see Matt brace himself from falling against the wall, leaving smears of red behind.

“Matt! What happened!?” Fitz exclaimed, rushing over to grab his shoulder to help support him.

“Here, Mr. Murdock, sit down, I can help,” Jemma quickly followed up, beginning to inspect his body for injury. “Where does it hurt? Any pain in your chest?”

“I’m fine,” Matt panted. “The blood isn’t mine.” It had taken every ounce of willpower he possessed to throw off Kilgrave’s influence again after being completely taken over by Ryan. Somehow, her power was even more all-consuming than his, and he’d been left in a dazed fog after she released him and had then fallen under Kilgrave’s control again. His body was exhausted with the effort his mind had exerted to free himself, but still he stood up shakily and pushed away from Fitz and Simmons, beginning to stumble down the hallway where Kilgrave and Ryan had just disappeared.

“Wait, where are you going? What’s going on!?” Fitz questioned, quickly following after him.

“Matt, please, if you’re hurt, let me - “ Jemma started.

“Stay here!” Matt barked, his strength gradually starting to return. “Dr. Banner, Thor, and Agent Johnson are going to come after me in nine minutes, I have to start tracking Ryan before they do.” He began to run, and both the agents stubbornly trailed after him as quickly as they could.

“Track her? W-what are you talking about?!” Jemma stammered as they rounded the corner to the west exit.

“What happened back there!?” Fitz yelled.

“Quiet!” Matt snapped as he flung open the door to the outside, taking in the scene. The car - no, a
limousine - had fled south, with only three people inside: Kilgrave, Ryan, and an unknown third. The driver, he realized quickly. Matt sped through every sense memory of the encounter with Kilgrave, his mind going a million miles an hour. Suddenly, he dashed back inside, pushing past the two agents again and heading back down the hall.

“Jemma, wait,” Fitz said, stopping her following with a hand on her shoulder. A suspicion was niggling in his mind. “If he’s doing what I think he is, we don’t want to follow.”

“Where is he going?!” Jemma cried, completely lost at Matt’s behavior. “Fitz, how is he doing this? He’s blind, how does he even know where to go?!” she demanded in a half-whisper as Matt disappeared around the corner.

“Do you remember all the explosions back in New York City that happened a few months ago?” Fitz asked, his words tumbling swiftly after another. “In the part they call Hell’s Kitchen? People thought it was some terrorist that wore a mask?”

“I - yes, but what does that have to do with this?”

“It wasn’t the man, it was a frame job,” Fitz explained. “There was this whole insane mafia - you know I like those stories, I followed it - and the masked man, the one they thought did it? He brought the whole crime empire down single-handedly. The Russian bratva, Chinese drug manufacturers, Japanese distributors, regular street thugs, all headed by this crime boss Wilson Fisk. Just him!”

“Fitz, are you saying…” Jemma trailed off, scarcely believing her mate’s words.

“The masked man, it was Matt,” Fitz breathed in awe. “They called him the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen at first, then Daredevil. I don’t know how, but he can - you should have seen him in the garage, he somehow knew the guard was there, took him down in seconds. He saved my life.”

Jemma shook her head, mouth agape. “How?” she beseeched him. “God, first the girl with telekinesis and mind control, now a blind man who can somehow track vehicles and take out criminals? How is any of this possible?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll figure it out,” Fitz swore, wide eyes locked on his mate’s. “But come on, we need to get back to Coulson and Daisy and the Avengers, we need to figure out what happened.” Together, they set off down toward the central hub, dozens of questions rattling in their brains.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Matt approached the garage at top speed, picking up howling, desperate screams followed by a sickening crunch of breaking bone. Rounding the corner, he burst onto the scene to a room full of the scent of blood, terror, and pain. The man who had attacked him and Fitz that he’d left behind unconscious was pinned down by another man, gripping a handsaw from one of the benches. Its metallic scent was overcome by gore, and the bleeding stump of a fingerless hand was held in a vice grip by the second man.

Grabbing a wrench from a toolbox on the floor, Matt carefully controlled his strike to knock out the original guard’s captor, who hadn’t deterred the slightest from his gruesome task upon Matt’s entrance and approach.

“Th-thank you,” the guard sobbed, cradling his arm against his chest as Matt pushed the unconscious man off him.
“Don’t thank me yet, asshole,” Matt growled, deadlifting the man and throwing him over his shoulder. He felt the man pass out almost instantly. Quickly heading back for the central hub again, he mentally calculated the time left. 4 minutes. It had to be enough.

Chapter End Notes

It's comic book canon that Matt is pretty much the only one who can resist Kilgrave and even throw him off completely, thanks to his meditation and training and- frankly- his iron will and beliefs. I gotta say, Catholic Matt and his moral struggle and his religious beliefs are just so, so, SO important to me, and I'm not even really religious.
Fitz and Simmons looked up in surprise as Matt approached the hub again, pausing in their observations of their statue-like friends. It was like a grotesque game of freeze-tag: everyone was still breathing, but otherwise absolutely stock-still and unresponsive.

“Jesus, did you do that to him?!” Fitz cried in shock, spying the man’s mutilated hand. Jemma clapped a hand over her mouth in horror.

“No,” Matt emitted shortly. Pushing his way past his still-stationary mates, Matt roughly dumped the man onto the floor in the bloody pools around the two dead mercenaries. “There’s a fourth, unconscious in the garage. I don’t know if he’ll try again when he wakes up, keep them apart,” Matt ordered brusquely. Turning to the room at large, he listened carefully for a moment. Everyone seemed in fine enough health, besides being trapped by the mysterious kidnapper’s commands. Two and a half minutes left. “Agent Fitz, do you still have those shock bands you took off us earlier?”

“Y-yeah, why?” Fitz questioned.

“Put one on Agent Johnson and two on Thor. Now!” he growled as Fitz hesitated, then moved to snap the cuffs onto the respective wrists. Jemma was looking over at Matt, and he heard her heart thumping erratically in fear. He ignored her, striding quickly over to Bruce, standing just behind Bucky and beside Tony. “Doctor, my apologies, but I don’t know what else to do. This will hurt,” he said, and he abruptly swung outer edge of his hand up and rammed the base of Bruce’s skull behind his left ear, hard. He collapsed instantly, and Matt breathed a small sigh of relief. He’d known he’d had to do something, but had no idea if the monster inside Banner was under control as well; that could have ended differently.

Jemma loosed a small shriek at Matt’s abrupt assault, backing up quickly and accidentally splashing in the pooling blood near the center of the space. She gasped and shrieked again as she jumped away, Fitz grabbing her arms to steady her.

“Everyone, listen,” Matt stated, ignoring Fitz and Simmons again to turn to the room at large. His voice was deep and rough, no mask over his anger. “You’ll be free to move again in less than two minutes. Get Agent Johnson and Thor into the strongest restraints you have. Whoever the man that kidnapped Ryan is obviously shares her abilities. Ryan, however, is innocent of your accusations. Your agents will confirm that,” he continued, gesturing to Fitz and Simmons standing together transfixed at his impromptu speech. “The man escaped originally heading south by southeast in a 2016 Chrysler 300 limousine. The chauffeur is a Caucasian male Beta in his fifties from Hoboken. Ryan’s kidnapper came here from downtown Manhattan and ate at Cipriani last night. And…he’s unpresented.”

As Matt finished his final pronouncement, everyone standing frozen suddenly stumbled forward at once, and heavy gasping filled the air. Just as quickly, Thor loosed a vicious roar, rushing forward towards Matt.

“Thor!” Jane cried out, reaching for and missing her mate’s hand as he pulled away from her. Half a second later, though, Thor grunted loudly as he spasmed violently, falling unconscious to the floor as the shock cuffs loosed their voltage on him. Jane stared in alarm for a moment, then dropped to her
knees beside him to check his pulse. To Matt’s left, Daisy buckled simultaneously, Coulson half-catching her as she fell.

Bucky yelled “Steve!”, his voice cracking in desperation, and dropped to his mate’s side, turning him over and slapping his face gently with the backside of his flesh hand. Steve’s eyes wrenched open immediately, and he gasped as he sat up so quickly that he almost passed out again. He grabbed Bucky’s arm for support, blinking away the dark spots in his whirling vision and waiting for his ears to stop ringing.

There was a sort of quiet chaos in the air surrounding everyone as they began to process it all. Matt was being thoroughly inspected for damage by his mates despite his vehement assertion that he was fine. Darcy had tears streaming silently down her face, too shell-shocked to speak as she was held tightly by Natasha. Tony was leaning entirely against the wall, his breathing heavy and eyes far away, and Pepper was murmuring quietly into his ear despite her voice shaking. Bucky was whispering something into Steve’s still-deafened ears, the brunet’s eyes closed as he kneeled on the floor supporting his mate. Clint and Sam’s eyes met across the pool of bodies, and they each nodded slightly, approaching Thor simultaneously and reaching down to lift him with unsteady hands.

“Power containment cells won’t hold him,” Jane said automatically from the floor beside them, speaking over their loud grunts of exertion as they hoisted Thor up. “He’s too strong, he’ll break out.”

“That’s what the shock bracelets are for,” Sam replied gently, meeting her gaze with a compassionate look despite his anxious scent. “They sense heart rate, motion, and body temperature; if he wakes up and tries again, they’ll stop him.”

“Wait, we can’t just keep frying him!” Clint interjected, his expression strained and worried.

“He’s the god of thunder, he’ll be fine,” Jane countered, steeling herself as she stood back up. “At least until we figure out how to stop it.” She lightly stroked her Alpha’s cheek for a moment, his head lolling on his shoulders, then dropped her hand again. “Get him taken care of, we need to deal with Bruce right now.” She turned away as they left, hugging her arms to her chest.

Fitz and Coulson led the way back down the east hall, carrying Daisy, and Clint and Sam followed behind. “You got all the systems back online, Fitz?” Coulson asked briefly as they deposited Daisy in the room beside Thor’s. Coulson removed her shock bracelet; Daisy’s powers would be inactivated by the cell, and she couldn’t escape without them.

“Yes, sir, the whole base is fully functional,” Fitz nodded. Their eyes met over Daisy’s unconscious form on either end of the cot. Coulson looked outwardly as competent and able as ever, but his eyes were full of a fear Fitz had never seen. “Sir, how were you all trapped frozen like that?” Fitz asked bluntly, despite a sinking feeling inside that he already knew the answer.

“Ryan isn’t the only one who can control minds,” With that, Coulson quickly strode out of the room.

Fitz looked down at Daisy again, his stomach twisting in knots of dread. He somehow knew things were about to go from bad to worse. Ryan might have been innocent, but whoever caused his friend to rush at Matt, a murderous look in her eye, certainly was not. He gently brushed Daisy’s hair out of her face, worry marring his own, and left.

Steve, meanwhile, was finally able to stand again, rapidly regaining strength though still rather weak and fatigued for the moment. He took in the scene, observed the varying looks of shock on everyone’s face. “He got away,” he breathed, anger sparking over a hollow feeling in his chest.
Bucky nodded curtly, his jaw set tight. He felt his heated, burning fury steadily giving way to cold steel, old instincts coming back online. He was going to destroy the man who took Ryan, and the perverse thrill of the impending kill coursed through him. Bucky quickly filled Steve in on what had happened after he’d fallen unconscious, his voice mechanical and flat. Steve nodded brusquely after he finished, watching Coulson and Fitz arriving again ahead of Clint and Sam.

“Fitz,” Jemma called out, standing next to Jane. “This is Dr. Foster, she’s just explained what she saw happen,” she introduced as Fitz hurried over. “They were all under mind control, but not by Ryan!”

“Yeah, Coulson said the same thing,” Fitz affirmed, “but why were Daisy, Thor, and Dr. Banner going to attack Matt?”

“Try to stop anyone following them,” Jane reported, her voice steady despite her frightened and angry scent. “And speaking of, who are you and how the hell did you escape like that?” she continued, pushing past Jemma to where Foggy, Karen and Matt were all huddled together. Everyone stopped to look over at the trio. Foggy looked nervous, Karen angry, and Matt simply intense.

“He’s the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen,” Clint inserted, stepping forward into the center, stopping just before the pile of bodies on the ground. “Ryan said that she knew you. Guess she was telling the truth.”

Everyone was stunned into silence after his pronouncement, all heads turning to look at Matt’s bloodied clothes and tense posture. They all knew the story from the papers, and the one blurred photo of the masked vigilante had played on news channels for weeks after the explosions last spring.

Ryan said that she knew you. Guess she was telling the truth. Clint’s words echoed again through Bucky’s mind, and his barely repressed anger exploded out of him. With a furious cry, he launched himself at Clint, grasping around his throat with his metal hand and lifting him into the air as he choked. “RYAN’S GONE BECAUSE OF YOU!” he roared, throwing him viciously into the ground on his back. Clint wheezed and gasped, the wind knocked out of him in the impact.

“BUCKY!” Steve yelled, grabbing Bucky’s arms and straining with all his might to hold him back. “Stand down!” he hissed in his mate’s ear, Alpha voice resounding in his tone. Bucky still struggled against him, baring his teeth ferociously and snarling as he tried to continue his attack. Natasha jumped in front of Clint, spitting angry, unintelligible Russian at Bucky with a dangerous, volcanic glint in her eye. Matt pushed away from Karen and Foggy, half a second from throwing himself into the fray to stop it devolving further.

“That is QUITE enough!” a voice burst out from behind them all, and everyone paused to see Jemma, a determined expression on her face, stalking into the center of the room with a stern, chastising expression. “A juvenile brawl will solve nothing, and there is immediate danger we need to address,” she reprimanded, her tone like a teacher berating unruly students. “Dr. Banner will wake up any moment and try to kill all of us should we even take a step towards the west exit, and there have been enough near-death encounters today already. You can sort out the blaming later. You’re Avengers, not schoolchildren!”

Jane gave a surprised but impressed look to Fitz beside her, who raised a single eyebrow with a smug grin. He might be the Alpha, but his mate was not only endlessly brave, but fantastic at taking charge when needed. “Jemma’s right, and if it weren’t for Matt,” he emphasized, stepping up beside his mate, “we’d all probably be dead already. Not to mention, we’d have no idea where to start looking for Ryan.”
Bucky relaxed somewhat, his scent no longer like scorched pavement and ashes. Steve released him as Darcy and Natasha helped Clint up, who rubbed at his neck as he worked to regain his breath. The two sides glared at each other a moment, then turned to Fitz and Simmons. “Is there anything here that can hold back the Hulk?” Steve questioned, his tone commanding and practiced.

“No,” Coulson answered, approaching again from the side, “but if he’s already unconscious, we can try to keep him that way. Simmons?”

“Yes, not a problem,” she answered. “Get him to med bay one, I’ll have it set up in a few minutes.”

“The two bodyguards need medical attention as well,” Matt spoke up from where Karen was grasping his hand, Foggy standing protectively beside them. “Keep them apart, the one in the garage might keep trying to kill the other.” Simmons turned a little paler at his words, instinctively glancing for a split second at the mutilated hand of the unconscious man nearby on the floor and immediately regretting it. “They might know where Ryan’s being held,” Matt finished.

“Coulson, we need the security footage of all of this,” Tony spoke up for the first time, his voice noticeably lacking his usual confidence and bravado. “There might be more clues.”

“Oh, now you believe Ryan’s innocent?” Bucky spat out, turning around to level a withering glare at Tony.

“Yes,” he replied quietly, not meeting Bucky’s eyes. His scent swirled with an almost sickening guilt that everyone could tell he didn’t even try to mask. “You two, Agents?” he addressed Fitz and Simmons. “Ryan didn’t control anyone? For sure?”

Both of them silently nodded their heads. “No one we interviewed showed any signs of it,” Simmons reported softly.

Tony closed his eyes for a brief second, then looked fully up at everyone. “Let’s get to work, then.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

“I’m fine,” Bucky snapped, batting Steve’s hand away from his shoulder. They were standing outside Coulson’s office, where the director, Natasha, Clint, Tony, and Sam were waiting to review the security footage of the incident. Steve had stopped him before entering, and Bucky recognized the concerned look in his eye. “I’m not going to kill Barton. Yet.”

“Buck,” Steve sighed. “Look, I get it. I’m furious. Beyond furious. If Ryan…” he trailed off, lowering and shaking his head, jaw clenched tight. He’d forgotten the point he was trying to make.

“We’re going to find her, and we’re going to get her back,” Bucky vowed, sharp and dangerous. “And I will take great pleasure in ripping whoever that was that took her limb from limb.”

“You’ll have to fight me for it,” Steve muttered low, crossing his arms and looking away. Very few people truly realized just how far Steve would go, what exactly he would do for those he cared about. His fierce love for Bucky had propelled him into breaking military law a dozen times to sign up to go to war, and when he’d been refused, he’d gotten himself injected with experimental drugs and put into an untested mechanical monstrosity designed by a mad scientist to finish the job. He’d jumped out of a rickety fighter plane amidst heavy fire in enemy territory, alone and without backup, and had taken out half the men on the HYDRA base to finally get to his mate. He’d led the charge against Red Skull out of duty, but he only went knowing Bucky would be by his side. After he’d fallen, Steve had fallen, too.

Steve saw the side of Bucky’s mouth quirk up at his remark. Ryan always smiled with her whole
The corners of her cerulean eyes crinkling, laugh lines around her smooth, pink lips falling into the same pattern they so often frequented. Ryan always smiled when she greeted him, whether it was a cheery “good morning”, a quick “hi, Steve!” as she left for the bookstore, or a bright “oh, hey!” when she was surprised to see him come to her room and invite her to spend time with everyone. Her smile was so beautiful, skin glowing, eyes alight with joy as natural as breath to her.

He hadn’t seen any of it in days, now.

The thought of it all simultaneously warmed his heart and reignited his anger. He had succumbed to the man’s influence completely, and it had been Ryan who had kept him from hurting someone. She had been screaming, fighting, horrified at the violence she was forced to witness, and he’d let her be dragged away as he lay unconscious on the floor. The panicked, anguished, yet firmly resigned expression on her face as she’d been forced to say good-bye would haunt his dreams for a long time. Ryan had never used her powers to hurt anyone, and now because of the Avengers—because of him—she was in the hands of the type of psychopath Clint, Nat, and Tony had feared her to be all along.

Steve exhaled loudly, emotions boiling, and then punched his fist at the wall with a shout of anger—only to have it caught by Bucky’s metal hand before it connected.

“Do not blame yourself for this,” Bucky ordered in a deep, rumbling growl. He knew Steve better than Steve knew himself, could smell the self-loathing rolling off his mate like bitter poison. He released Steve’s fist and dropped his hand to grip the side of Steve’s neck by his right shoulder instead. “None of this is your fault, and we need to focus on Ryan. We’ll deal with the rest after.”

Steve silently shook his head, completely disagreeing with his mate but knowing he was right all the same. “When Ryan is safe, we need to talk. About… everything,” he replied quietly, looking down at the floor rather than at Bucky’s eyes.

Bucky’s flesh hand pushed his chin up to look his mate in the face. His eyes were an indecipherable storm of emotion buried in the rich, golden sepia. They closed for a moment as Bucky quickly leaned in to kiss Steve softly, his actions gentle despite his external demeanor. “I know,” he murmured, only millimeters away, his breath a warm wind across Steve’s mouth. He pulled back fully, letting go of Steve’s neck to take his hand. “C’mon, they’re waiting for us.”

“I’m fine, Foggy,” Matt insisted for what felt like the hundredth time. “No one even got a hit in. You’re getting blood on your shirt.”

“Yeah, well, you just shot two guys, knocked out two others, and fought off evil supervillain mind control twice in the span of ten minutes, so forgive me if I don’t completely believe you. And I don’t give a single fuck about my shirt,” Foggy shot back, refusing to release Matt out of his arms even as Karen hugged them both from Matt’s other side. He wasn’t nearly so clingy normally, but he was still freaking out internally over everything that had happened, and he disguised it with being a mother hen.

“And stop lying, Matt, we can both tell you’re exhausted,” Karen interjected, stepping back from her mates and tugging on Foggy’s arm. She led them both to the couch where they’d waited before, far away from the gruesome sights they’d been forced to witness. The others had dispersed to parts unknown without any instruction given to the outsider trio, despite the stark announcement of Matt’s secret. Karen had honestly thought Matt would be the next one thrown into shock cuffs, but the fact that he’d saved all their lives seemed to have earned them SHIELD’s trust, at least for now. All that was left was to wait, Karen decided.

Matt sighed, but he stopped arguing with his mates. Tucking his head onto Karen’s shoulder, he closed his eyes, Foggy’s hand stroking his hair at the nape of his neck.
“Matty… how did you do it?” Foggy asked after they’d sat for a few moments in silence. He didn’t have to clarify any further; the question was on everyone’s mind.

Matt sighed again, this time more thoughtful and pensive than tired. “Agent Fitz cleared me, and we were going through the garage to get to Ryan so no one would see. When the lights went out, the first man tried to shoot us. I disarmed him, questioned him. He said the devil had sent him, and he would come for us all.”

Foggy’s hand stilled, and Karen tensed beneath Matt. Neither of them shared Matt’s absolute convictions, but they understood them well enough to know how that threat would affect him. “What happened then?” Karen asked softly.

“I knocked him out, ran to get to Ryan. I could smell synthetic scent blockers, and I figured that’s where she was. But I was too late. Whoever they were already had her, and the Captain and Sergeant were already brainwashed. The man told me to stop, and… it took everything I had to keep going.”

“I still don’t know how you beat him,” Karen professed. “It felt like… like all I wanted in the world was to stand there silently, and if I didn’t, terrible things would happen. But I could just obey, and everything would be fine.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s exactly what it was like,” Foggy agreed, his scent distressed and upset. “God, I was just screaming at myself to move, but it didn’t make any difference.”

“Ryan’s command was even stronger,” Matt half-whispered, the slightest note of fear tinging his voice. “I couldn’t do anything against her.”

“Wait, she used mind control on you?!” Foggy exclaimed, exchanging alarmed looks with Karen.

“She saved my life, probably, and Captain Roger’s. The man made Rogers attack me. I was going to shoot him, but Ryan made us both stop, and Rogers passed out right after.”

Both his mates were quiet, processing for a moment. “How could Ryan be even stronger?” Karen asked, her question almost rhetorical in tone.

“It was different, her power. The man’s… was like being persuaded, hypnotized. Ryan just… came in and took control,” Matt said haltingly. “There was nothing left. It was just her.”

“God,” Karen breathed, terrified but somewhat intrigued. “But, she must’ve let you go. And you got controlled again after?”

Matt nodded once, still lying against Karen’s shoulder. “She let me go almost immediately, when she saw Captain Rogers’ reaction. Her command and his at the same time caused… physiological pain, somehow. He got knocked out, and I was so dazed that I…” He trailed off. “It was easier to throw off the man’s influence the second time, though. I don’t know if I’d have even fallen under again if it weren’t for the effect Ryan had on me.”

“God,” Karen repeated. “Look, I… I know we said we could help with all of this, but this isn’t just a bunch of thugs whose asses you can kick anymore. Maybe we should leave this up to the Avengers. They seem like they’re all on board, now.”

Foggy chuckled quietly. “I concur, but I’m pretty sure we’d have to get another one of those shock cuffs back on Matt to stop him, and he’s stronger than both of us combined.”

“I think we could take him,” Karen said with a matching snicker. “We know his weak spots,” she
emphasized with a poke in Matt’s side, making him exhale a short laugh and grab Karen’s hand before she did it again.

“I know yours too, you know,” Matt joked. Then he sobered again, thinking hard. “I have to stay. I’m the only one who can beat that bastard,” he said softly. “But you two need to go home. I need you safe.”

“Not a chance,” Karen replied firmly.

“What she said,” Foggy echoed. “We all promised Ryan. And who knows what’s going to happen to her after this either? She’s been all alone. She needs us.”

Matt sighed a third time. He hadn’t expected anything different from his mates. Their unswerving loyalty was one of the reasons he loved them so much. “One thing at a time,” he said.

“What if you could… teach us, somehow, to throw off the mind control?” Karen pondered. “We’d have that dick in a vice, we’d just need to make sure we didn’t… set off any hostages.”

Matt shook his head. “I couldn’t tell you how I did it,” he admitted. “Just…I’ve fought the Devil before, and I almost lost. I couldn’t let it happen again. Not now that I have you two.” Karen pulled him even closer, and Foggy crowded in, slinging an arm across Matt’s torso. There was nothing more to say, for now. In less than a minute, they fell asleep.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Chapter End Notes

I loved the last few chapters I wrote, and I hate this one. But I think that's just how this is going to go.
Ryan wasn’t positive when she had passed out again. She figured it couldn't have been long after getting into the limousine. Tidal waves of adrenaline had all at once receded as they were driven away; the last she remembered was cold violet eyes shining above an incongruously genial, sympathetic smile. Surging dread had rushed through her again, and she knew no more.

But she felt strangely sedate now. Peaceful, even, despite all the horrors that had befallen her replaying absently in her mind. It was more like watching a movie with the events than actually recalling them. She calmly looked around, eying the thin plastic tubing attached to a needle in her arm, following it upwards to an IV bag of clear liquid with a soft golden light radiating down upon the stand. She lifted her head off the cushy pillow, silken bedsheets sliding down to pool in her lap as she slowly rose to sit upright. It seemed a miracle, but for the first time in a long while now, she was in no pain whatsoever. It was a welcome change.

Even better, though, was the extravagant room she found herself situated in. It was dimly aglow with copper strands of tiny lights, hung across walls with lavishly designed wallpaper of warm gold, shining flowers and fleur-de-lis against a matte backdrop. The carpet was a rich burgundy overlaid with plush ornamental rugs, and the furniture and other décor could have come from the Palace of Versailles during Louis XIV’s reign. *The Sun King*, Ryan remembered as a giggle escaped unbidden through her lips. *Mrs. Thompson thought I didn’t learn a thing. Fuck you, Thompson, I remember all that France shit…*

Suddenly, the memory of her 9th grade World History teacher’s dour frown popped into her mind’s eye, and Ryan dissolved into hysterical laughter, mirthful tears streaming down her face as she fell back onto the mattress again. A minute later, she spied a glass of water on the bedside table and reached for it, only to knock it to the ground, water splashing into the carpet. That set her off again, and she snickered uncontrollably as she curled gently into a ball. The bed was the most comfortable thing she’d ever experienced, her weight gently sinking her down as ornately patterned blankets kept her snug and cozy. Even her clothes were opulent, she noted dimly, rose satin pajamas cool on her skin. She still had those silver cuffs on, though, but they were much more comfortable now that they weren’t tying her hands behind her back, she thought. Ryan’s chuckles eventually calmed, and drowsiness quickly overtook her once again. Outside, the overcast sky was dark as pitch, snow whirling down through the night.

* * *  * * *  * * *

No one was looking at anyone else when Steve and Bucky entered Coulson’s office. Steve heard the sound of a ticking clock, and he glanced up automatically. A little after nine. He didn’t know precisely when Ryan had been taken, but each minute she was gone was a minute too long.

“We have the surveillance on the power containment rooms on a separate system,” Coulson said quietly from his desk as the wall-sized video monitor turned on, the timestamp reading 20:04.
“Agent Peters didn’t know, thankfully.”

Ryan on the screen stirred on a cot, her face mostly covered by the blindfold and gag, her arms tied tightly by magnets on the shock bands to act as handcuffs. Steve, Bucky, Coulson, Tony, Sam, Clint, and Natasha all watched as impassively as they could as Ryan sat up, the springs beneath the mattress squeaking slightly. She sat still for a moment, then her breathing started to come in gasps. Suddenly, Ryan was sobbing brokenly, the muffled yet visceral sounds ripping through Steve like a jagged blade. Beside him, Bucky gritted his teeth and stood his ground against the feeling of his heart breaking in two.

In the video, the lights went out, and Ryan didn’t seem to notice. Her stifled cries didn’t stop until the door to her cell opened, and she sniffled as she tried to call out through the gag. When the kidnapper’s goons laid hands on Ryan, Steve growled unconsciously, deep in his chest. Bucky’s fury scented like cold steel from beside him.

Ryan tried to fight them off as best she could, and beneath the roiling anger Steve felt a surge of pride. It quickly turned to astonishment, though, when the man had her blindfold ripped off and exclaimed with delight.

“They know each other?” Clint breathed inadvertently from his perch on a windowsill, eyes widened with shock. He was silenced by the coldest, deadliest glare he’d ever seen, emanating across the room from Bucky.

“Kilgrave,” Steve said, flat and hard as the man dragged Ryan off down the hall, the command for her to smile sickening him to his core. He turned to Coulson. “SHIELD had no idea he existed?”

“No,” Coulson replied simply. “But then, we didn’t know about Ryan either.”

Steve’s immediate reaction to the director’s words was a flare of anger; Ryan was nothing like that monster. She couldn’t be equated with him even like that. But then, a stray thought passed through his mind, and his stomach suddenly dropped. He exhaled sharply like he’d been punched in the gut.

“Steve?” Bucky muttered quietly, his eyes concerned as he turned to his mate.

Steve closed his eyes and shook his head slightly before returning to look at the screen, the footage from the central hub now queued up. He caught Natasha’s glance for a moment as he turned. Her expression was neutral, but her eyes bored into his. As always, it seemed she knew exactly what he was thinking before he could even say anything.

They all watched as Steve and Bucky fell under Kilgrave’s commands, as Ryan was forced to say good-bye, as Matt struggled and shot the guards, as everyone arrived and was forced to endure Kilgrave’s mockery. Through it all, Bucky, who had occasionally flexed his metal hand or clenched his jaw, became as still and silent as a shadow. Steve, on the other hand, became increasingly restless, and stormed out of the room the second the footage was over. Bucky followed silently.

Sam sighed, the first noise he’d made the entire time. “Daredevil - Matt - he said they escaped south. Were the outside cameras able to pick up a license plate?”

“No,” Coulson replied, “they weren’t on the secondary circuit. But this Kilgrave apparently likes Italian and limos. We’ll have to start there.”

“How did- “ Tony began, but was cut off by Steve and Bucky returning with Matt, Foggy, and Karen all trailing behind. The trio looked slightly disheveled, Karen smoothing out her hair and yawning behind her hand as Foggy readjusted his suit jacket. Matt had put his dark spectacles back
on and stood impassively in front of his mates just in front of the door.

“Mr. Murdock,” Coulson greeted. “We’d like to ask you some questions.”

“We have some as well. Namely how your security was breached to allow our client, who was already taken against her will, to once again be kidnapped,” Matt responded coolly.

“Also, if you wouldn’t mind, maybe explain your legal rationale for coercing our client into confessing? I’m pretty sure the 5th Amendment doesn’t agree with your methods,” Foggy tacked on.

“You’re lawyers?” Tony exclaimed incredulously. “You’re a vigilante, how the hell does that work?”

“We’ll let you know when we know,” Karen shot back shortly, stepping out to stand beside Matt and leveling a mild glare at Coulson. “This isn’t important right now, we need to find Ryan. How soon can we get back to New York?”

“You three won’t be finding anything,” Natasha countered, voice firm and unyielding. “This is SHIELD business.”

“Like hell it is,” Bucky spat at her. “Fucking SHIELD is the reason-“

“It’s my fault. Not SHIELD’s,” Clint interjected loudly. He jumped off the window sill and faced Steve and Bucky, his face carefully blank. The finger-shaped bruises on his neck were slowly turning bluish-purple. “I did this. But I need SHIELD’s help to fix it.”

A heavy silence fell after his pronouncement. “Where do we start, then?” Sam asked softly after a few moments.

“I’ve already got JARVIS on face recognition,” Tony said, pulling out his cell phone.

“Bucky and I will track down leads back in the city,” Steve volunteered. “We have the restaurant and the limousine, hopefully something will come up.”

“No, you two are staying here,” Coulson ordered. “You’re too recognizable,” he continued as Bucky rounded on him, a furious look in his eye. “And even if baseball caps and hoodies could effectively disguise two of America’s most famous icons, they won’t inspire any confidence when you question people. I’ll send Agent May.”

“Because she’s the most tactful interrogator?” Clint pointed out. “I’ll go. People don’t know my face nearly as much. And I do this for a living.”

“Fine. Agent Romanoff?” Coulson asked, looking pointedly her way. She nodded once, and she and Clint strode out of the room. “Agent Simmons is monitoring Thor, Dr. Banner, and Agent Johnson, and hopefully we’ll figure out how Kilgrave’s powers work from them. Everyone else, sit tight. We’ll have news when we have news.”

“Wait wait wait, where did the grumpy lawyers go?” Tony piped up, looking back up from his phone for the first time. Matt, Foggy, and Karen were nowhere to be found.

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“Hi, I’m calling on behalf of Mr. Kilgrave? He was a patron last night?” Foggy chirped in his friendliest tone.

“Yes, thank you,” Karen smiled, pacing opposite Foggy as she spoke. “I’m so sorry, I can’t seem to find the number! The driver was a nice man from Hoboken, though?”

“Yes,” Foggy continued. “There are some fraudulent charges on the credit card used last night, we’re try-“

“I don’t know exactly where it was, could you maybe, like, send the GPS data so I could confirm?” Karen said, her voice at least a half octave higher than normal. She played herself off like a doe-eyed, innocent blonde through the phone, and it was working like a charm. “Oh my god, thank you SO much! You’re a life saver!”


“The company’s sending the GPS data from the limousine, hopefully it’ll tell us where that rat bastard’s holed up,” Karen replied, grinning hugely.

Foggy let out a whoop of celebration, standing up to pull Karen into his arms. He kissed her briefly then pulled back, a triumphant smile lighting up his face. “When is Secretary Appreciation Day? Because you’re getting the biggest stuffed teddy bear I can find online.”

Karen beamed back at him. “What happened with the restaurant? Dead end?”

Foggy chuckled, shaking his head. “The bastard didn’t pay, he just ordered them to give him a table and then left when he was done. I guess we should’ve seen that coming.”

“It doesn’t matter, we’ve got him now,” Karen replied. Her phone vibrated just then, and an email with an attachment showed onscreen. “Come on, let’s get this to someone.”

“After all this, they’re going to owe me the best new phone in existence,” Foggy commented lightly as they jogged back down the hall. Only Coulson and Tony remained when they burst back into Coulson’s office, scents alight with exhilaration and accomplishment.

“Hey!” Tony exclaimed as Karen grabbed his phone straight out of his hand and replaced it with hers. “What the he-“ he cut off, looking down at the screen. His eyes shot back up at them, completely astonished. “It’s been, like, ten minutes, how the hell did you get this so fast?!?”

“We might just be the little guys, but we’re awesome,” Foggy boasted with a grin.

“What is it, Stark?” Coulson questioned.

Tony ignored him, furiously tapping at Karen’s phone then yanking his own back to continue. A few seconds later, a small hologram projected itself from his screen, and he took it in hand and pushed it towards Coulson’s video monitors. The blue light grew in size and then seemingly disappeared into the wall, where suddenly a satellite picture of an abandoned dirt road came up on the screen. “Goddammit,” Tony swore under his breath. “He switched cars on us. This'll take a little bit longer.”

“Where is that?” Coulson questioned again.

“Just outside of Allentown,” Tony replied, already glued to his device again.
“Wait, Allentown… Pennsylvania? We’re in Pennsylvania?” Foggy inserted incredulously.

“In Tioga State Forest,” Coulson replied. It seemed all of his secrets were destined to come out regardless of his feelings on the matter. “The locals think it’s a specially licensed fracking operation, no one can come within a few miles. No one would ever think to look for a secret government organization in Pennsylvania, right?”

“Alright, that’s fair,” Foggy shrugged. “It’s been what, two, three hours since Ryan was kidnapped? Could they have gotten much further?”

“The GPS timestamp says they were in Allentown an hour ago,” Tony said absentmindedly, hacking his way into an FBI satellite. “They must’ve been going 100 miles an hour on the highway, there’s got to be some radar that picked them up.”

“Good work, both of you,” Coulson said to Foggy and Karen, standing up to shake their hands. “And our apologies about the kidnapping. To be fair, SHIELD thought you were brainwashed.”

“Yeah, words will be had in the future about all of this. But Ryan comes first,” Foggy replied, shaking Coulson’s hand anyway as Karen half-smirked beside him.

“If you two were tracking this down, where is Mr. Murdock?” Coulson asked, ignoring Foggy’s pronouncement for the moment.

“Hopefully, making our breakthrough irrelevant,” Karen answered. With that, she and Foggy quickly left, Coulson shaking his head as his office door closed again.

“I’ll call Agent Barton and update him, hopefully he’ll figure out more from there. Also, where do lawyers learn to be so esoteric? They make May look like Captain Obvious,” Coulson remarked.

“I like them,” Tony quipped back.

“I thought you hated being handed things,” Phil said pointedly.

“Only when it’s you, dear.”

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Jemma had been surprised yet again by Matt’s entrance, this time into the med bay. She had finished attending to Agent Peters - I knew that was his name - and the man was thoroughly sedated with painkillers for the time being, after stirring briefly during her treatment. Fitz had stood guard beside her, icer gun at the ready. They didn’t know if Peters was still under mind control, but he would at least survive the ordeal. Jemma knew it was possible he would not survive another round with Daredevil, however.

“Mr. Murdock, you can’t be in here!” Jemma whispered loudly as Matt pushed her and Fitz aside to go over to Peters.

“Go check on Dr. Banner or the other bodyguard,” Matt warned in a low rumble as he swept past. “Neither of you want to see this.”

“You will not hurt my patient!” Jemma demanded fiercely, shoving her way in between Matt and the
still-sleeping Peters, Fitz right beside her. “Interrogate him if you must, but the man has already had his fingers sawn off! I’ll be damned if I let you injure him further!”

“Matt, please,” Fitz interjected desperately. “He’s a SHIELD agent, he was forced to do ev - “

“You don’t know that,” Matt interrupted bluntly. “I don’t kill. But I know how to get information. Get out of my way.”

“No,” Jemma responded firmly, standing her ground despite her hands starting to shake. Fitz grabbed her hand and stood unyielding as well, protective instincts rising at the threat to his mate.

“Mr. Murdock,” a quiet voice called out from the doorway. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Agent Romanoff, with all due respect, you will not be harming my patient either!” Jemma reiterated angrily, looking past Matt to see the redhead approaching. Her gait and expression were entirely casual, her stance open and non-threatening.

“I won’t need to,” she responded simply. “Although I’m sure your tactics would likely be faster,” she directed at Matt, who was staring unseeingly at the side wall now as he turned partway towards her. “This is my job. Let me help Ryan how I can,” she finished, a softness in her tone and scent Matt hadn’t yet observed of her. A moment later, he gave a curt nod and backed away.

“You two can stay if you’d like,” Natasha said as Matt left. “But it’ll be more effective if I can interrogate him alone.”

Fitz looked to Jemma, who shook her head slightly. He gave her a pointed look, knowing she would understand him. Jemma rolled her eyes, then looked back to Natasha. “We’ll be monitoring the interrogation over the security feed,” she informed her shortly. “Do not cause further injury to my patient.”

Natasha nodded solemnly. “Understood.” She pulled up a chair and sat beside the bed, crossing her legs and looking relaxed as Fitz and Simmons walked out.

“I hate this, Fitz,” Jemma muttered out in the hallway.

“I know, love,” Fitz replied gently. “I’m not happy about it either.”

“SHIELD is supposed to be good. The Avengers are supposed to be good! Matt-Daredevil, whomever he is- has apparently saved hundreds of lives himself, and he was going to torture that man!” Jemma expressed vehemently, gesturing back up to the med bay.

“They are good. We are good,” Fitz insisted. “But morality- it’s not like science, it’s not black and white.”

“So, what? We kidnap people in the name of justice? We try to bend this girl to our will just because she can do it to us?” Jemma exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air as she paused her pacing.

“I’m not saying mistakes weren’t made, because apparently there have been a lot of them,” Fitz replied. “But all of this is still in shades of gray. Think about it: why were the Avengers so afraid of Ryan?”


Fitz wrapped his arms around her, tucking her head into his neck. His Alpha scent calmed her
somewhat, the familiar cinnamon and honey feeling like home. “We’ll do our part to make sure Ryan is safe,” he vowed. “And then we’re finally going on vacation.”

“To Perthshire?” Jemma asked hopefully.

“To Perthshire,” Fitz promised.

Jemma hugged him even closer. "Also, when exactly did you become such a philosopher?" she teased lightly, pulling back to kiss his cheek.

"You... were gone a long time. I had a long time to think," Fitz admitted.

"So you dwelled on the deepest mysteries of mankind?" Jemma said, smirking at him.

Fitz shrugged, kissing her on the forehead. "Amongst other thoughts. It seemed like the thing to do. I had to at least try to find a reason to live without you."

*B * * *   * * *   * * *

Bucky could barely contain his fury, but Steve’s mind seemed far away from the task at hand for once. They were in one of the lounges, Bucky resting stock-still and staring almost mechanically at his mate’s progress as Steve paced back and forth. Steve almost never paced, except for when he was at his most agitated: after a mission gone wrong, after one of his own nightmares, or even way back when after a fight in a Brooklyn alleyway had ended with the perp getting away clean. “Steve, spit it out,” Bucky ordered coldly. The scent of his frustration and inner turmoil was only irritating Bucky further as they were forced to sit idly and wait.

“‘S nothin’, Buck,” Steve shot back. What remained of his accent, a unique amalgam of old Brooklyn and older Irish, only ever came out when he was at his most relaxed or his most emotional. Worry for his mate - stupid, self-sacrificing punk, Jesus H. Stevie - joined the thousands of other emotions churning in Bucky’s chest, and he jumped up and grabbed Steve’s arm to yank him around, glaring in his face.

"Inis dom, m’fhíorghrá!” Bucky said fiercely, slipping easily into Steve’s native tongue. It always calmed and centered him, their special means to communicate that so few knew nowadays. It was the language they had used for their fiercest passions and whispered confessions, their most special endearments, what they couldn’t let anyone else hear when their hearts were too full to keep quiet.

Steve’s face crumpled, and he closed his eyes. “Bhí síad ceart, mo anamchara,” he responded effortlessly in kind. The words brought him back to a simpler time, but the memories his mind conjured in conjunction were no less painful than the present. He felt as helpless and hopeless as the day Bucky had left him behind for Europe and war, the same endearment rolling off his tongue as he desperately kissed Steve good-bye.

“Cé a bhí?” Bucky asked softly as he released Steve’s arm, his own ire extinguishing for the moment at Steve’s heartbroken expression.

“Clínt agus na daoine eile,” Steve sighed, running a hand over his face.

“Tá Ryan neamhchiontach!” Bucky shouted, a look of shock crossing his face.

“Cad atá i gceist agat?” Bucky asked again roughly, getting frustrated with Steve’s caginess.

“The man who took her, Kilgrave,” Steve explained, switching back to English out of habit as his agitation recurred. “The others were afraid of Ryan because she came out of nowhere and can control minds. Look what happened.”

Bucky opened his mouth, defensiveness springing up, then shut it again. He dropped onto the couch behind him as Steve closed his eyes once more. “Ryan is innocent,” he repeated.

“Kilgrave’s not,” Steve said simply. “Jesus, Buck, he made you carry her…” Steve trailed off as he sank down to sit atop the coffee table in front of the couch, head in his hands. “Somehow she knew that sick bastard, and she had to... and I swore to you no one would ever take away your free will again, and-“

“For fuck’s sake, do not blame yourself for this, Stevie!” Bucky yelled, forcing Steve’s hands away and pushing his face to look at his own. “It wasn’t you. And it wasn’t Ryan.”

“Well, it wasn’t Clint, Natasha, Tony, or Coulson!” Steve shouted back. “Cause everything they were worried about happened! For Chrissake, Kilgrave's unpresented, just like Ryan was! Exactly everything - it's fucking HYDRA all over again, mind control and plants inside SHIELD and -“

“And we brought them down before,” Bucky growled, his scent like a raging thunderstorm. “When I came back to you. You and me, we destroyed every last HYDRA base we could find. Right?”

Steve nodded silently, inhaling deeply and avoiding his mate’s eyes.

“It doesn’t matter how all this happened right now. Because we’re going to destroy Kilgrave, right? You rescued me. And now we'll rescue Ryan. She’ll come back to us,” Bucky continued.

Steve nodded again. He reached for Bucky, crushing his mate to his chest, holding him as tightly as he could to stifle his shuddering breaths. Bucky returned the embrace just as passionately, his metal hand fistig in Steve’s shirt, the other clenching in his hair. Steve might be the Alpha in their relationship, but he knew he could rely on Bucky when he needed him. They were best friends, brothers-in-arms, equal partners, lovers, soulmates. ‘Til the end of the line. And Steve was beginning to think, deep in quiet recesses of his aching heart where he didn't dare explore, that there might be another person he wanted to join them along the way.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, I'm so sorry it's been a long time since I've posted. Some shit went down and left me in a bad headspace for a while, and gave me writer's block to boot. I'll try not to let it go so long between updates again. Hope you liked the chapter!

UPDATE:
So sorry about how I did the translations at first guys, I got a lot of comments saying it ended up being clunky and distracting. For those of you on computers, the translated text should now appear if you hover the cursor anywhere over the non-English text, and
I'll put the full translation in the notes for readers on tablets or phones. I have a thing for languages so there will definitely be more in the future, hopefully it will add to the story next time instead of detract.

Bucky: Tell me, my true love!

Steve: They were right, my soul mate.

Bucky: Who was?

Steve: Clint and the others.

Bucky: Ryan is innocent!

Steve: I know. But they were right to be afraid.

Bucky: What do you mean?
“Brought you gals something to eat. Thought you might be hungry,” Sam offered quietly, putting down the plate of sandwiches. “How is he?” he whispered sympathetically as he sat on the floor across from Jane, leaning against the opposite wall.

“He woke up about two hours ago. Got shocked back down again,” she answered mechanically, her usually sweet, almost chocolatey scent now dull and muted. "Agent Johnson was trying to escape too, but I think she exhausted herself." Sometime during their silent vigil outside the power containment cell housing Thor, Darcy had fallen asleep on Jane’s shoulder, trails of tears still visible on her cheeks. Jane’s dry eyes were gaunt, her expression haggard under the pale fluorescent lights. 

“He’ll be alright,” Sam reassured her gently. “Alpha that huge and strong, and an Asgardian to boot? He’ll fight it off.”

“It’s been five and a half hours,” Jane reported listlessly. “If he could have broken free, he would have already.” She’d watched the date change from December 9th to the 10th an hour or so ago, and nothing had changed but a number on a screen.

Sam dropped his eyes from her face, focusing on his hands resting atop his bent knees. Neither of them spoke for a few minutes, until Jane broke the silence with a tired sigh.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I’m not handling this well.”

“I don’t think there’s any way to handle this well,” Sam responded with a wearied half-smile.

“Is there any news yet?” Jane asked softly, hazel eyes fixed in a blank, empty stare up the corridor.

“The girl lawyer - I think she’s a lawyer, I’m not sure - she and the blond guy tracked down the GPS data from the limousine service,” Sam answered quietly. Jane met his gaze for the first time, a spark of hope lit in her countenance. “Stark said they switched cars someplace in Allentown, he’s trying to figure out where they went next.” His voice dropped quieter. “The trail’s gone cold right now, though.”

Jane’s expression deflated, and she dropped her head back against the wall, gazing up above. A dead fly’s carcass was a dark speck against the textured glass of the light directly overhead. Every three seconds for the past five and a half hours, the fluorescent tube on the right had blinked with a dull ticking noise. Off, and on. “Darce said Clint’s gone,” Jane stated flatly, for lack of better conversation.

“Yeah, he went back to New York. Coulson said he’s tracking down the chauffeur, maybe get us a direction to start looking in again,” Sam replied. “Bruce is still under, and Natasha was interrogating the SHIELD agent that got left behind last I knew. Pepper’s been on the phone nonstop, trying to keep Stark Industries under control and the press off the story.”

“How could the press possibly know about all this?” Jane wondered vaguely.

“Nothing specific, but the Hulk had a wrestling match with a souped-up Iron Man suit on the roof a few days ago, and now the Tower’s on lockdown and nobody’s home. All the offices and whatnot on the upper floors and the lobby downstairs are closed. People’ll have questions.”
Jane remembered dimly when she, Darcy and Thor had all moved into the Tower a few years back, not long after the battle of New York, when Thor had returned and Tony offered them a home. She’d thought it odd that Tony would make the living space for the team on the lower floors just above the public area and put the Stark Industries business suites on the upper. Tony had given her a sad smile when she’d asked why. All the safer in an emergency, my dear, he’d quipped. He didn’t much like heights anymore. Most of them didn’t. “What about Steve and Bucky?” Jane asked.

Sam shook his head. “I overheard Barnes shouting earlier in some language I’d never heard before. I didn’t stick around to eavesdrop.”

“Those two… and Ryan,” Jane emitted haltingly, lines on her forehead deepening.

“Yeah,” Sam intoned. “They’re taking it hardest.”

“Do you think…?” Jane pondered. She’d never suspected anything in the past, but given their reactions to everything, she was beginning to wonder.

“I don’t know,” Sam replied with a small shrug. “I mean, they were closest to her. They met her first, invited her to live in the Tower, they hung out together a lot. But I thought that was it. I mean, I didn’t think they could ever have eyes for anyone except each other - star-crossed lovers reunited through time and space and all that. And we all thought Ryan was a Beta that whole time.”

“But she’s not,” Jane whispered. Against her shoulder, Darcy sniffled a moment, then relaxed. Asleep, her sugar-and-flowers scent was peaceful for the first time in ages. It was a small comfort.

Sam shook his head again. “No, she’s not,” he agreed.

Tick. Tick. Off. On. Off yet again. The light blinked seventeen times to Jane’s count before she closed her eyes. “I always thought it was too good to be true,” she confessed in a low mumble. “Being with Thor, meeting everyone else. Darcy found her mates. Then adding you and Bucky, Ryan, all of us living together. Everyone getting along. Thor was so happy. I was, too, but at the same time… I was just waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Hey, come on now,” Sam said reassuringly, trying his best to smile. “Everything’s gonna be alright,” he promised.

“Sam,” Jane admonished, finally looking him in the face again. “After what Nat, Clint and Tony did? What, you think Steve and Bucky will ever come back to the Tower again after this? Their team betrayed them, got their - whatever Ryan is to them - attacked, injured and kidnapped by a lunatic who mind controlled us all. We’re lucky to even be alive, and Ryan…” She trailed off, shaking her head.

“I know,” Sam joked. Jane just stared at him. He sighed again, dropping his gaze. “I was hoping that maybe people could see past it, see that… we all were more than just a team that made some mistakes. Admittedly huge mistakes, but honest ones,” he emitted softly, fiddling with his hands. “Family doesn’t have to end with blood or mates.”

Jane’s eyes softened for the first time. “Apparently we’re dysfunctional enough to be one,” she offered with a small smile. “And we already have family dinner.”

Sam grinned gently back at her. “You know this whole thing… it was, but it wasn’t really anyone’s fault,” he relayed cautiously.

“I know,” Jane affirmed quietly. “It should never have gone this far. But I don’t know if everyone else will see that.”
“No, nope, none of that negative thinking right now,” Sam chided, still smiling gently. “We all were taken off guard because we weren’t seeing clearly before. Not gonna let that happen again.”

“Nothing’s going to be the same after this,” Jane worried, sounding fatigued.

“You’re right,” Sam agreed. “Hopefully, by the end, the world will be one supervillain less and one superhero more.”

“Sam, Ryan’s never even going to speak to us again,” Jane opposed. “The security footage from the Tower, I watched it after. She didn’t even believe Steve and Bucky were telling the truth. And even if she manages to… and that’s assuming she’s even-”

“Hey,” Sam interrupted, soft but firm. “We’re Avengers. We don’t give up on people, we don’t give up on our team, and we certainly don’t give up on family. We’re gonna fix this.”

Jane closed her eyes, leaning her head back atop Darcy’s again. “If I had the energy, I’d probably be mad at you for being so positive.”

“Positive thinking’s about all we’ve got right now,” Sam muttered low, heaving himself to his feet. “Get something in you,” he instructed, nudging his foot at the plate of sandwiches at Jane’s side. “And don’t worry. Ryan’s strong.”

“So’s Thor,” Jane countered sadly.

“You’re right. And they’re both going to be okay.” Sam trudged off, making his way back down the corridor with exhaustion settling deep within. Memories of Ryan played silently in the back of his mind: her sitting beside veteran seniors at the VA, listening to endless stories with a genuine smile; her yelling at the TV as they watched baseball together; her goofy grin as she, Steve, and Bucky danced together in the common room. She was strong, and kind, and passionate, and honestly just a good person. Sam would be proud to call her family. Apparently, though, there was a lot more about her they still didn’t know. And Jane was right, regardless, he mused. After this, things wouldn’t be the same.

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“Nothing? He knows absolutely nothing?” Coulson reiterated in disbelief.

“Nothing that’ll help us find them,” Natasha replied shortly, standing with arms crossed in front of Coulson’s desk. “He was hired to be Kilgrave’s inside man. He’s got some skill with computers, set up a program to silently steal copies of any highly classified files on the SHIELD network. That’s how Kilgrave discovered Ryan, when the initial report was filed and security footage of the Tower was sent here for review.”

Coulson thought hard for a moment. “Why would Kilgrave have not realized they’d known each other until he kidnapped her, then?”

“He doesn’t seem the type to do grunt work himself,” Natasha profiled. “There wasn’t any footage of Ryan using her powers besides the first day she was in the Tower. He only would’ve watched that, left the rest to his lackeys. It’s possible he just didn’t recognize her at first.”

“The initial report Steve sent would’ve been sufficient to alert him, the rest was just extra,” Coulson
pondered aloud. “But Peters doesn’t know anything else about Kilgrave whatsoever?”

Natasha shook her head. “He wasn’t even under mind control. He met the guy face-to-face once, got offered a ludicrous amount of money, and took it,” she reported with a note of disgust. “He said Kilgrave just wanted to make sure SHIELD was off his back at first, but then he was told to send along every report on the new Index. Ryan came along, but Kilgrave wasn't stupid enough to try to kidnap her from the Tower, so they waited. After that, he was told to make the plan they used tonight.”

Coulson closed his eyes wearily. “Kilgrave said he’d thought about coming for Daisy,” he exhaled. “He’s either fascinated or threatened by other powered people. Probably both,” Natasha reasoned.

Coulson didn’t even want to think about what that meant for Ryan. What a man like that might do… “We need figure out the details of his powers, as soon as possible,” Coulson mandated. “The other guy, the one who attacked Peters. He was definitely under Kilgrave’s control. He’s still unconscious, right?”

Natasha nodded. “Agent Simmons has him… thoroughly restrained,” she replied. “I’ll work on him next.”

“Get some sleep first,” Coulson instructed. “No, that’s an order,” he continued as Natasha opened her mouth to argue. “I know for a fact you haven’t slept at least since Ryan first ran from Avengers Tower, and that was over 48 hours ago now. You’re no good to us dead on your feet.” Coulson’s eyes softened just a bit. “Go find Darcy and get some rest. I’m sure she needs you right now, too,” he said gently.

Natasha’s lips pressed into a thin line, but she nodded curtly anyway. “Yes, sir.”

Coulson glanced up at the clock on his wall as she left. 3:42 am. Almost eight hours, and they’d had no more breakthroughs than what the civilian lawyers had managed to dig up. “Where are you, you bastard?” he muttered under his breath, staring up at the satellite view of the road to which Tony had tracked the limousine on the large screen. He tried not to think about the ticking clock of the typical kidnapping case. Another twelve hours or so, and they might never find Ryan.

Natasha walked slowly down the hall, exhaustion hitting her in waves, dulling her senses and emotions. She was grateful; she was feeling nothing good. But she didn’t want to sleep, didn’t want to slow down or stop. As soon as she did, she’d have to face her guilt, worries, fears. In a past life, she might have simply disappeared, run away and began anew where none recognized her fiery hair or sharp blue eyes, shedding her regrets along with her skin. Not so anymore.

There was something else bothering her, though. More than just the disappointment at the uselessness of the man she’d interrogated, than her anxiety at her separation from her mates, than her self-loathing she swallowed down. It was the feeling that she was missing something, some clue she should never have overlooked. She had no idea what it was, though. Maybe Coulson was right about needing rest.

She turned the last corner and found Darcy and Jane, huddled up together on the floor outside Thor’s cell. Jane was still sitting upright, Darcy leaning against her, but both were fast asleep. Natasha scented her Omega’s floral notes mixed with Jane’s richer tones, and a small smile came to her face. At least they were both at peace for the moment. She didn’t have the heart to disturb them. Laying down on the thin carpeting beside Darcy, she finally closed her eyes. She’d slept in worse places. A dull clicking sound emanating from overhead lulled her quickly to sleep.
Tony jerked suddenly upright, the sensation of falling having startled him back fully awake. He’d drifted off as he sat alone at a table in a lounge area, trying everything he could think of to somehow track down where Ryan had been taken after leaving the limousine. Every satellite he could hack, he’d hacked, and nothing. There had been no calls or reports from state sheriffs or local police of a speeding limousine on the highway, and JARVIS had reported that according to every criminal database in the U.S. and the U.K., a man by the name Kilgrave didn’t exist. His mind was spinning in circles, trying to come up with some new angle, a new idea. He might as well have been spinning himself in circles for all the good it was doing.

“Tony?” Pepper’s voice called out softly from behind him. He turned around to see his mate approaching, looking as tired as he felt. She smoothed down his mussed hair, and Tony’s eyes dropped shut at the touch of her gentle ministrations. “We need sleep,” Pepper mumbled.

“You go. I’m fine,” Tony insisted, opening his eyes to stare blankly at his phone screen again.

“Tony, it’s almost 5 am. It’s been over 24 hours since we’ve both slept, and I’m too tired for your usual crap,” Pepper sighed, her words lacking any real heat. Tony’s usual fresh-cut grass scent was bitter with frustration and dimmed with exhaustion. She knew her own would be tainted with worry. “Please. Just four hours.”

“Not like I haven’t been up longer than this before, and this is just a little important, Pepper,” Tony snapped, irritation spiking. Her hand stilled atop his head, and he sighed in frustration. “Sorry,” he grunted shortly.

“I’ll make you some coffee,” Pepper said quietly, turning around to search out a kitchen area someplace. She could use a pot or two herself.

“No, wait,” Tony pleaded, catching her hand as it slipped off his hair and gently tugging it towards him. “I’m sorry. Please don’t leave,” he implored, his voice almost breaking on the last word.

Pepper stepped closer, pulling him into a hug with her arms gently wrapped around his head. Tony leaned against her, drained to the core. “I’m not going anywhere,” Pepper promised softly. She pulled back from the embrace, leaning down to kiss Tony’s temple. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Tony retook her hand, squeezing tightly. His eyes were closed again, his skin ashen and wan with tiredness. “I don’t know what to do,” he confessed in a whisper. “I’ve tried everything, and just - nothing. What the hell am I supposed to do when there’s nothing I can do?!?” he asserted, voice rising to a half-shout.

“You can get some rest,” Pepper reiterated. “You’re literally a genius, Tony, but you’re human. Genius doesn’t work when you can’t even see straight.”

Tony growled angrily, frustration rolling off him in waves. “How am I supposed to sleep when it’s my fault that - “. He cut himself off, his teeth clacking together as he tightened his jaw against the prickling in his eyes.

“Baby, please,” Pepper begged. “I - we can’t do this right now. It won’t help anyone or anything. You’ve done all you can for now, just please,” she entreated.
Tony shook his head, but stood up anyway. “Come on, Coulson said there’s spare bunks off the south hallway,” he relayed, pulling Pepper along the corridor. Neither of them said another word as they opened a door and collapsed fully dressed onto a too-small, too-hard, too-old bed. They were asleep in seconds.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Dr. Erskine’s serum had its better and worse qualities, Steve had discovered over time. He couldn’t get drunk anymore, only tipsy at best off of Thor’s Asgardian mead. But the healing ability, strength, speed, and stamina had never disappointed. His senses were all enhanced above the norm as well, although not as much as they could have been, he suspected; his vision and hearing had been so awful before, there was only so far even the serum could improve them.

The real blessing and curse, though, was how little sleep he needed. He’d spent some time in the past few years discovering his limits, studying how the human body worked to figure out his own now that he’d had the opportunity to do so. He could sleep as much as he used to, but he didn’t need it anymore; a regular four or so hours was more than adequate for his regular life. He was a bit hungrier when he slept less, but neither his physical stamina nor mental faculties were otherwise affected. It certainly was useful for missions and the like.

The problem came about, however, when he was residually nervous, anxious, or even just stressed. He’d linked it to the fight-or-flight response, the body’s instinctive reaction to danger. Normally, he’d discovered, the response was regulated so that eventually, even if the person was still under duress, a new equilibrium would be reestablished, and relative calm would result until the danger significantly increased again. Otherwise the body would completely exhaust itself, and the advantage of the survival response would be gone. In his case, though, his body was so much more efficient than the norm that his adrenaline and cortisol levels stayed high much longer, and consequently sleep was almost impossible whenever he was so much as vaguely worried.

When he’d been thawed from the ice, he’d gone months without more than two hours of sleep at a time as he awoke almost every night from horrible nightmares, unable to calm himself afterwards to return to his cold, empty bed. After he’d moved into the Tower, he’d started therapy, and Bruce had taught him meditation to relax. After a week or so, he’d finally been able to sleep normally again instead of wandering the early hours as a pale specter, restless and discontented.

Right now, though? Sleep was as elusive as it had ever been no matter what he tried. Steve stared up at the ceiling, every minute an hour and every hour a minute as he laid back restlessly on the couch. Bucky sat in an armchair opposite him, as fully awake as he. The serum Bucky had been subjected to, they’d figured out together, was almost identical to Erskine’s in its effect, but his strength and stamina were even greater while his healing abilities and senses were a bit less than Steve’s. They’d made Bucky to be a weapon, one of potentially thousands, incredibly lethal but ultimately disposable in their eyes. Consequently, though, Bucky needed so little sleep he could be awake up to a few days straight with no side effects so long as he had adequate food intake. Steve doubted he’d so much as close his eyes until Ryan was safe again.

There was a single small window nearby, facing eastward apparently as yellow-orange beams of light began to stream in from the rising sun. Steve watched the shadow of a chair grow shorter as daybreak came upon them, neither he nor Bucky speaking a word as they waited. They’d grown silent after a few hours as no news came and their feelings of frustration increased. They couldn’t hack databases or track down leads or interrogate suspects; the jobs were all taken by the more
highly qualified. Waiting helplessly was their only option at the moment, and Steve hadn’t felt so useless since he’d been a five-foot-seven asthmatic with heart palpitations. The clock soldiered on regardless.

The sound of running footsteps stirred them out of their reverie, and Steve sat up quickly as Sam suddenly appeared from around the corner. “What’s happening?” Steve called out as Sam dashed down the hall, Bucky rising swiftly to his feet.

“Thor and Agent Johnson, they’re themselves again,” Sam explained in a rush. “The mind control, it wears off.”

Chapter End Notes

This might've seemed random, but it irks me a bit when authors have their characters go like a week without sleep and just say "they're used to it, it's fine." That's not really how it works. People literally just collapse after a few days if they don't sleep. And the adrenaline crash after a trauma is brutal, guys.

...Except for Steve and Bucky. They don't get to sleep. ー_(つ¬ー)つー_
“Where are they now?” Steve asked quickly, already starting back down the corridor.

“In one of the med bays,” Sam answered, following along beside Bucky as they rounded the corner and strode past the bloodstained floor of the central hub. Steve and Bucky had dragged the bodies outside earlier to stay cold for the time being; they would try to contact families later. It was perhaps ungracious, but they were more concerned with the living at the moment.

“What about Bruce? And were there any residual side effects?” Steve voiced concernedly, speeding up as they approached the glass-walled enclosure.

“Haven’t woken him up yet, we’re giving him a little longer just in case. And no, not direct ones,” Sam evaded as he opened the door. They crowded inside to find Jane, Darcy, Natasha, and Coulson already present, spread between Thor sitting atop one bed and Agent Johnson sitting up on the other across the room. Simmons was carefully cutting open Daisy’s long, fingerless gloves as Daisy grimaced, her eyes screwed tightly shut. Agent Fitz held onto her shoulders as support.

“Thor, are you alright?” Steve called out, making his way over past Natasha and Darcy. Thor looked up with a wearied smile.

“I am myself again, at least,” he replied, “and I am mostly unharmed.” Jane was grasping his hands, carefully holding bags of ice over a series of reddened blisters circling his wrists.


“I can only conjure and direct it,” Thor explained. “I cannot touch it myself without suffering the consequences, though I am somewhat more resistant than most. But it matters not; it is a small price to pay for my weakness.”

“No weaker than the rest of us,” Bucky spoke up quietly for the first time in hours, a hint of self-deprecation in his tone. Steve grasped his hand, squeezing tightly for a moment before letting go.

“He’s already healing quickly, Agent Simmons said,” Jane reported. “He should be fine in a few days.” Her voice sounded stronger, more hopeful. “His vitals are normal for him, too, thankfully,” she finished. Thor smiled up at her, his gaze one of pure adoration. She mirrored the look, lifting the ice off his wrists and reaching for a small roll of gauze and a tube of burn cream.

A muffled cry of pain turned everyone’s attention over to the other bed, where Simmons quickly released Daisy’s now-gloveless hands and rushed to dig through a cabinet across the room.

“Is Agent Johnson alright?” Steve asked quietly, striding over to Coulson as he watched from a few feet away. Bucky followed automatically.

“We couldn’t keep the shock cuff on her,” he replied lifelessly. “That much electricity might’ve killed her. When she woke up, she was pounding on the door to try to escape, according to Dr. Foster. We thought she’d just exhausted herself when she stopped. But she passed out from the pain.”

“Shit,” Steve breathed, spying the mottled purple bruising spreading up both of Daisy’s forearms
from her swollen fingertips. A few of the digits were bent at unnatural angles, and her nails were
crusted with blood. Fitz was murmuring quietly in her ear as Jemma carefully inserted pills into
Daisy’s mouth, holding up a glass of water. “She broke her own hands?”

Coulson nodded once. “It’s happened before,” he muttered quietly. “When she first got her powers,
before she learned to control them. The vibrations rebounded up her arms, shattered some bones in
her wrists. She healed then. She’ll be alright.” He sounded more like he was trying to reassure
himself than Steve.

They watched as Simmons knelt down beside the bed, level with Daisy’s hands resting on her thighs.
“I’ll need to take x-rays to do a proper diagnosis, but your hands have been left injured for some time
and need to be immobilized immediately, or they might be permanently damaged. Do you
understand?” Jemma asked. Daisy nodded quickly. Simmons then folded gauze into a thick wad
and inserted it into Daisy’s mouth. “Don’t want you nipping your tongue,” Jemma whispered
sympathetically, reaching for Daisy’s left hand. “I’m so sorry. This will hurt,” she warned before
rapidly restraining the first finger in a taped splint. Daisy bit down hard, but didn’t let out any noise.
Sweat was pouring down her temples.

“When exactly did the mind control wear off?” Bucky directed at Coulson.

“We’re not sure. Thor was shocked three separate times and woke up sometime after 8 AM,
according to Dr. Foster,” Coulson replied. “He was back to normal then. Dr. Foster called for
Simmons, and Fitz woke up Daisy afterwards to see if she was recovered as well. It could have
happened anywhere between the last time Thor went down and when he awoke.”

“Lasts around 12 hours then,” Steve deduced.

“How the hell does it actually work, though?” Sam inserted, making his way across the room to join
them.

“I have a theory about that,” Fitz answered, squeezing Daisy’s shoulders comfortingly before
releasing her. Simmons was working on her second hand now, but the medicine seemed to be fast-
acting; her breath was no longer coming in pained gasps.

“Fitz, you didn’t say anything,” Jemma piped up, looking up in surprise for a second before turning
her attention back to Daisy.

Fitz shook his head. “I’m not positive, it’ll take some testing, but…”

“Anything you have, we’ll take,” Coulson said.

“Yes, well… I asked a few of you last night, and everyone described the effects of the mind control
the same way. Like persuasion, or hypnosis. It was instinct to obey,” Fitz stated, slowly walking
over with his arms crossed tightly across his chest. “There’s only one other physical mechanism
currently known with anything like similar effects.”

“What do you mean?” Natasha questioned, she and Darcy joining the middle of the room as Jane
and Thor listened from behind them. A sinking feeling in Nat’s stomach told her she already knew
the answer, but it was nothing she wanted to hear.

Fitz’s scent was disheartened, his eyes closing a moment as turned back around to look at his mate.
Simmons was just about finished with Daisy’s hands, taping the last pinky finger. “Jemma,
sweetheart, look here,” Fitz called gently, his Alpha speech rippling in the undertone.

She immediately turned to him, rapt with attention. Fitz sighed deeply, turning back to the others
with guilt churning in his chest. Varying degrees of shock were reflected in the faces of the
Avengers as understanding sunk in. “Somehow, he’s unpresented, but with an extremely enhanced
and powerful Alpha voice capability,” Fitz concluded morosely.

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Clint dropped the few feet down to the tiny balcony below. The figure lying prostrate inside the
living room didn’t stir. He was surrounded by empty beer bottles and a few harder liquors as well,
passed out on an old and threadbare couch. Clint reached for the sliding door, only to find it jammed
shut with a wooden rod in the track. He rolled his eyes, then took a step back and kicked through
the glass. The cheap material shattered to the floor instantly.

“Hey, what the hell?!” the man on the couch yelped as he jolted back to life. Clint ignored him as he
ducked inside, shards crunching beneath his boots. “Get the fuck out!” the man yelled in a heavy
Jersey accent, pushing himself up halfway with shaking hands.

“Joe Parkland?” Clint demanded gruffly as he towered over the man, glaring intensely.

“I said, get the fuck out!” Parkland screamed, seizing a beer bottle and hurling it at Clint’s head.
Clint leaned slightly to the left, dodging it easily as it flew by to smash against the wall. The man
grabbed for another bottle, and Clint rolled his eyes again as he caught the man’s arm and twisted it
back, making him yowl in pain.

“Try that again, and you’ll need a whole lot more than alcohol to dull your pain,” Clint threatened
quietly. The odor of the tiny, cramped apartment was rancid, and most of it was emanating from the
man himself.

“The fuck do you want, you freak?!” Parkland shouted, unkempt strands of thin, gray hair falling
into his face.

“You’re a limo driver with the Gold Coast service,” Clint growled, his anger getting the best of him
as he twisted the man’s arm back further. “You were hired by Kilgrave.”

“I swear, it wasn’t me!” the man denied, his voice raised in agony. “H-he made me do it!”

“Yeah, I know,” Clint replied, throwing down the man’s arm and stepping back. Parkland groaned
loudly, clutching at his elbow and grimacing. “Tell me everything he said and did,” Clint ordered.

“He didn’t say or do nothin’!” the man shot back angrily. Clint saw red, and grabbed the man’s arm
again to violently yank him up and hurl him across the room. Parkland collapsed against the floor
with a pained grunt, only to be jerked up by the shirt collar and dragged howling across the broken
glass out to the balcony, where Clint leaned him halfway over the edge. “Let me go, hey, let me
go!!” he shrieked in terror, looking fearfully down the four stories to the ground as he scrabbled at
Clint’s arms.

“Kilgrave infiltrated SHIELD, kidnapped an innocent girl, and tried to kill everyone on this planet
that I love,” Clint snarled roughly, his teeth bared at the coward shaking beneath him. “He
threatened my team, my family, and my mates. And if you try to cover for him again, I will end your
miserable existence right now.”

“I can’t!” the man wailed, beginning to weep. “He-he’ll kill my girl if I talk, man! Please, just let me
Clint growled low, then released him, stepping back and watching him slump trembling to the ground. “He’s already killed innocent people, and he will kill more if I don’t find him,” Clint rumbled. “But if you tell me everything you remember, he won’t get the chance to.”

Parkland continued weeping. “I – I just did everything he said,” he shuddered, “I don’t know why, I just - “

“He controls minds,” Clint said bluntly. “Everyone has to do what he says, and he kills them for it. That’s why I’m going to stop him.”

“You can’t,” the man cried, “no one can, he’s gonna know you were here and that I squealed and he’ll cut her to pieces, man, he swore he would.”

Clint groaned aloud in frustration, turning away from the man for a moment as he ran his hands through his hair. “If you tell me where he’s hiding, I will kill him before he gets the chance,” Clint stated coldly.

The man’s sniffling paused at his declaration. “How do I know?” Parkland shot back at him.

“Because Kilgrave will be my one hundred and fifty-seventh mark,” Clint stated coldly, staring out across the dark, shadowed alleyway. “Not counting aliens. The extraterrestrial kind, that is. I know what I’m doing.”

The unadulterated fear returned to the man’s eyes as he stared up at Clint. Clint reached up over his head, pulling out one of the arrows from his quiver slung across his back and fingering the sharpened point as Parkland watched closely. Ryan had destroyed his favorite bow, but Clint had retrieved a backup at SHIELD headquarters before leaving. His fingers were itching to break it in.

“He didn’t talk much, in the limo,” Parkland mumbled, drawing Clint’s gaze back to him. “He told everyone else to be quiet while he was on the phone, giving orders to someone. Stuff about getting a house ready, I think.”

“What exactly did he say?” Clint articulated quickly.

The man shook his head a moment. “Something about not paying them double to finish the basement late. I don’t know man, really, it sounded like it had flooded or something,” Parkland finished.

Clint sighed in frustration. “He said nothing else?”

“He complained about the champagne in the back one time, said Prosecca was like swill compared to Perrier-Jouet,” Parkland replied, shaking his head again. “He almost made us stop to get something better.”

“Where did you pick him up?” Clint persisted, holding out for anything useful.

“At Cipriani’s in the city, two nights ago.”

“Where did you drop him off that night?”

“Nowhere. He made me drive outta the city, and he told me to wait there for him, eyes in front. He got in another car and left. I waited,” Parkland murmured. “I sat there all night, awake. I couldn’t sleep, couldn’t even move.”
"What about when he switched cars, with the girl? What did the other one look like? Where'd they go?"

"I don't know, man! He made me shut my eyes when we stopped! I didn't hear nothing!"

Clint just barely held himself back from yelling wildly in frustration. Kilgrave had been ten steps ahead almost the whole time. Clint's wrath wouldn't serve him now, though. “Alright,” he muttered. “Sorry about the door,” he intoned flatly as he climbed up on the balcony edge.

“Wait, you're gonna kill him before he gets me, right? You promised?” Parkland asked, equal parts fear and hope leaking into his tone.

“As long as the others don’t get there first,” Clint muttered darkly. He jumped off the balcony, tumbling lightly below and springing silently to his feet. He pulled out his phone, pressing stop on the recording as he collected his discarded jacket to conceal his weapons again. Striding out of the alleyway into a late-morning sidewalk crowd, he dialed Natasha. “Sending it to you now,” he said by way of greeting when she picked up. “Not much useful there, I don't think.”

“Just have to put all the pieces together,” his Alpha’s voice replied. “Thor’s back to normal.”

Clint breathed an internal sigh of relief. "When?"

"An hour or so ago. Only some burns from the shock bands, no residual side effects."

"Good," Clint said. "What's our next move?"

"Get some sleep, then come back to base. There’s nothing else you can do out there right now."

“I'll be there in a few hours,” Clint stated, stifling a yawn at the mention of sleep.

“Sleep first,” Nat ordered again. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Clint said softly. He hung up the phone, sending the recording a moment later. He stopped at a crosswalk, and his vision blurred for a second as an upsurge of exhaustion coursed through him. It felt like a lifetime ago.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Ryan startled awake from under the covers at the sound of an door opening. Her sudden movement pulled at her side, and she squawked slightly in pain. The IV in her arm was gone, she noticed as she moved to grasp her torso with both hands.

“Don’t move too quickly, you’ll tear your stitches,” a feminine voice called out. Ryan wrenched herself up above the blankets and was momentarily blinded, bright sunlight streaming in through the windows. Blinking heavily, she saw a middle-aged woman wearing a simple baby-blue dress and white apron close the door and make her way over to the bed.

“Wh-who are you?” Ryan croaked out, her throat dry and scratchy. The woman picked up a glass from the floor and refilled it from a pitcher on the bedside table. Ryan gulped it down quickly. “Where the hell am I!?” she spat out, fear and anger mixing equally in her gut.
“Mr. Kilgrave has ordered you be made ready for brunch,” the woman stated robotically, in contrast with her wide, fearful eyes. Memories flooded back at her words, and Ryan swallowed heavily against a surge of nausea. It didn't help that the woman smelled reminiscent of a soured washcloth to Ryan’s nose when she drew back the covers and held out her hand to Ryan. “We musn’t keep him waiting,” she said, her voice dropping down to a half-whisper by the end. Ryan took her hand, a cold pit of dread in her stomach threatening to swallow her whole.

Ryan was shepherded across a sunny hallway, lined with landscape paintings and intricate moldings above shining hardwood floors, into the largest bathroom she’d ever seen. There was a humongous bathtub, a glass-walled shower, and a vanity with two sinks, all accented with black and white marble. The faucets and handles were all silvery chrome, and the windows were frosted over with greenery on the sills.

The lady closed the door behind them, the lock clicking ominously. She then reached for Ryan, who backed away in alarm and almost tripped over a bathmat in front of the tub, which was filled to the brim with steaming, soapy water.

“Please, dear,” the woman stated, more urgently now. “Mr. Kilgrave has ordered me to bathe and dress you to his instructions.”

Ryan gritted her teeth and closed her eyes, pushing back against the memory of the last time she'd disobeyed. She felt lucky she hadn’t eaten in some time, or the contents of her stomach might’ve resurfaced as cold, clammy hands pulled off her satin pajamas and underclothes, gently removing the bandage from her torso afterwards. Ryan glanced down as the tape was carefully peeled away. The skin across her ribs was still painfully scaly and red, but what had once been a wide hole oozing blood was now a line of black-threaded stitches, slightly damp to the touch. She had been asleep for a long time, it seemed. The silver cuff from earlier remained on her wrist.

The woman re-wrapped Ryan’s wound in a plastic bandage as Ryan covered her naked body as best she could, cheeks flaming. Whoever she was, the lady seemed unperturbed by the nudity and the grimness of her injury. Maybe she’s a nurse or something, Ryan thought vaguely as she was urged into the bathtub. Despite herself, Ryan loosed a sigh of relief; the water soothed her aching bones and warmed her to the core.

She was handed a bar of soap, smelling lightly like roses, and Ryan quickly scrubbed her body and face clean as the woman walked across the room to a closet. Retrieving a mound of fluffy white towels, she laid one across the back edge of the tub and guided Ryan’s head back to rest, gently freeing her hair and dousing it with a pitcher of warm rosewater. The water splashed all over the floor, but the woman didn’t seem to care. Ryan’s head was massaged tenderly as her hair was washed, rinsed, conditioned, and rinsed again. More and more water, mixed with the rinsed soap from Ryan’s hair, splashed all about the woman as she continued. She didn’t even seem to notice. Ryan kept her eyes open, afraid she would relax and fall asleep again. She was mortified at being stripped and washed, and her nerves were still sparking with anxious fear, but the swirling emotions grew dimmer and dimmer as she was ministered to. Her eyes dropped shut without her permission as the warmth and comfort seeped into her bones. She tried her utmost not to think at all, focusing on the sensations of the lady's gentle hands.

“Put your leg up here, please,” the woman dictated, laying down another folded towel on the opposite end of the tub. Ryan lifted her right leg atop the towel, and the woman gently rubbed the soap up and down its length to a foamy lather. Grasping a razor, she meticulously shaved every inch of Ryan’s leg up to her thigh, then repeated the action on her left leg. Ryan smoothed her hands over her right leg absently when it was finished. She hadn’t often been able to afford razors in her time on
her own; it was a foreign sensation, the slippery feel of her own skin. Her face burned crimson again, though, when she was made to lift her arms to have her armpits shaved as well.

At last, the woman said, “Stand up now, dear,” and Ryan was quickly wrapped in a gigantic, warm towel and guided to dry land across the bathroom. “Brush your teeth,” she was ordered, and she swished minty mouthwash for good measure. She was then led to a cushy swivel chair in front of a large mirror, surrounded by round light bulbs that illuminated every inch of her face. The woman plugged in a blow-dryer, and Ryan’s hair was set perfectly straight and then weaved into an elaborate braid, pinned up and circling around her entire head. Fresh sprigs of lavender and tiny sprays of forget-me-nots were carefully placed between her coppery strands. The woman opened another drawer, this one full of makeup. Foundation, concealer, mascara, blush, lipstick, and a few other products whose names Ryan honestly didn’t know were artfully applied as she watched her face be transformed.

At one point, the woman muttered something under her breath. “What’d you say?” Ryan asked automatically.

“Uneven, uneven,” the woman mumbled again, ignoring Ryan as she fretted with an eyeliner pencil. “No, no, no!” she cried, her hands trembling slightly as she went back to the other side of Ryan’s eye.

“Hey, it’s fine,” Ryan assured her, pulling back and away automatically from the woman’s frantic hand as it approached her eye.

“It’s uneven!” the woman shouted suddenly, making Ryan jump in her seat. “I’m sorry!” the woman breathed, clapping her hand across her mouth. “I’m so sorry, please don’t - “

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” Ryan exclaimed, reaching out reassuringly. “It looks great, it looks fine,” she repeated, her muted dread returning in full force as her own hands started to tremble. “Did - did he tell you it had to be exactly even?”

The woman shook her head slightly, still looking panicked.

“Then it’s okay. I - I’ve never looked this good before, I’ve never even worn makeup before today,” Ryan divulged, trying her best to smile and failing.

The woman swallowed nervously, then nodded her head and continued. Neither of them spoke again as the woman finished her makeup and smoothed shimmering lotion up and down her arms, legs, and the top of her chest. Ryan was then finally made to stand back up, now fully dry after sitting so long in the towel, and brought back to the room where she’d been asleep. The woman opened an ornate armoire to pull out a creamy-white lacy sundress, nylons, and a pair of tall black pumps.

“I’ve never worn heels, I’ll fall over if I wear those,” Ryan imparted, her wiping her sweaty palms on her towel.

“Mr. Kilgrave says every young woman should wear heels,” the woman replied, not meeting Ryan’s gaze. She pulled away the towel to give Ryan a matching lacy underwear set, too fancy to ever be practical.

Once she was fully dressed, Ryan was lead to a floor-length mirror outlined with strands of the same copper lights lining the walls. She was five inches taller than normal, dressed more opulently than she’d been in over a decade, almost unrecognizable. Her skin shimmered slightly, the lotion having been infused with a shining substance, and it left an ethereal effect. Even Ryan had to admit, she
looked more beautiful than she ever had. It nauseated her thoroughly.

“Mr. Kilgrave will be down the staircase to the right, in the foyer,” the woman whispered. "Don't forget to smile."

Ryan closed her eyes, forcing back tears. She wouldn’t cry anymore. It wouldn't help her now, and she'd wept enough. “Thank you,” she whispered back, her voice almost steady. Steeling herself, she opened her eyes and made her way to the door, tottering slightly on her feet as her heart pounded almost audibly in her chest.

Grasping the handle, Ryan forced herself out of the room and down the hall, one hand lightly against the wall for balance. She reached the top of a grand marble staircase, lit by a crystal chandelier, overlooking a magnificent foyer. Her footsteps clacked loudly as she descended, echoing down off the pristine white walls. She kept her eyes on her feet. All too soon, she reached the bottom.

“Ah, my dear,” the all-too-familiar British voice sighed happily. “A vision. Simply radiant.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm really fascinated by Clint's history. I'm not positive, but I think he was a criminal and assassin before he worked for SHIELD, just like Natasha was. But people don't really seem to remember that about him.

Also, over 250 kudos? Wow. I honestly feel so blessed. Thank you so much everyone!!!
In Which Ryan and Kilgrave Have Brunch

“Come, everything is prepared and waiting,” Kilgrave smiled toothily, offering his arm to Ryan as she approached. The deep purple fabric of his suit jacket was soft and velvety beneath her unsteady hands, being pulled along as he led her through an elegant, arching doorway into what Ryan would loosely label a living room. It was larger than main floor of the Tower and probably cost as much as the entire building, she thought, what with the glittering crystal chandeliers, lush Persian rugs, and what Ryan recognized as a Van Gogh painting amongst the assorted loveseats, ottomans, and a fireplace taller than she was. Everything was in rich shades of reds and gold, even the crystal vases of fresh flowers spread around on ornately carved end tables accented with cream and gunmetal gray.

“Just had the last of it finished two days ago,” Kilgrave boasted as they paused a moment. “How do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful,” Ryan got out, her voice a hoarse whisper. She cleared her throat as unobtrusively as she could, her heart still pounding heavily.

“Oh, my apologies, love,” Kilgrave said, guiding her to a glass door on the left side of the room. “You must be parched,” he sympathized as the door was opened for them from the outside, allowing them to step into a warm, slightly humid room filled to the brim with blazing sunlight, bright flowers and verdant, leafy vines.

“I thought it would be lovely to dine in the greenhouse, what with the miserable winter it’s already becoming,” Kilgrave exclaimed, leading her across pristine marble floors to a long wooden table, laid out with sparkling china and a centerpiece of white roses. He pulled out her chair, and she sunk down gratefully; her feet were already starting to ache from the outrageously tall pumps. There were more forks and knives and spoons placed in front of her than she knew what to do with, but she remembered to place the cloth napkin on her lap as Kilgrave sat across from her, at least ten feet separating them down the lengthy table top. A woman in a blue dress and white apron, different from the woman Ryan had met earlier, appeared seemingly out of nowhere, setting down ice water on a coaster in front of Ryan.

“Thank you,” Ryan murmured, reaching for the glass just to keep from wringing her hands. She saw a small look of surprise crossed over the woman’s face, slipping back into a neutral mask when their eyes met. A slight nod, and the woman hurried over to fill Kilgrave’s glass as well. He didn’t even seem to notice her.

“Was the bedroom to your liking?” Kilgrave asked, briskly waving over a man in a white shirt and black trousers carrying a silver tray. “I chose the color scheme and the important bits for the house, but the feminine frippery I left to the decorator,” he explained as a small salad of spinach and berries was placed in front of her, an identical one being brought over to Ryan. Just as quickly, flutes of champagne were placed beside them.

“It’s the fanciest home I’ve ever been in,” Ryan managed, forcing up her head to glance down the table. He had picked up the fork furthest on the left. She copied him, picking through the leafy greens to find a strawberry. It had a strongly acidic aftertaste from some dressing she hadn’t noticed atop it, and her lips pursed at the taste.

“So. It has been some time since we’ve last met,” Kilgrave commented genially between bites. “I had been travelling Europe- Spain, France, Italy, the grand tour. So much to see, and all the time in the world. All the business in New York a few years ago, though, it drew my attention back home.”
All the business, Ryan thought with a spike of red-hot anger. Hundreds dead, more wounded, fire and brimstone reimagined in a futuristic apocalypse led by a madman from another world bent on making theirs fall to its knees. And Kilgrave didn’t even care.

The man blithely continued on. “It was certainly an eye-opener for me, and it must’ve been for you, too,” he said with a sympathetic look. Ryan distracted herself with another forkful of greens. She heard him sigh impatiently, and she instinctively looked up again. He was staring pointedly at her. “What with discovering there are not only alien life forms, but other people with powers?” Kilgrave hinted.

Ryan didn’t know what he wanted her to say, but apparently conversation was now required of her. Hopefully the truth would be good enough. “It wasn’t a complete surprise,” she answered, focusing once again on her salad. Her stomach was churning violently and each bite almost returned back up, but she didn’t know when she’d be able to eat again.

“You suspected, then, that you weren’t entirely unique?” Kilgrave questioned. “Although, it’s fair to say you are still individual, amongst even the Inhumans.”

“I’m not an Inhuman,” Ryan denied quietly. Probably. Whatever that was.

Kilgrave flashed a knowing smile. “No, indeed,” he affirmed. “You’re something brand-new, aren’t you.”

“I don’t know what I am,” Ryan countered, trying to keep her voice steady. She swallowed once, then met his violet gaze again. “Do you?”

Kilgrave looked pleased. “I have my suspicions. All in good time, dear,” he said affably.

Another surge of anger arose in Ryan, overriding her fear. She didn’t know if he was simply toying with her or actually withholding information, but she was tired of his games. There was a question she needed answered, though, no matter how badly the thought sickened her. Forcing herself to sound amiable, she tried again. “But you and I the same, aren’t we?”

His expression was almost delighted, as though he were proud she was finally catching on to where he was leading. “No, Ryan, indeed we’re not,” he informed her. “Would you care to hear my story, then? It’s not something I normally advertise,” Kilgrave admitted, “but friends need to trust each other, no?”

Ryan gaped at him, and she forced bile back down her throat as heat surged through her. “Friends?” she repeated, incensed. “You kidnapped me and murdered those men!” she shouted furiously. “You left a dozen people to die at each other’s hands!” Then her stomach dropped, and a rush of horror swept through her as her mouth clapped shut, her hands clenching the skirt of her dress.

Kilgrave didn’t seem upset by her outburst, however. “Oh, my dear,” he said almost sympathetically, leaning forward in his chair. “I believe there’s been a misunderstanding. Please, allow me to explain.”

Ryan sat in shocked terror a moment longer, then minutely nodded her head. Kilgrave sat back again, raising up a hand to snap his fingers. Immediately, what was left of their salad course was whisked away by another nameless face in plain clothes, and plates of pasta topped with a sprinkling of white cheese and basil garnishes replaced them.

“All’amatriciana,” Kilgrave announced. “My favorite dish. Have you had it before?”

“No,” Ryan responded shakily. “I – I haven’t eaten much pasta that didn’t come from a can,” she
joked, trying to assure his good graces.

Kilgrave gave her an astonished look. He shook his head, mouth open in an incredulous half-smile. “How you astound me, Ryan,” he finally said. “Do try it though, go on,” he added, gesturing his hand for her to take a bite.

Ryan complied, chewing carefully as she focused on her plate. “It’s delicious,” she complimented.

“ Took a few tries to find a satisfactory chef, but I find I am pleased with Salvatore, for now,” Kilgrave shared. Ryan didn’t want to think about what might’ve happened to the others. “Anyway, then. I think it best if perhaps I start from the beginning, yes?” Kilgrave decided, taking a sip of champagne. “There is one other thing, besides the obvious, you and I have in common, Ryan. Can you guess what it is?”

Ryan thought silently for a moment. She had no idea how much of her life he knew about, and she didn’t want to give him anything more. There were a few things he must know, though. “Well, it’s not that you’re homeless,” she offered.

Kilgrave chuckled appreciatively, then shook his head. “Nonsense, Ryan. As long as you are my guest, you have this place to call home,” he declared, spreading his arms to gesture at the lavish greenery surrounding them. “The whole mansion, not just the greenhouse,” he specified with a teasing smirk and a wink.

“Um… thank you,” Ryan stammered. It seemed the appropriate response, but as she’d never had an extended conversation with an insane person before, she felt she could only guess.

Her captor smiled warmly. “What we have in common, my dear,” he began again, “is that once, we were both unpresented, and now, we are something more.”

Ryan’s mouth dropped open slightly. “I don’t… Are you… I’m sorry, I only presented a few days ago, I don’t know how to, um, scent yet,” she sputtered.

“And I have never been able to,” Kilgrave responded lightly. “You are certainly a special case as far as presentations go, considering your age, but while that is unique, I’m afraid I have the corner on that market, as it were.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Ryan professed. She had long since abandoned her food, but she played with her fork in her hands, a nervous tic she couldn’t seem to stop.

“No, no, I am being rather cryptic,” Kilgrave apologized with a wave of his hand. “It’s necessary to the tale, however. Alejandro and Mary were both unpresented, yes?”

A shiver ran down Ryan’s spine. Logically she knew he would have looked into her past, but her parents… They were long since gone, but hearing their names in his voice still sent chills through her. “Yes, they were.”

“My parents were not,” Kilgrave said simply. “My mother was an Alpha, and my father a Beta, I’m told. They met doing neurobiology research together, fell in love, mated, the whole shebang. Had me shortly after and regretted it the next moment.”

Ryan shifted uncomfortably in her seat and dropped her fork in the process, hearing it clatter beneath the table. She ducked down to pick it up, but paused as Kilgrave ordered shortly, “Leave it there, they’ll bring you another.”

Ryan quickly made to sit back up, and banged her head on the underside of the table. “Ow!” she
loosed involuntarily, rubbing the back of her head. She felt part of her hairdo come loose, and she flattened it down as best she could, her face sporting a bright red blush.

Kilgrave was staring at her, half impatient and half merely amused. “Atrocious table manners, but that can be remedied,” he emitted, almost to himself. “You haven’t tried your champagne, do you not care for it?” he asked as his gaze caught the untouched glass.

“I don’t drink,” Ryan replied, her cheeks still flaming. “Never thought it was a good idea for someone like me to, uh… lose control of their, um, mental faculties.”

“All right, all right, prudent,” Kilgrave acknowledged, nodding in deference. “Anyway, the story. I was nine years old when Mum and Dad figured out I was unpresented. Naturally, I didn’t know what their presentations were – you’ll understand how it was, I’d heard of it, simply thought it was never discussed - but I gathered my courage, asked them one day after school. The experiments started the next.”


“Mm, yes,” Kilgrave hummed. “Dear Mum and Dad, bent on fixing the freak. Neurological exams, fluoroscopy, brain biopsies, and – oh, my personal favorite – cerebral spinal fluid extractions. Painful and invasive, every one.”

“But… why?” Ryan asked in an exhale, just louder than a whisper.

“To eventually make me present, of course,” Kilgrave said, his voice growing dark and cold as he stared off into the distance. “Oh, they claimed it was all for the greater good. It’d make my life so much better! It could change the lives of thousands of people! Save me and others derision, scorn, prejudice. Never worked, though, not like they expected.”

“Wait – that’s how you – “ Ryan cut off, comprehension dawning as Kilgrave met her eyes once again. “Is it?”

“Yes,” he replied matter-of-factly. “I was injected with an experimental drug of their design. It had had unforeseen effects.”

Ryan swallowed thickly. “I – I’m so sorry,” she relayed, an unexpected blooming of sympathy spreading through her as she dropped her gaze. The food in front of her now looked distinctly unappetizing; the warmth of the dish had melted the cheese into the sauce, and it had cooled into a congealed mass.

“Ryan,” Kilgrave sighed, shaking his head incredulously again. “I simply do not understand you.”

Ryan looked back up, confusion furrowing her brow. “What?” she asked, perplexed.

“Ryan, I was given a gift,” Kilgrave emphasized. “Yes, my parents were sadistic, tortured me, but I was able to make it right!”

Ryan felt the blood drain from her face. “What do you mean?”

“Well, after they realized what they’d done, they ran from their mistakes,” Kilgrave replied casually, taking another sip of champagne. “They abandoned me, a ten-year-old boy, alone and unpresented. But look at me now.”

A small rush of relief coursed through Ryan’s chest. “They say the best revenge is living well,” she acknowledged.
Kilgrave smiled widely at her words, raising his champagne glass. “Cheers, love,” he said with a rakish wink. “But I must say, killing them was much more satisfying than simply living the charmed life.”

Ryan closed her eyes, forcing back panicked instinct to flee as she pressed her trembling hands into fists. She wasn’t sure how much more of this she could take. Her nails dug into her palms, and the pain cleared her head somewhat. No, she decided. She knew what was coming, but she was sick of being afraid.

“And, well, that brings us to when we met first, I believe,” Kilgrave kept on, as though he hadn’t just admitted to double homicide. Ryan gritted her teeth at his words. “How long ago was it, now? Five years?”

“Seven,” Ryan whispered.

“Good lord, has it been that long?” he reflected. “Time truly does fly, but Fate has a way of bringing people back together, doesn’t she? Although I admit, I didn’t recognize you at first – not that you’ve aged a day!” Kilgrave insisted politely. “No, in fact, you look… entirely the same,” he mused, looking thoughtful.

“I haven’t paid that much attention,” Ryan said mechanically. She took a deep breath, exhaling slowly through her mouth. “I remembered you, though.”

“Oh, I’m gratified I made an impression, dear,” Kilgrave smiled. “Especially just from the one night.”

“It’s hard to forget,” Ryan continued on, adrenaline coursing through her. This might have been the most foolish thing she’d ever done, but she couldn’t hold it in any longer. “The person who raped you.”
Kilgrave’s expression hardened. “Just which part would you label rape, then? Plucking you off the streets, treating you to dinner, taking you to the finest hotel in Manhattan -”

“The part where you made me have sex with you!” Ryan shouted furiously, heart pounding as though she were running for her life. “You never even told me your name, you just made me – how about the part where you ordered me to tell you my presentation and then said ‘maybe this will fix us both, then?’ The part – why the fuck would you even want it?! You’re unpresented, you knew I was, why would you ever think I would want it?!”

“That’s no way to tell!” Kilgrave snapped. “Your parents had you - presentation doesn’t matter, I happen to enjoy sleeping with beautiful women! And furthermore, how am I supposed to know if people want to -”

“What?!” Ryan screamed, jumping to her feet and knocking over her chair with a bang in the process. “What the hell – you don’t use mind control on them, for starters!”

“People do what I tell them to!” Kilgrave yelled back, a menacing glint in his eye as he shot to his feet as well. He waved a hand off to the side, and a security guard Ryan hadn’t seen backed off again. “I never know if anything is their idea or not! Do you even – I have to regulate every word I say, every time I speak! I once told a man to go fuck himself, can you even imagine?”

“Then just STOP TALKING!” Ryan exclaimed, gesturing widely with her hands. “God, just – you don’t have to use your powers! But no, you’d never stop, you power-hungry psychopath! Everything you’ve ever done has been for you, using mind control to steal and kidnap and kill and –“

“Everything I’ve done,” Kilgrave interrupted, his voice dangerously low, “the so-called ‘kidnapping’, the luxury I’ve created here, this whole mansion – every bit has been for you, Ryan.”

Ryan gaped wordlessly, closing and reopening her mouth. “Why?!” she finally managed incredulously.

“Ryan,” Kilgrave sighed, his manner abruptly shifting back to amusedly bewildered. “Do you not see the incredible similarities between you and I? Two people, both with the power of mind control, sitting together under one roof? Unpresented, shunned by the world, our families gone, not a friend in the world. Except for each other.”

“No,” Ryan held forth, shaking her head with wide eyes. “No, that’s not true,” she asserted, hands trembling in clenched fists.

“The Avengers lied to you,” Kilgrave said bluntly. “Every one of them. The group of heroes the entire world is meant to trust. They led you to believe you were safe, had a real home at last, then attacked you and forced you to run for your life. They tracked you like an animal and threw you into a prison cell, blinded and defenseless. They were then going to strap you down into a highly advanced lie detector machine and condemn you for any sin they chose, and they were going to lock you away, forever. Powerless, and alone.” He was very slowly walking around the table, hands open at his sides in a gesture of openness. “Ryan, you know it’s true. I took you from SHIELD to save you.”

“No, no,” Ryan repeated, taking a step away as he continued to approach. “No, you threatened me and killed those men, and tried to kill everyone else, too! They could all be dead!” Because of me,
the voice in her head whispered treacherously.

“Ryan, I did that for you, too,” Kilgrave offered softly, comfortably, now only a few feet away. “To show you… you don’t have to be afraid anymore. You’ve never truly understood, have you?”

“Understood what?” she replied, her voice almost breaking.

“Ryan, it can’t be coincidence we found each other. Especially twice now.” Kilgrave consoled, smiling kindly. “You, the only person immune to me, the only one with whom I can actually relate. You’ve never had anyone who’s understood you, either, how could they? But I do,” he promised reassuringly. Ryan shook her head silently, but with less fervor now.

“You poor thing,” he murmured slowly, now standing just beside Ryan, whose arms were folded tightly across her chest as she stared down at her feet. “So special, so unique, and you’ve been nothing but persecuted for it. I know how you feel. But your guilt, your fear – they’re needless.”

Ryan didn’t speak, but she didn’t move away, either. A storm of emotion was churning and agitating in her chest, and her mind was whirling.

“They wanted to hurt you. I wouldn’t let them,” Kilgrave declared. “You don’t know how extraordinary you are, my dear. You’ve never had anyone to show you how to use your abilities. Teach you exactly what you can do. Reveal to you the power we share,” he persisted, his voice dropping to a whisper. Ryan’s hands fell to her sides.

“We were, both of us, alone. Our families, those supposed to love and care for us, ripped away too soon. The world looking down on us with hatred ever since because of its foul prejudices. Cowards who cast you aside,” he sympathized. “I’m the only one who matches you. Who can give you the life you’re meant to have. Who would do anything for you.”

A tear rolled down Ryan’s cheek as she closed her eyes. Kilgrave stepped even closer. “Ryan,” he crooned in her ear. “No one will ever hurt you again. You don’t have to run and hide anymore. No more living on the streets, no more concealing yourself from the world.” Ryan sniffed heavily as Kilgrave paused. “I’m going to take care of you,” he whispered, tenderly raising her hand to his lips.

A memory flashed through Ryan’s mind, triggered at the gentle touch. Sobbing on the floor of a walk-in closet, foolishly pouring out her heart. The first time she was assaulted. Giving in to feral anger, bloodthirsty rage. Using her powers to get exactly what she wanted. Fear, self-loathing, revilement.

Steve and Bucky, grasping her tight. *Just because you have these abilities, it doesn’t make you a monster, Ryan. And if you are one, then we are, too.*

Ryan’s eyes snapped back open, and she wrenched her hand out of Kilgrave’s grip. “DON’T TOUCH ME!” she screamed, and she instinctively thrust out her left hand, glowing bright blue. Kilgrave jerked back violently, flying across the room to hit the far wall with an almighty crash. Ryan turned to run, but her path was blocked by half a dozen men pointing guns straight at her chest, piling out of the doorway to the greenhouse. She froze, a rush of panic coursing through her. Their minds were all entirely blank, except for the singular thought of thwarting her escape.

A sharp, excruciating pain exploded from her right wrist, shocking her entire body, and Ryan collapsed to the ground.
Bruce vaguely registered muffled voices, slowly lugging him up from unconsciousness. His ears were ringing like a bell, his pounding head keeping time. He managed to drag open an eyelid, and bright, unfocused light burned on his retina for a moment before he dropped it shut again. A light, airy scent that reminded him of a summer night wafted nearby.

“Dr. Banner?” a soft British voice said, and Bruce realized he could hear properly again. He groaned quietly, lethargically forcing a hand to his face. Rubbing at his eyes, he tried opening them again, and the light level was more manageable now. A pretty brunette spun through his still-fuzzy vision. “Dr. Banner? Can you hear me?” she asked softly.

“What happened?” he responded, attempting to sit up. A piercing hurt spiked in his neck, and he collapsed back down with a grunt.

“Don’t try to move yet,” the woman admonished, “your neck will be quite sore for a time, and the drugs are still wearing off. Please, do you know where you are?”

Bruce blinked a few more times, and the unfocused swirling began to sharpen. “I – a hospital,” he answered, looking around without moving his neck.

“You’re in a med bay at the SHIELD headquarters in the eastern U.S.,” the woman Bruce assumed to be his doctor corrected. “My name is Jemma Simmons.” He met her brown eyes with his own, and he remembered.

“Oh god,” he exhaled, a horrible guilt washing through him. “How long have I been out?”

“Approximately 13 hours, sir,” Jemma reported. “Thor and Agent Johnson returned to normal an hour or two ago, and it was decided it was safe to wake you up again now.”

“What about Ryan? Have we found her yet?” Bruce questioned urgently. “Where are the others?”

“We haven’t yet located Ryan,” Jemma replied, her tone slightly disheartened. “Everyone except yourself, Mr. Stark and Miss Potts, and the trio of lawyers were in the med bay with Thor and Daisy still when I left. I believe they’ve all gone back to work trying to find Ryan again.”

Bruce took a deep, sighing breath. “They let you wake me up alone?” he inquired, a slight note of disbelief in the undertone.

“Erm, well, Fitz was just here,” Jemma hedged, turning away to dig through a cabinet nearby. “We knew the danger had passed, though, you’ll be just fine with some rest.” The sound of running water reached him, and a second later Jemma returned with a cup and a few round, white pills. “These should help with the pain,” she said comfortingly.

“Thank you,” Bruce murmured, slowly lifting himself with his arms so as to keep his neck straight. The pain wasn’t as sharp already, and his head cleared as he swallowed the water. “Is there any news about Ryan at all?” he asked again. “Something on the security footage? The blind man, he… well, ran after them somehow, I think,” he remembered, furrowing his brow in confusion. “He’s the one that stopped me.”

“Yes, well, blindness doesn’t seem to be much of a handicap for him,” Jemma noted. “His name is Matt Murdock, although his more colorful moniker is Daredevil,” she explained. “He seems to have highly developed senses, along with considerable strength and martial arts training.”

Bruce blinked once, then decided to let it go for the moment. “And Ryan?” he prompted.
“We were able to track the limousine used to get away,” Jemma began, “but they switched cars at some point, and the trail went cold. The men left behind have no useful information, so far as Agent Romanoff has been able to tell. The only other breakthrough is a theory on how the mind control mechanism could possibly work – we suspect it’s somehow an extremely potent type of Alpha voice.”

“Alpha voice?!” Bruce repeated, eyes widening. He swung his legs off the side of the bed, his limbs still feeling clumsy and heavy, and a pained swirl of dizziness threatened to overtake him as he stood too quickly.

“Dr. Banner, please, you need rest!” Jemma insisted, rushing forward to catch him as he pitched forward slightly.

“I was working on something that could help,” Bruce insisted, brushing her off as he started to gain his sea legs again. “Before I was brought in – where are Tony and Jane?”

“Mr. Stark was asleep, and Dr. Foster was across the hall,” Jemma sighed in resignation, and the next moment, Bruce was gone.

“Jane?” Bruce called out, spying her through the glass wall of the main medical ward, sitting atop one of the beds with Thor.

“Bruce, what’re you doing up?” Jane cried out, jumping up from the bed as he stumbled in.

“You should not be exerting yourself, my friend, you have been through a great ordeal,” Thor echoed, grasping Bruce’s shoulders and guiding him to sit where they had just vacated.

“Go find Tony, please,” Bruce begged, his breath coming a little heavier than normal. “And I need the notes I had when I came in, it’s important.”

“Why? What’s going on?” Jane inquired, looking to Thor a moment as he grabbed a blanket from a spare bed and draped it around Bruce’s shoulders.

“Agent Simmons just told me the mind control was some extreme form of Alpha voice,” Bruce explained quickly, a hint of irritation coloring his tone. “I was working on a way to counter the effects of Alpha voice while I was gone.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “Thor, babe, stay with him?” she asked in a rush, dashing out into the hallway at top speed at his affirmative nod. Bruce closed his eyes for a moment, another wave of dizziness crashing over him.

“Please, Bruce, you must remain calm,” Thor urged, laying a large hand comfortably on his shoulder.

“I’m fine, the other guy’s under control,” Bruce countered, taking deep, slow breaths. He opened his eyes again and spied the bandaging on Thor’s wrists. “Oh god,” he said again. “The shock cuffs?”

“Yes, it took some effort to fell me,” Thor replied. “The burns are already healing, however, and I shall be recovered fully quite soon. Agent Johnson did not fare so well,” he reported darkly.

Bruce just sighed. “And we haven’t found Ryan yet? Tony hasn’t?” he repeated disbelievingly.

“All are trying their utmost,” Thor maintained. “With good fortune, this discovery will lead to more.”
As Thor finished speaking, Tony hastened into the room, pillow lines on his face and hair mussed from sleep. “Jesus, Bruce, what the hell are you doing up already?” he reprimanded. “It’s twice now you’ve had enough ketamine in you to down a Thoroughbred, you shouldn’t—“

“Tony, I’m alright,” Bruce insisted. “Did you bring my notes?”

“Jane’s getting them,” Tony answered, “and by the way, tell her to bring coffee instead of breaking down the door next time. Oh, and glad you’re feeling better too, big guy,” he directed at Thor. Thor smiled at him, turning around to go over to the sink along the back wall.

“Where are we in the search for Ryan?” Bruce asked Tony, who frowned as he looked away.

“Lost the trail last night just outside of Allentown. Clint tracked down the limo driver, sent over whatever he got, and Natasha’s putting things together,” Tony replied. “Tried every goddamn satellite, security camera, even police scanners, they just disappeared.”

“I am sure with this new information Clint has gathered, we will locate Ryan quite speedily,” Thor interjected, bringing a glass of water over to Bruce. “Meanwhile, there is possibly a way to counteract the kidnapper’s abilities?”

“Wait, that’s what Jane was yelling about?! What do you have?” Tony demanded, yanking out his cell phone from his pocket.

“Just the bare bones of an idea,” Bruce informed him, shaking his head gently. The pain was already almost gone, but he was still exhausted. “We need as many heads on it as possible if it’s going to get anywhere fast.”

“I’ve got them,” Jane interrupted, jogging back in with a yellow legal pad in her grip. “Bruce, I’m gonna be honest, I don’t know what 80% of this even means,” she admitted, handing the notes over to Bruce and standing by Thor, who took her hand. “I haven’t studied anything about the human body since undergrad.”

“Us three are the only scientists we’ve got right now, we need to keep this quiet,” Bruce replied grimly. “I’ll explain it as well as I can, and we’ll just have to hope for the best.”

“Excuse me, Dr. Banner,” a lilting Scottish voice called out. “If I may, Jemma and I can be of some assistance,” Fitz piped up, standing in the doorway. “I’m engineering, she’s biochem. And we’ve solved odd problems before.”

“Get in here then, laddie boy, we need to get a move on,” Tony indicated, jerking his head towards the impromptu meeting. “And bring a whiteboard. And coffee.”

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“Ugh, the coffee here is even worse than yours, Karen,” Foggy teased, grimacing at his mug.

“It’s better than your morning breath,” Karen joked back, taking a long draw from her own cup.

“Next time we’re kidnapped, I’ll be sure to grab floss,” Foggy assured her, rolling his eyes. “Speaking of being kidnapped…” he trailed off, more sober now.
“There’s no news,” Matt announced, approaching from down the hallway. “About Ryan, anyway. Thor and Agent Johnson are back to normal, and Dr. Banner was woken up a little while ago. And Karen’s right about your breath, Foggy.”

“Says the guy whose only clothes are still covered in someone else’s blood,” Foggy retorted.

“So, what, the dick’s superpowers only last half a day if he doesn’t let you go first?” Karen interposed.

“Well, that’s good news, at least,” Foggy said. “And we know they don’t work on other people with mind control, either.”

“Wait, what?” Karen asked.

“Ryan wasn’t under Kilgrave’s control,” Matt answered, taking the coffeepot himself and frowning at it. “For whatever reason. She didn’t follow his commands; that’s why Kilgrave made Sergeant Barnes carry her, remember?”

“Oh, okay, okay, so…” Karen started, looking deep in thought. “This guy can control minds, but only up to twelve hours if he’s not there to keep controlling you. Ryan isn’t able to be controlled, somehow. And you can throw off his control, and maybe not be affected by it anymore, right?” she mused, looking to Matt to approve.

“If I am still susceptible, I can throw it off again,” Matt confirmed. “And there’s another thing. Director Coulson said that Agent Fitz suspects his powers are some kind of heightened, permanent Alpha voice.”

Foggy looked shocked. “But you said he was unpresented, how is that even possible?!”

“Alpha voice is nowhere near mind control, though,” Karen added. “It’s just supposed to be something for mates, right? And we don’t have to listen to Foggy if we don’t want to.”

“I have enhanced senses because of my blindness. No one knows how that happened, either. And yeah, anthropology says it’s supposed to help keep families together and safe,” Matt supplied. “Think about it, though. Alpha voice is instinct to obey, same as ducking when something’s thrown at you. For Betas and Omegas, anyway. It was instinct to obey Kilgrave, too.”

A few moments later, Foggy declared, “Well, I’m never using Alpha voice ever again,” a sick twist of guilt permeating his scent.


“We’re your mates, Foggy,” Matt stated solemnly. “We trust you.”

Foggy shook his head, but reached out and pulled Matt into his other side, holding them both close. “After this, I’m calling a hiatus on fighting superpowered bad guys. Normal crooks and criminals only. For at least a month.”

“A week,” Matt countered, cracking a grin.

“Three weeks,” Foggy smiled.

“Two, and I’ll wear that hideous tie from my birthday you both pretend doesn’t have glowing neon cats on it to the office one day,” Matt laughed.
“How the hell did you know?!” Karen demanded incredulously.

“I asked Claire,” Matt shrugged.

Foggy just chuckled and pulled them in closer.

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Natasha stretched out her neck as best she could, feeling a massive headache coming on. The second interrogation, with the hired gun who had been under Kilgrave’s control, had been even more useless than the first. He hadn’t even been hired, technically; he was a veteran, part of a security firm once he’d returned, and had been forced to obey Kilgrave for the past two days. His coworkers were the ones dead outside. He’d known nothing besides the plan.

Gentle fingers began kneading themselves into her shoulders, and Natasha hummed a small noise of contentment. “Thank you,” she mumbled, closing her eyes for a moment.

“Have you found out anything else?” Darcy asked quietly, pressing her thumbs firmly into a knot.

“The other man left behind didn’t know anything either.”

“What about the limo driver? What did Clint say?”

Natasha leaned her head to the side, releasing a crick in her neck with a cracking sound. “I’m working on it,” she said.

“Nat, please,” Darcy begged suddenly, dropping her hands from Natasha’s shoulders and pulling out the chair beside her to sit. “I’m not a super spy, but just… let me help.”

Natasha didn’t meet her Omega’s eyes. “Clint sent the recording of the interrogation,” she emitted. “But… I don’t want you to listen to it.”

Darcy gritted her teeth, exhaling in frustration. “For real? We just talked about this, and there’s more secrets already?”

“It’s not that,” Natasha sighed. “It’s not classified, it’s…”

“Then what?” Darcy pleaded, laying her hand atop her Alpha’s. “Just tell me!”

Natasha swallowed once, then met Darcy’s eyes. “You know what I was before I met Clint. Before I met you. And you know what Clint was before SHIELD found him. Since we were both kids.”

Darcy nodded silently. “It was… quite the heart-to-heart, when we were dating.”

Nat’s expression saddened further, dropping back to the table. “It was the hardest thing we’ve ever had to do,” she said, her voice falling to a whisper. “We both already loved you so much. We didn’t know what we would do if you hated us because…”

Darcy squeezed Natasha’s hand tightly. “I love you,” she stressed, firm with conviction. “You and Clint. No matter what you did or who you were.”

Natasha shook her head. “It’s not who we were, Darce,” she refuted. “It’s who we are. Everything
we’ve done will always be part of us. We just… it brought Clint and me together. We understood each other’s pasts. But that doesn’t mean we don’t hate it now.” She looked back up at Darcy, mournful but resigned. “You make us good again, Darcy. We want to be better because of you. We just… never want you to see our bad sides.”

Darcy wiped away a stray tear with her free hand as she glared at her mate. “Natalia Alianovna Romanova, you are not good because of me,” she pronounced, her voice somehow strong even while it trembled. “You and Clint are the best people I know, because you even though you both have the fucking suckiest pasts that I can’t even begin to imagine, you both choose to be good every single day. And even if you mess up,” she emphasized, “I don’t care, because I don’t even know how to love you less anymore.”

Nat looked away a moment, willing back her own tears. She took her hand out of Darcy’s, retrieving her cell phone from her pocket. “The first message.”

Darcy took it, and they sat silently as the sounds of breaking glass, screams of pain and fear, and Clint’s cold fury played out between them. When it was done, Natasha braved a look at Darcy again. She was pale, but her jaw set determinedly. “156,” she said. “I didn’t know he kept track.”

“I don’t know mine,” Natasha whispered. “I lost track after somewhere after 300.”

Darcy took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “I love you,” she whispered back chokingly.

Natasha quickly stood up, grabbing Darcy’s arm and yanking her to her feet. She crushed Darcy to her, holding her head in the crook of her neck as Darcy began to sob.
In Which Darcy is an Accidental Genius and Plans Begin to Form

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! I'm sorry, I know it probably feels like there's been a lot of filler lately, but I'm getting excited, things are happening :))) Hover over for translations or scroll to the end notes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What is all this?” Steve cut through the overlapping chatter, observing uncomprehendingly the mass of numbers and chemical formulae scattered across whiteboards and discarded pages on the floor. He spotted Bruce amidst the chaos, and quickly went to the bed where he sat. “Are you alright?”

“Just a little tired, Steve,” Bruce replied, only sparing him a quick glance and smile. “If the second aldehyde is in excess at 180°C, that should fix the equilibrium problem,” he called over, looking around Steve to Jemma at a whiteboard, scribbling furiously.

“No, I already accounted for that by replacing hydroxide – “

“With LDA, yes, good,” Bruce mumbled, turning back to his own notes and ignoring Steve’s questioning look. Steve looked around for Bucky instead, who had come in first and was currently listening to Fitz and Tony talking rapidfire by a second whiteboard covered in hastily-drawn mechanical schematics. Steve knew his own expression would be just as bewildered.

“Don’t worry, Steve, I don’t understand most of this either,” a voice called out from behind him. Turning around, Steve found Jane and Thor, sitting on a bed and drinking coffee as they watched the commotion. “Maybe if Kilgrave could make wormholes…”

“What’s going on?” Steve demanded, dodging to the side as Fitz suddenly bolted out the door and down the hall.

“Why aren’t we searching for Ryan?!” Bucky added angrily, striding over.

“Bruce was apparently studying how to counter Alpha voice while he was gone,” Jane placated. “They’re trying to work something out from his ideas. And Natasha’s still going over the testimony from the limo driver last we knew, we haven’t stopped searching."

“Darcy has also just visited, and she believes Clint will return quite soon. He will be able to assist Natasha as well,” Thor added.

“Yeah, but we’ll have a way to neutralize the mind control?” Steve clarified, hope alighting in his eyes as he looked to Bucky.

“In theory, yes. But it’s going to be almost completely untested, what with how quickly we’re doing this. We won’t know about potential side effects, or if it’ll even work against him. It’s as big a risk as going in without it,” Jane reported grimly.

“I’ll do it,” Bucky inserted immediately. “When will it be ready?”
“We’ll both do it,” Steve emphasized, looking pointedly at Bucky. Bucky opened his mouth to argue, but he was cut off by Bruce from behind them.

“I’m sorry, but neither of you are viable candidates,” he said, finally peering up from his notes. A furious growl erupted from Bucky, and Steve rounded on Bruce. “We’re the only ones who wouldn’t be harmed by any side effects. No one else is doing this!”

“Captain Rogers, please,” Jemma interjected, pausing her madcap calculations for a moment. “Yours and Sergeant Barnes’ biology has been permanently altered, there’s no way we could begin to understand how this might affect either of you.”

“When you came back, Bucky,” Bruce began again, more gently this time, “there were all those blood tests, remember?” Bucky nodded curtly, eyes still ablaze. “Steve went through the same thing. They were to see how your health had been affected by the cryostasis, and then to make sure whatever medication you were given wouldn’t negatively affect you. But we don’t have time to do a full array of safety tests on this, it would take months. What we’re working on is a last resort.”

“Also, both of your metabolisms are ramped up at least a few times the average man’s. Your bodies would burn through the drug incredibly quickly, and giving you higher concentrations would only magnify the risk factors,” Jemma explained sympathetically.

Steve sighed through his nose. “Who, then, if not us?”

“Clint and Natasha are the best candidates,” Bruce answered.

“Вы послали бы те, кто ее предал?!” Bucky exploded, the scent of his fury raging. He took a step towards Bruce unconsciously, and Steve quickly inserted himself between them.

“Tóg go bog é!” Steve hissed, grabbing Bucky in front by both shoulders. Bucky bared his teeth at him. “Ní mór dúinn go léir chun fanacht socair,” Steve said pointedly, gesturing with his eyes over to Bruce. Bucky’s jaw tightened, but he gave another short nod, and Steve released him.

“Natasha and Clint both have clean health records and are well-trained and capable,” Bruce elaborated, calmly breaking the silence following the outburst. “But that’s only if we can finish the formula, synthesize the drug in time, and hopefully give it a trial run. Nothing’s set in stone yet.”

With a last glare at the whiteboard full of unintelligible jargon, Bucky left silently, a murderous look to his gait. “I’m going to go hit something,” he muttered low when Steve caught up in the hallway. “Don’t come with.”

Bucky’s words stung, but Steve nodded anyway. “I’ll… make us some food, or something,” he replied listlessly, latching on to the first thing he thought of to distract himself from his own frustrated irritation.

His mate’s sepia eyes softened for just a moment. “Is gá dom roinnt ama,” he voiced. “Beidh mé ar ais.”

“Tá a fhios agam,” Steve acknowledged. He shook his head, worry and resentment and a thousand other emotions burning in his chest. “Is breá liom tú.” It perhaps wasn’t the time, but he needed to say it. It felt like the only thing he could do anymore.

“Mar is féidir liom.” With that, they went their separate ways. Steve hadn’t felt so stranded and powerless in a long time.
“Nat?” Darcy asked quietly, breaking the silence they’d been sitting in for the past hour or so.

“What is it?” her Alpha responded absently, still deep in thought. Normally she had more evidence to go on, or a way to at least extract more information. Kilgrave was masterful at covering his tracks, it appeared. But there was something obvious she was missing, she knew. She’d felt it last night, and she felt it now, like a word waiting, dancing, teetering on the tip of her tongue. Just the slightest nudge, and it would all fall into place.

“I have a really stupid thought, but it’s nagging at me,” Darcy offered hesitatingly. “On the recording… the guy said the basement flooded. I mean, Kilgrave was getting a house or something ready then, right? But unless there was, like, a water leak or something, why would his basement flood? My parents’ new place flooded once, but only cause it’s like a hundred years old. But a guy that rich and douche-y wouldn’t get old or cheap shit for his house.”

All at once, it clicked. Natasha shot up, staring wide-eyed at Darcy for a moment, then grabbed her Omega and yanked her into a fierce, claiming kiss. She pulled back abruptly, eyes shining and scent alight with satisfaction. “мой блестящий фейерверк,” she breathed, then dashed out of the room.

“Hey, wait up!” Darcy called out, grabbing their cell phones and taking off after her.

Natasha checked her watch as she sprinted up the hallway. Already pressing into the afternoon. She bounded into the med bay where Stark, Banner, and the others were all still gathered. “Tony!” she shouted.

All eyes turned to her in surprise, and she jerked her head out the door impatiently. “We’ve got a lead,” she emphasized, and Tony quickly followed her back out.

“What’ve you got?” he inquired, jogging behind her as she sped towards Coulson’s office.

She ignored him, bursting through the office door and unceremoniously shoving Coulson away from his desk in his rolling chair.

“Agent Romanoff? I assume you found something?” Coulson remarked mildly, spinning slightly as he rolled away into the wall. Nat quickly typed in a Google search, and the next moment a weather radar map popped up on the wall screen. A splash of blue and green played over New York and the New Jersey coastline, the remnants of the storm that had started the night Ryan went on the run.

“Uh, babe? What’re you doing?” Darcy panted, finally catching up behind them and looking baffled as Natasha studied the screen intently.

“Yes,” Nat breathed triumphantly, then turned to Tony. “Find out if any mansions along the Jersey Shore have been sold recently. Or built in the last three months. Concentrate on the north, near Long Island,” she commanded, pointing out a section marked with green and yellow precipitation on the map.

“Far be it for me to doubt your deductive reasoning, but you do realize all that map shows is where it’s been raining, right?” Tony enunciated slowly, seeming rather perturbed by Natasha’s out-of-context commandment.
“Do it, Stark,” Coulson ordered, “and Natasha, please, what’re you thinking?” His expression looked a little concerned as well.

“Kilgrave wore a three-piece Italian wool suit to a kidnapping,” Natasha explained impatiently. “Drinks Perrier-Jouet champagne, eats at upscale restaurants. He’s ostentatious, has expensive tastes, and he uses his powers to satisfy them.”

“Okay, he’s rich, but why would he have a mansion on the Jersey shore?” Tony interjected. “Why wouldn’t he be holed up in some fancy hotel in the city, or something? They could’ve gone anywhere in the world.”

“Because his basement flooded,” she countered simply. “It has to be a mansion – not just the luxury, it’s to intimidate. Part of the power play. And it’s nearby; he got picked up by a driver from Hoboken, went to Cipriani’s, and then made the chauffeur wait all night. His time limit was twelve hours,” she continued unwaveringly.

“Yes, but If he was communicating with the workers via phone in the limo, he doesn’t necessarily need to be close,” Coulson pointed out.

Natasha shook her head. “He wouldn’t risk going back into the city because of the cameras, he has to avoid facial recognition. The only way he could get away by plane is with a private flight at a remote airstrip, and even those have security. You searched everywhere, right?” she directed at Tony, who nodded silently.

Satisfied, she continued, “Kilgrave would micromanage these plans - he kept his men on a tight leash, expects every order to be followed to the letter, made one mutilate another when they were disrupted. Back when he was keeping tabs on Ryan, all he needed was the initial proof, and then he could just wait for her to be taken in. But he would’ve overseen everything that was being worked on for his own comfort, make sure it was to his satisfaction. And - ” here she paused, eyes shining with pride as she turned to Darcy, “ - as my brilliant Omega pointed out, he’s a rich douchebag. No expenses spared, his basement wouldn’t flood from faulty pipes or inexperienced workers. Too big a coincidence. It’s been dry for two weeks until the storm the past few days, and it rained on the coast before it turned to snow. The most likely place is at sea level. No one would care about another rich eccentric on the Jersey shore.”

Tony blinked once, then raised an eyebrow and shrugged. “Good enough for me,” he quipped. “JARVIS is on it, and – yeah, yeah, there was a sale finalized last we - wait, no, shit,” he muttered, “scratch that, just some Real Housewife… wait, there!” he pointed, a zoomed-in satellite image appearing on the wall screen. A humongous mansion was displayed, surrounded on three sides by forest and the ocean just past the front yard. “Just north of Spring Lake. You’re right, he is a rich douchebag.”

“Takes one to know one,” Darcy jested, a victorious smile beaming on her face and scent alight with excitement. “I’m gonna go tell the others,” she proclaimed, backing out the door.

“Darcy, wait!” Coulson called out, making her pause. “Tony, are you sure?” he emphasized.

“The land’s in a nature reserve, and the whole thing went up in less than three months. No way that ever happened without mind control at the helm,” Tony reported, scrolling down his phone screen before looking back up. “Guess no one ever told him not to build his castle on the sand.”

Coulson nodded. “Alright. He must have security cameras, can you find and hack them?”

“Director, you wound me,” Tony spouted dramatically, holding one hand to his chest.

“Relax, relax, I’m literally five seconds from being done,” he resumed quickly. “And… finito.” On the wall screen there appeared over two dozen camera angles, showing various points inside the mansion and grounds. There was a cook in the shining chrome kitchen, a housekeeper dusting an already-immaculate bedroom, a few burly men in tactical gear outside, and – “There,” Tony pointed out again. Kilgrave appeared in the bottom right corner, quickly stalking down a hallway full of flower vases and disappearing through a door at the end into darkness. There wasn’t a camera view, wherever he was going. Ryan was nowhere to be seen.

“Someone go get Cap and Sarge,” Tony finished, jaw set determinedly. “They’re going to want to see this.”

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Darcy bounded down corridor after corridor, her footsteps echoing almost eerily in the quiet as she sought out Steve and Bucky. Coulson had shut down the normal operations on the base for the day, and the only people still left were them. Unfortunately, that meant she couldn’t ask for directions when she found herself looking at a crossroads of hallways and not remembering she’d already been. *Screw it*, she thought petulantly, then took a deep breath and bellowed, “STEVE! BUCKY! WHERE THE HELL DID YOU G - ”

“Darcy!” Steve cut her off, jogging up from behind. “What’s wrong?”

Darcy’s huge smile returned in full force. “We found them.”

The look on Steve's face was almost indescribable. Relief smoothed his wrinkled forehead, joy lit anew in his eyes, fortitude displayed itself in the set of his mouth, but beneath his skin glowed a deep, utter, sincere *hope*. There was only other time she’d seen him like that: the day he’d brought a wary but resolute Bucky to the Tower, gathering everyone together and fiercely grinning as he introduced his long-lost mate. The same grin broke out again now, and Steve took off at a sprint down the hallway to the left.

“Meet up in Coulson’s office!” Darcy yelled after him, but he was already gone.

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Bucky heard the door slam open, rebounding off the wall with a crash over the pounding of his fists against the heavyweight bag. The next second, a familiar but intense scent - like blazing fireworks, like the sun rising at dawn, like a warm home on a cold night - invaded his senses, and he whipped his head around as hope surged in his chest. Their eyes met, and Steve simply nodded.

Bucky exhaled sharply, and instantly they were in each other’s arms, clutching each other desperately for a few seconds, hearts pounding in their chests as their worlds realigned. Steve pulled back, eyes shining, and Bucky surged up to kiss him fiercely. Steve returned it with equal fire, and a moment later they were running back out the door.
Coulson’s office was packed when they arrived, everyone left on the base except the men Kilgrave had left behind and Bruce jammed into the room, scents swirling and mixing together. Bucky pushed past Sam, Fitz and Thor to reach the center, eyes quickly scanning the images displayed on the wall screen. “Where is she?!” he demanded, turning back to Coulson for answers.

“We got eyes on Kilgrave,” Coulson attested, “but he went off camera. There’s what looks like a basement area without any coverage.” He indicated the hallway where Kilgrave had disappeared, the door slightly ajar to show pitch blackness beyond. “Unless there are more rooms elsewhere without security, Ryan is probably down there.”

“Where is this?” Steve asked, quickly piecing together and memorizing the layout of the house from the footage. It was enormous, practically the size of his entire apartment building back in the ‘30s, but the cameras connected almost every inch.

“Just north of Spring Beach, right on the coast,” Coulson answered.

“Of course he’s on the Jersey shore,” two sarcastic voices mocked simultaneously, and Foggy and Sam looked to each other in surprise before grinning and bumping fists, Karen stifling a giggle beside them.

“How many guards?” Matt spoke up from a corner, gripping his cane as he looked unseeingly towards Coulson across the room.

“At least two dozen, all heavily armed. We’ll canvass the area to get a sense of the other security measures,” Natasha answered. “I assume you two will want to do the scouting?” she directed towards Steve and Bucky, both of whom nodded once. “After that, we’ll formulate a plan, and Clint and I will take Bruce’s drug.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Matt replied shortly. “I’ll be getting Ryan.”

“Matt – “ Foggy muttered, but he was cut off by Tony.

“Okay, look, we appreciate what you did earlier, but we’re not letting some random civilian vigilante go up against that psychopath, even if you can somehow throw off the mind control,” he asserted. “Just because you have bat hearing and can somehow aim a gun doesn’t mean you can fight off an army single-handedly, and we’re not fucking this up any more than we already have.”

Coulson began, “Mr. Murdock, we can’t allow you to – “

“There’s an 8 kilovolt electric fence surrounding this compound that opens to the southeast and northwest, but there’s a dead spot a dozen yards or so from the southeast entrance that no one’s bothered to fix. Captain Rogers broke three ribs less than a week ago, and he’s still instinctively compensating by leaning to the left when he stands, despite them being completely healed. Dr. Banner is an Omega, but the creature inside of him is an Alpha, and he’s hoping to be able to subdue him completely with the drug he’s developing. And if you turn on the live audio of the security footage, I will be able to tell you exactly where every guard is on the house and grounds.” Matt paused for a moment, a stunned silence left in his wake. “What’s most important, though, is that Ryan trusts me. As opposed to all of you. You can imagine it would make the rescue go more smoothly.”

“You’re right. You still shouldn’t go in without any backup, though,” Clint’s voice suddenly called out from the doorway. All heads turned to see him enter, weariness still evident but determination in his eyes. Darcy quickly shoved away from Thor and Jane, and they embraced tightly for a few silent moments. “This isn’t a stealth rescue; we need to take Kilgrave down. Nat and I will help with the
guards and get to the bastard, you’ll be the one to get Ryan. You don’t face an army alone, and Ryan gets out unharmed,” Clint finished as he turned to Matt again. “Deal?”

“On one condition,” Matt specified. “No one dies.”

“No one di – you do realize there’s most likely going to be people shooting at you, right? And you’re going to have to shoot back at them?” Tony snarked, looking incredulous. Everyone else looked surprised at Matt’s declaration.

“I won’t be shooting anyone. The gun I used on the guards was a last resort, and I didn’t aim to kill.” Matt’s tone brooked no argument, and both Foggy and Karen stood tall and firm beside him. “I have saved hundreds of lives, and I have never killed anyone. And if none of you can handle this without murder, then I’ll do it alone.”

Coulson’s frown deepened. “Mr. Murdock, this is a SHIELD operation. Clint and Natasha are my top two agents, and they will be leading this mission. We appreciate what you’ve done, but – “

“Alright, that’s it,” Karen inserted furiously. “Ryan would’ve died before SHIELD found her had Matt not smelled the blood out in the alleyway. All the rest of us would’ve died had Matt not saved all our asses last night! It’s not that much to ask - if he says don’t kill anyone, then don’t do it!”

“No one has to die,” Foggy echoed. “But, look. If nothing else, just let Matt get Ryan out and then do whatever the hell you want to Kilgrave and his goons. We can’t stop all of you at once,” he finished. Matt’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t refute the statement.

“I’m afraid it might be more complicated than that,” Bruce’s voice called out from the hallway. Shuffling exhaustedly inside, he leaned against Coulson’s desk as the crowd parted for him. “Computer trial simulations of the drug are showing that in concentrations in excess of .5 millimolar, the compound begins to react with itself and become inert. It’s far too low to be effective on a full-grown adult.”

“So Matt’s the only one who’s safe from Kilgrave,” Steve spoke up. “Then Ryan’s only chance is a grab-and-go. Kilgrave will have to wait for another day.” The words burned like acid in his mouth, but he knew it was the only option.

“He can’t be allowed to escape,” Natasha countered. “He’s too much of a threat. He needs to be taken out.”

“No. I’m sorry. If you want my help to rescue Ryan, then no one dies,” Matt insisted again, shaking his head. “I won’t be complicit in murder.”

“You’d let Ryan die instead!” Bucky snarled at him.

“Everybody just wait a sec,” Sam interjected, looking deep in thought. “I have an idea.” Looking to Bruce, he asked, “Would the drug work on a smaller person, then? Someone with less mass?”

“Perhaps a five-year-old,” Bruce answered, shaking his head. “I need time to rework the formula if –”

“But it would work, in theory?” Sam emphasized. “We can synthesize it and everything?”

“Yes, but – “

“I know a guy.”
“Scott! Bro, you’ll never believe what just happened, man, oh my god, dude, I gotta tell you – “

“Luis, I don’t have time, Cassie’s waiting for me to pick her up,” Scott Lang sighed exasperatedly.
“And I can’t find my cell phone – “

“No, no, yeah, no, I know,” Luis babbled, “but, okay. I was with Ignacio again, right, you remember Iggy, from – “

“Yes, your cousin! Please, Luis – “

“No, no, sorry, I just get excited. Anyway, so we were at the movies last night, right? Havin’ a man night! Seeing Leonardo DiCaprio get eaten by bear and shit, it was insane! You know I don’t like Leo that much, except for Titanic, that was some dope shit, but if he doesn’t get the Oscar for that one, oh my god – “

“Luis – “

“No, yeah, sorry, sorry. But Iggy tells me after ‘Yo, man, let’s go to the Spot, find some crazy fine chicks, you know what I’m sayin’?’ And I’m like ‘Hells yeah, bro!’ And oh my god, Scott, this one girl, like crazy-stupid fine, gets all over Iggy, and she’s like ‘Hey, man, I got a friend if this dude is legit,’ and Iggy goes ‘He legit, a’ight!’ And this other chick was even hotter where it counts, you know what I’m sayin’!”

“Yeah, I walked in on her naked in the bathroom this morning! She was hot! Is there a point?!”

“No, no, definitely, so I made waffles this morning right? And she goes ‘Oh my god, these waffles are sublime!’ And I’m like ‘Baby, I’m the waffle king, you know that’s right,’ and she’s like ‘Yo, waffle king, give me your number, we’ll hook up later baby!’ But my phone got stolen like a week ago, so I gave her yours and she put in her number and we been texting all day – “

“You’ve had my phone the whole time?!”

“Yeah man, but like, ten minutes ago, a weird number comes up on the screen, and I answer it, and it was fucking Falcon, dude! From the Avengers!”

“What?!”

Chapter End Notes

Surprise!!

Translations:
Bucky - You'd send the ones who betrayed her?!

Steve - Calm down! We all have to stay calm.

Bucky - I need some time. I'll come back.

Steve - I know. I love you.

Bucky - As do I.

Natasha - My brilliant firecracker.
The pain was back, again. It could’ve been her pounding head, battered wrists, or throbbing side that dragged Ryan awake, but all three at once were nauseating. The metal bracelet was apparently more than just half of a pair of high-tech handcuffs, she thought distractedly. She blinked to clear her vision, and then realized she couldn’t see anything anyway. Wherever she was, it was pitch black, cold, and wet.

The gag had returned, too, tied so tightly her jaw ached from the intrusion. The honest-to-god shackles on her wrists and feet were new, though. Her arms were raised up together above her head, hands almost completely numb, but there was about a foot of leeway for her legs. She discovered this by her bare feet slipping in something moist and slimy coating the cement floor, shooting her legs out from under her. She jerked painfully to a halt, all her weight yanking onto her bound wrists as her knees buckled. A muffled scream of pain echoed off the walls, and a warm wetness blossomed on her side as she felt her stitches rip.

Breathing heavily, her arms trembling in pain, Ryan carefully readjusted her footing and stood again. Hoping beyond hope for a miracle, she focused her powers and tried to move the gag. Nothing. She couldn’t even feel upset about it. Idly, she thought perhaps she was drugged again, but dismissed the idea; she was in far too much pain.

No, it felt more like apathetic acceptance, she mused vaguely. In a split second decision all those months ago, she had begun walking down a path with giants, and now she had been crushed underfoot. Deceived, attacked, made to flee and now caught and chained down at last. She was alone, powerless, and starting to shiver as she felt her lifeblood soak into the horrid dress barely shielding her from the damp chill. Any moment, a sadistic monster would enter through the hidden door and do whatever he wished to her. Even if - by whatever miracle - she managed to escape, it was only a matter of time before she was found again, by SHIELD or by Kilgrave. Perhaps government prison cells were somewhat less miserable. But it wasn’t any kind of life.

Even that thought was a pipe dream, though. Kilgrave would just kill everyone in his way and take her again. Regardless of whatever the hell he wanted with her, he didn’t seem the type to take such an insult lying down. But it didn’t matter. No one was coming for her. Matt, Karen, and Foggy’s faces flashed in her mind, and her heart panged for them. They must’ve been taken by SHIELD too; hopefully they at least were being treated okay. But no one cared about her. She had been alone for years of running, hiding, and scraping by, and now she was tired. She was tired, and there didn’t seem much point in fighting it anymore. I’m going to die down here, Ryan realized. It didn’t upset
her like she reasoned it should. She merely closed her eyes and hoped it would be quick.

A door opened, and light flooded the lower part of the room. Footsteps tapped on wooden stairs to her right. When Ryan’s eyes had adjusted, Kilgrave stood in front of her.

They stared at each other silently for a few moments. Kilgrave looked up and down her body, almost disinterestedly taking in her ruined dress and disheveled hair. He then took a step forward, and Ryan tensed, squirming away as much as she could as the chains clanked softly. He ignored her, leaning in close. Ryan froze in place, trying not to retch as she stood still and hoped it would satisfy him. Kilgrave inhaled deeply, his nose grazing her neck, and then he suddenly licked a wet stripe up the side. Ryan shrieked through the gag, a muffled, muted shout, and almost slipped and fell again as she thrashed away from him in her bonds.

“That’s enough,” Kilgrave barked coldly. Turning away, he strode over to a mass of equipment pushed up against the silver walls Ryan hadn’t been able to see before. She recognized a shaking incubator and microcentrifuge from her time with Bruce, but the rest of it was a mystery. “You’ll behave for the doctor now,” he added as more footsteps echoed down the stairs. A severe-looking man in a white lab coat and glasses appeared, his pinched face buried in a pile of papers he was closely examining.

“Have it ready by morning,” Kilgrave ordered as he took his leave.

“Yes, sir,” the man replied, then turned a piercing gaze on Ryan. A cold smile spread across his face. Turning around, he opened a drawer and drew out a huge syringe. Ryan started hyperventilating as he approached.

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“Murdock,” a gruff voice called out, and Matt turned back around. “Follow me,” Bucky ordered, waiting expectantly back down the hallway.

“I’ll be back in a little bit,” Matt quietly promised his mates, scenting their unease.

“Be careful,” Foggy muttered. “Guy’s literally an assassin.”

“Matt literally beat a ninja once,” Karen pointed out.

“Yeah, and he was literally mostly dead afterwards,” Foggy countered darkly.

Matt gave them a small smile. “Mostly dead is slightly alive,” he gibed, and Foggy rolled his eyes as Karen snickered. Matt kissed them both just for good measure, the lightest touches to their cheeks, then followed Bucky silently away. A minute or two later, Matt caught the odor of old sweat and older layers of dust. Three other heartbeats were already in the gym beside the wrestling mats, their scents deliberately muted and even.

“Matt,” Steve greeted as they approached. “I don’t think we’ve introduced ourselves properly. I’m Steve, and this is Bucky, Natasha, and Clint.”

Matt ignored his outstretched hand. “I’m not dressed for sparring, Captain,” he replied coolly. Steve dropped his arm.
“I took the liberty of getting these,” Clint spoke up, tossing a pile of clothing towards him.

Matt felt the familiar texture and bit back a growl. “Breaking and entering is against the law,” he dictated.

“So is vigilantism,” Clint returned.

Matt stripped off his bloodied shirt, sensing their eyes on his scars. Perhaps they would convince everyone of his capabilities, as it seemed little else had. Sliding into his boots, he felt the air shift around him, and he snatched his batons as they flew at his face. Steve made a small noise of approval.

Matt pulled on his mask, then stood with his head down. Steve moved off to the side, and the others stood on the corners. Matt focused his hearing. Natasha’s heartbeat was just a hair too fast. He straightened up. “Whenever you’re ready.”

She was quick. Matt ducked a roundhouse kick and blocked a blow to the head before finally landing one of his own. She was almost silent, too, Matt’s grunts and exhales far louder and more frequent. Her thighs choked off his air supply, and it took all his strength to throw her off. He dodged suddenly to the right, Clint’s aim with his own discarded baton deadly and swift as it became two against one. Pain exploded across his jaw as he felt his lip split in two, and he retaliated with a quick series of jabs to Clint’s chest that left the man wheezing. Swallowing blood, he caught Natasha from behind him and flipped her to the ground before his legs were swept out from under him. He landed on his back with a grunt, and threw himself to the side as a metal fist pounded into the floor where his chest had just lain. He kicked up to his feet, then dropped and rolled again to avoid Bucky’s brutal onslaught. He sprung up again just to be struck down by Natasha and Clint simultaneously, their coordination synchronized to perfection. He fell to the ground, gasping for breath, then caught Clint’s foot and leveraged him into Bucky. Natasha caught him in a chokehold, and he flipped them over to crush her with his weight, springing back up to his feet and striking Bucky in the throat lightning-quick. The other three kept attacking. Matt kept fighting.

“Stop,” Steve called out a minute later, and everyone halted instantly, panting hard. Bucky gingerly touched his throat, Clint held his side, and Natasha spat out a mouthful of blood. Matt gritted his teeth and stood at the ready. “You guys convinced now?” Steve retorted, his voice tinged with sarcasm.

“He’ll do,” Natasha answered. “Assuming he can avoid getting shot.”

“Criminals generally use guns,” Matt stated. “It’s not a problem.”

Bucky nodded once. “You can take a lot of punishment,” he noted, almost sounding impressed.

“Catholicism,” Matt replied shortly, taking off the mask and striding back out the door, exhaling raggedly when he was just out of sight.

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“You hacked into the cameras in seconds, but you can’t find the old footage?” Darcy sounded disbelievingly.

“I know exactly where the old footage is,” Tony shot back, “but Google’s Cloud encryption security
“How close are you?” Coulson asked impatiently. “We need to know what we’re sending the civilians into,” he sighed, self-directed irritation seeping into his voice.

“It would take a team of hackers a week to do what I’m doing, you can give me an hour!” Tony sniped, typing away at Coulson’s desk.

Pepper entered the room just then, placing a fresh cup of coffee in front of him, and he glanced up gratefully for half a moment before returning to the screen. “Let’s give him some space,” she suggested, her tone making it clear it was not a suggestion. Screaming heavy-metal guitar music started blaring as soon as the door was closed behind them. “Phil, get some rest. I don’t want to see you before morning,” Pepper ordered, and the man didn’t even try to argue, yawnning behind his hand as he trudged off. “Did you sleep last night?” she asked Darcy pointedly.

“Yeah I’m fine, Jane makes a good pillow,” Darcy replied.

“Good. Make sure people eat, please. I’ll be picking up Mr. Lang at JFK early tomorrow, and we all need to rest and recuperate in the meantime,” she instructed briskly, pulling her hair up into a high ponytail and opening the email inbox on her cellphone. “I’ll check back in with Tony, everyone else is to leave him alone until I say. And tell Steve and Bucky that if they don’t get some sleep before their recon mission, I will personally make sure they regret it,” she finished, already typing rapidly as she walked away.

Darcy blinked, then realized Pepper was completely serious. She quickly hastened away, unsure of when exactly she became an executive assistant, but definitely not wanting to disappoint. Darcy lived with a team of superheroes and was mated to former assassins, and still somehow the most intimidating person in her life was Pepper Potts.

She found the biggest communal kitchen a few minutes later, and Sam was already inside, a long line of half-assembled sandwiches and half-empty bags of chips spread across the counter. “Pepper told me to help, and I think I’ll get grounded if I don’t,” Darcy informed him, picking up a jar of mayo and a butter knife.

Sam smiled. “How that woman can manage all of Stark Industries, all the press for the team, all the press for Tony, Tony himself, and still have time to be our den mother in a crisis…”

“I know,” Darcy agreed, laughing a little. “Normally it’s you and Bucky that forces everyone to eat and whatever, but it’s somehow way scarier coming from her.”

Sam laughed too, saying, “If there was ever a person I didn’t want to meet in a dark alley – “

“Oh my god, I can’t even,” Darcy snickered. “I’m pretty sure we’d all be dead if it wasn’t for her.”

“God bless Pepper Potts,” Sam exhorted, finishing up the last of the sandwiches and going to the sink.

“So, is it time for the embarrassing story of how you know some mysterious shrinking man that can help us rescue Ryan?” Darcy teased, raising an eyebrow and grinning.

“Hey now, I never said it was embarrassing,” Sam defended a little too quickly. “I just said it was long.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s embarrassing,” Darcy countered. “Otherwise you would’ve said more than just ‘He’s a Beta, he goes by Ant-Man, he’s got some kind of shrinking tech, he’s a good fighter, and I
can get him to help.’ I can’t believe you convinced Steve and Bucky with that, much less Clint, Nat or Coulson.”

Sam sighed. “Coulson already knows,” he admitted. “Look, I – the guy stole something from one of the other SHIELD locations while I was there on mission a while back. He, uh…”

“Kicked your ass?” Darcy supplied.

“No, he did not kick my ass,” Sam retorted, gesturing pointedly with the knife he was washing, “he just managed to break my goggles, and then I couldn’t find him because he was too small! But he promised to return the tech he stole, and then he did, so I tracked him down in California to figure out what the hell was going on. Apparently, there was this evil guy that was trying to sell a war suit version of the shrinking tech to some remaining HYDRA agents, and Lang managed to stop the deal. With… weird quantum physics.”

Darcy snorted out a laugh. “Dammit, Jane is gonna go crazy,” she remarked. “But how the hell did the guy invent a shrinking suit?”

“He says he didn’t, but I don’t even know,” Sam dismissed. “He told me this crazy-ass story about getting out of prison after some Robin Hood-style heist, then stealing the suit from an old guy’s house cause he needed the cash, returning the suit when he found out what it did, going to jail again for breaking and entering, being broken out of jail by said old guy who actually invented the suit, then training with the old guy and his daughter to break into the other place and steal the other shrinking suit.”

Darcy gave him a look, pausing in drying the cutting board. Sam held up soapy hands, saying, “I know, I know, but SHIELD’s kept an eye on him since, and he hasn’t done anything much since, so I figured he’s probably alright.” He shrugged. “I mean, we’re working with Daredevil against a guy who controls minds, for god’s sakes, what’s adding on Ant-Man?”

“I guess,” Darcy shrugged too. “But he doesn’t actually work with ants, right?”

“No, no, it’s gotta just be a nickname,” Sam denied, turning off the water and drying his hands. “Come on, let’s feed the troops.”

A few minutes later, Darcy found Steve and Bucky, sitting alone again where they’d spent the previous night. “Pepper told me that if you two don’t get some sleep before you go, she’ll personally make sure they’ll regret it,’” she informed them, setting down her last two plates. “And I’m 95% sure she was serious.”

Steve and Bucky met each other’s eyes for a moment. They both knew far better than to cross Pepper Potts. “Yes, ma’am,” Steve grumbled, and Darcy grinned as she walked away. A minute or two later, they left their empty plates and found a spare bedroom. Pushing two of the tiny beds together, they both finally managed to drift off, feet dangling off the ends and hands tightly joined in the middle.

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Exactly four hours later, Bucky awoke, completely alert and awake. 12:05 AM on the 11th. Four days since everything had gone to hell. The 7th would live in infamy twice now, for him. “Let’s go,
Stevie,” he whispered, and Steve sat up, running his hand through his hair and then brushing back Bucky’s as well.

“You look like hell,” he mumbled, a half-smile quirking on his face as he stood.

“Better than your ugly mug,” Bucky automatically replied, stretching lightly. “C’mon, Stark will have hacked the security footage by now.”

“This is taking too long,” Steve muttered as they made their way back down the hallway. “It’s almost four hours to the shore by car, and Lang won’t be here for another six. She’s already been gone too long.”

“Nothing else we can do,” Bucky grumbled, sounding just as unhappy as Steve. “We’ve found her, and now we’re going to get her. But if we fuck this up, we’re all goners. No telling what that maniac could do next.”

“I know,” Steve replied. “Doesn’t mean I like it.” They opened the door to Coulson’s office to see Tony, Natasha, Clint, and Sam gathered inside. There was a heaviness in the air, and Steve scented a muted, discomforting guilt that made his stomach drop. “We have the footage?” he asked the room at large.

Clint and Natasha glanced at each other, and Tony and Coulson avoided everyone’s eyes. Sam stood up a little straighter, then crossed his arms. “There’s nothing more there that’ll help you guys with the recon,” he said quietly. “I promise you both, from what we’ve seen, Ryan is okay. But we’ve all agreed – “ he gestured to everyone in the room, all of whom still avoided Steve and Bucky’s eyes, “– that you shouldn’t watch it until you get back.”

“That footage was the entire point of waiting,” Steve growled furiously. “We’re not going on a mission uninfor – “

“You’re too close to this,” Natasha cut him off bluntly. “You’re both emotionally compromised, you shouldn’t be involved at all. But we’re letting you in because we can’t stop you, short of locking you up again, I assume,” she added, meeting Bucky’s icy glare. “Trust us, please. What’s there will not help you.”

“You both have a history of… occasional recklessness, on covert operations,” Coulson chimed in. “What we need now from you both is your cooperation. Go to the mansion, observe the security measures and personnel patterns, and report back. We’ll flesh out the details from here, and the mission will be underway within the next twelve hours.”

“There’s a remote airstrip about ten miles south of the location,” Tony spoke up for the first time. “I’ve hacked the schedules and set up a loop and a trojan in the security. Clint will fly you there, you’ll be able to finish and return by the time Pepper gets back with Lang. We’ll keep an eye on things from here,” he ended, sounding more solemn than Steve had ever heard him.

“Take whatever you need from the lockup, Clint knows where it is. And he also brought this back, I believe you’ll want it as well,” Coulson finished, and he reached behind him to hand Steve his shield, left behind so long ago in the underground rooms of the Tower.

Steve fitted the shield to his arm, a small sense of rightness restored. He then looked to Bucky, silently asking his approval. His mate’s scent burned like ashes again, but he nodded almost imperceptibly. Steve returned it, then turned back to Coulson. “Expect debrief no later than 0700,” he stated, then turned and filed out, Bucky right behind him. Steve heard Clint a few steps behind.
"Tabharfaidh mé áthas orm críochnú a shaol," Bucky muttered low.

"Tabharfaidh mé áthas orm breathnú a dhéanann tú é," Steve replied in kind. It was true. For his entire life, Steve had only ever wanted to do the right thing. It hadn’t taken long for the world to teach him that didn’t always mean everything he would do to get there would be right as well, no matter how hard he tried to walk the straight and narrow. Ridding the world of Kilgrave seemed to fit the bill. And if it satisfied his baser instincts, roaring and screaming to protect his own, then all the better.

“Guys,” Clint called out quietly from behind them, interrupting his thoughts. He and Bucky stopped and turned simultaneously. “I’ve lied enough to both of you,” he emitted wearily, arms folded tightly across his chest. “If you want to know what’s on that footage now, I’ll tell you.”

Steve met Bucky’s eyes once more, considering. Silently, they reached a decision together.

“Ryan’s safety comes first,” Bucky said. He looked at Clint with an impassive gaze. “And I’m going to kill him anyway. It doesn’t matter.”

Clint nodded ever-so-slightly. “I was going to if you didn’t,” he affirmed. “Let’s go, then,” he said, striding purposefully past them.

“Clint,” Steve called after him this time. The man turned back to meet a cold, steely gaze. “If you or the others ever break our trust like this again, we will end both the Avengers and SHIELD. For good. And we will never look back.”

“If anyone breaks your trust again, it will not be me,” Clint vowed, a solemnity in his voice uncharacteristic of the usually-jocular man. “Trust me, I’ve learned my lesson.”

Steve recognized the scent of the guilt in Coulson’s office, and he nodded in response. Stepping forward, he held out his right hand, and Clint shook it briefly. Bucky stepped up next, and he and Clint stared each other down for a few moments. Then Bucky held out his flesh arm as well, and they shook hands too. There was more to be said, but now wasn’t the time. They had a mission to accomplish.

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“Mr. Lang, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Pepper Potts,” the Omega woman greeted him, shaking his hand firmly. Scott was struck immediately with the sense that he was underdressed, her crisp and clean business suit and perfect ponytail contrasting horribly with his three-day-old jeans and sleep-messy hair. *Shit, why didn’t I brush my teeth on the plane…*

“Good to meet you, too,” he returned, trying not to breathe in her direction as they made their way back through the terminal.

“My apologies for the short notice, but we’re all very grateful you were able to make it here so quickly,” Pepper continued.

“Yeah, well, when the Avengers call, you… pick up the phone,” Scott replied, grimacing internally as the words left his mouth. He cleared his throat, readjusting his backpack and trying not to look like he had been freaking out with Luis for four hours straight before boarding the plane.
“Do you have luggage to pick up?” Pepper asked him as they neared the baggage claim.

“No, the, uh, shrinking thing makes packing pretty efficient,” Scott answered. “The hardest part was– oh, crap, hang on,” he said, suddenly speed-walking outside, Pepper’s heels clacking quickly behind him. He dashed off to a bench, breath fogging in the cold air, putting down the backpack and unzipping the front pouch to bring out a small cardboard box.

“Mr. Lang?” Pepper asked pointedly, catching up to him as he opened the box and dug through miniature packing peanuts.

“Sorry, sorry, just have to check on–” Scott cut himself off, very carefully drawing out something almost too small to be noticed. Thankfully, it hadn’t been noticed by TSA as the bag went through the x-ray machine. Rapidly glancing around, he made sure they were alone before reaching into his pocket and drawing out a small silver disc with a blue center, pressing it into the middle of his palm atop the tiny object. Instantly, the glass case shot up to its normal size, and Scott pressed in his earpiece as Pepper looked on in amazement. “Hey, guys, you all good?” Scott breathed, holding a hand to his ear.

“You… actually work with ants,” Pepper stated, staring down at the honest-to-goodness ant farm now sitting atop the bench. There were several groups of ants, all different sizes and colors, appearing to stare attentively up at Scott as he smiled down at them.

Yeah, I didn’t tell Wilson that way back when,” Scott laughed, “pretty sure he already thought I was nuts.” He opened the top, and Pepper startled back as he stuck his hand inside. “No, it’s okay, I’m just grabbing Ant-tonio,” he said, drawing back his hand to show a medium-sized black ant with tiny fluttering wings sitting atop his palm. He brought his arm up to his shoulder, and the ant settled there and sat perfectly still. “He’s out with me too much, he hates being in the ant farm,” Scott explained, turning back to Pepper again after he closed the top. The expression on her face was purposefully blank. Scott swallowed nervously. “I’m not making a good impression, am I,” he quipped, clapping his hands together.

“If you’ll follow me, Mr. Lang, the car is waiting,” Pepper replied, the essence of professionalism. “There’s a lot to catch you up on.”

“Right,” Scott sighed, quickly stuffing the ant farm back into his backpack and hurrying after Pepper.

Chapter End Notes

Bucky: I will take great pleasure in ending his life.

Steve: I will take great pleasure in watching you do it.

“Copy, Rogers. One and a half klicks northwest. No breaks in the perimeter so far, over,” Bucky reported, ghosting swiftly and silently through the dark shadows of the trees.

“Copy. I’m seeing men on each side of every floor, likely counterparts in the back. Six circling the outside periodically. Positions changed at the top of the hour, security system with fingerprints and voice recognition to get inside. All packing semiautomatics, clear.”

“Copy. I’ll scope out the details when I get back around. Out.” Bucky held a Glock in his right hand and a switchblade in his left as he continued tracking. It was perhaps the only time in his life he would ever feel some tiny modicum of gratitude for his time as the Asset, he reflected, perverse though it felt to admit. It was likely no one else would have seen on the approach the small mound of earth and leaves, left behind by some hurried worker, for what it truly was: a receiver unit for an electric fence, more sophisticated than any in the common market. HYDRA had developed the technology as security for their higher-priority bases, and he had been forced to troubleshoot for weaknesses. He still had scars from the electrical burns.

The scientists and technicians had eventually perfected the system, however, to the point where even he couldn’t break in without outside help. In theory, it was similar to an electric yard fence for a dog, except the transceiver tuned to a precise frequency was needed to make it past the line without tripping the system and loosing five kilovolts on the victim.

Minutes later, he’d completed mapping the location of the fence and had circled back to Steve, staking out the house with a pair of night vision binoculars. There was a driveway that disappeared into the woods to the south, the mansion surrounded by dense forest on three sides, but the front yard rolled down to a small beach and then the open ocean. The fence continued in a circle through the front of the yard and encased a good portion of the woods on every side as well.

“Still no sign of Kilgrave or Ryan,” Steve conveyed when Bucky huddled beside him. “No movement beyond guards repositioning.”

“Dammit, we need those transceivers,” Bucky muttered, switching open the comm system back to the SHIELD plane. “Come in, Barton, over.”

“Received, Barnes. What’s happening? Over.”

“Has anyone entered or exited the property in the past 48 hours? Over.”

“Copy. Satellite and internal security footage showed no ingress or egress beyond the initial arrival. It’s likely they’re prepared to remain isolated for some time, over.”

“Copy, out.” Bucky switched the comms off before sighing, “Fuck.”

“Could Tony rig something up?” Steve asked, eyes still glued to the mansion.
“There’s no way to know the frequency they’re using, the system’s completely internal. There’s not even a panel or program to hack inside the house, the units are self-powered and have to be adjusted individually,” Bucky answered. “We’d have to get to one without tripping it, which is impossible.”

“What about an EMP? It’d take away the element of surprise, but at least we’d get through.”

“No dice. System’s already made to withstand electricity. Takes a crazy explosive strength to damage them, too. Besides, Ryan’s best chance is getting in undetected. There’s way too many guards for just Murdock and Lang if they’re all going after ‘em at once, and Kilgrave will have an escape plan.”

“Yeah, I know,” Steve sighed. “Alright, how exactly does the fence work?”

“Individual transmitter units are placed surrounding the area, and when you switch it on, they make a kind of force field that extends several dozen feet both up in the air and underground, connecting to the two units closest. It encases the transmitters within the electric field to keep them from being tampered with, and short of trying to fly in at two hundred feet over the invisible border and hoping you somehow don’t get noticed, it’s impossible to cross without the transceiver,” Bucky explained. “Even if you managed to get one unit turned off without sounding the alarm, the system readjusts itself so a new line stays intact between the next nearest transmitters anyway. You have to shut all of them down except one to eliminate the fields completely. Anything living larger than a small insect gets fried when it tries to cross.”

Steve shook his head. “It’s effective,” he admitted. “Could Lang cross when he’s small, then?”

“Maybe. Don’t think he’d be too keen to experiment, though,” Bucky replied. “And unless Murdock can leap tall buildings, he’s got no chance.”

“And after that, they still have to disable the security on the house without being detected, make it past the guards without being seen, and take down Kilgrave. And the mind control probably won’t wear off just cause Kilgrave’s unconscious,” Steve listed. “They might have to get both that bastard and Ryan past the guards on the way out, and there’s no telling if Ryan’s in any shape to…”

“They need the transceivers,” Bucky dictated, stopping Steve’s trailing thoughts. “But in theory, if they can get in quiet and get Kilgrave out, the rest of us can come after to help with the guards if they’re still whammied.”

“Alright,” Steve nodded. “But we need to shut down the fence if the rest of us are going to get inside, they can’t get us all transceivers after getting Kilgrave. There’s too many guards for Murdock to go unnoticed that long, no matter how quick he is. How do we shut down the fence?”

Bucky shook his head. “Above my pay grade, that’s on Stark and Agent Fitz. Lang will have to do it somehow, no way Murdock will be able to. He’s probably better at fighting than ‘Ant-Man’, anyway,” Bucky noted with a grudging amount of respect. He’d underestimated the blind man’s ability to take a hit and then keep punching back. “None of this means jack if no one goes outside the perimeter anytime soon, though.”

“Even HYDRA had to take out the garbage sometime,” Steve noted. “I’ll stay behind. You go back with Clint, get everything squared away,” he ordered, settling back into his lookout post.

“Not a chance,” Bucky countered, turning him back by his shoulder. “I’m the one that knows what the transceivers look like. And don’t act like you’re not thinking of busting in solo soon as you get your hands on one,” he said pointedly.
Steve glared at him, but didn’t disagree. They’d always known each other too well. “You need to explain how the fence works,” he argued.

“You can tell the others what I told you,” Bucky supplied fiercely. “No, we’re not arguing about this, Steve,” he said coldly as his mate opened his mouth again. “We already lost Ryan, I’m not losing you to your damn martyr complex.”

“We haven’t lost her!” Steve hissed furiously, gripping Bucky’s right bicep in a sudden burst of anger that scented of matchbooks and kerosene.

Bucky’s face softened under the intense gaze of his mate. “Not like that,” he whispered, a small note of mournfulness in his scent as he put his metal hand on Steve’s shoulder. “We’re getting her back now. But we’re not losing anyone else in the process.”

Steve closed his eyes a moment, dropping his hand back to his side. “Sorry,” he mumbled wearily. “’S alright,” Bucky returned gently. “Now get outta here. Got a lot of waiting to do, and the sooner it starts, the sooner it’ll be done.”

Steve swallowed once, then straightened up and reattached his shield on his back. “Don’t win the war ‘til I get there,” he recited as he backed away. “And don’t do anything stupid ’til I get back.”

Bucky closed his eyes, bittersweet nostalgia washing over him. He couldn’t stand to be separated ever again, but it wouldn’t be for long this time. “How can I? You’re taking all the stupid with you,” he answered.

Steve couldn’t help it. He surged forward and crushed Bucky to him for a few moments, his Beta returning the embrace. He pulled back and kissed him ever-so-gently, their lips still warm despite winter’s chill. “Wanted to do that in 1943, too,” Steve whispered. “Probably would’ve gotten arrested, though.”

“We kissed plenty indoors in 1943, and we’ve kissed plenty more everywhere in 2015,” Bucky replied. “And maybe in 2016…” he trailed off, turning away from Steve back to the mansion. He hadn’t meant to say anything else.

“What?” his Alpha asked, confused.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Scott laughed nervously. “I’m sorry, wh – mind control?”

“I know it’s difficult to believe, but we all experienced it firsthand,” Pepper assured him, flicking on the turn signal. They’d found a better red-eye flight for Scott and were earlier than expected, having made excellent time as they sped through the empty pre-dawn roads.

“No, no, I believe you! I’ve seen some crazy myself, I just, um,” Scott fumbled, trying to gather his
suddenly scattered thoughts. “I don’t know what I was expecting, but that wasn’t it,” he managed.

“Yes, well, none of us anticipated Kilgrave,” Pepper vocalized, a hint of darkness in her tone.

“Okay, so the Avengers met a human girl with quote-unquote ‘abilities’ – which I didn’t even know was possible, I’d like to just mention now – and I’m not allowed to know the details about her. And there was a big mix-up, and now she’s been kidnapped by a super evil guy - who can control minds because of super evil mad science - for reasons unknown,” Scott recapped as they passed through an opening in a gigantic electric fence. “Great. So, uh, why am I here, specifically?”

“I’ll leave that for Dr. Banner to explain,” Pepper said as she pulled up in front of the military-looking building.

Scott exited the car, clutching his backpack in front of him as he looked around. This place didn’t look anything like where he’d broken into – Oh my god, I broke into SHIELD and fought Falcon, that seemed way less stupid back then – and he didn’t like the imposing grey stone blending in to the dark forest beyond. He quickly followed Pepper inside and down a continuous series of hallways before reaching a large central area, presumably in the center of the compound. “Is – Is that blood?!” he suddenly stammered, spying with wide eyes dark red stains in the middle of the floor.

“Not any of ours,” Pepper answered nonchalantly, as though she saw the kind of violence that ended with copious bloodshed every day. “The others are gathered in Director Coulson’s office, first left then second right down that hallway,” she indicated as her phone started buzzing frantically. “I’m so sorry, I would take you there myself, but this is urgent.”

“No, no problem, I’ll just…” Scott pointed down the hallway as Pepper started conversing rapidly in what sounded like Mandarin, the tapping of her heels fading down the opposite direction.

The dim corridors remained noiseless and vacant as he wandered down, a creeping unease descending on his already-frayed nerves. The classified nature of the girl, the story of mind control, the pooling blood, the chilling silence, the empty halls… “Something’s rotten in the state of New York, Ant-tonio,” Scott muttered just to hear a sound. The ant, still lightly perched on his shoulder, thankfully didn’t respond.

Suddenly, a powerful roaring rushed overhead, and Scott jumped a foot in the air, throwing his hands up instinctively and clipping the side of his head. He stumbled back against the wall, adrenaline surging until his brain finally caught up with his senses. It was just the sound of an airplane, albeit much closer and louder than he would’ve expected. “Holy shit,” he laughed at himself, heart still pounding away. “False alarm, buddy,” he said, but when he looked to his shoulder, Ant-tonio was gone.

“Oh no,” Scott breathed, and he kept his feet firmly in place as he looked down and saw his earpiece a few feet away. He hadn’t even realized he’d knocked it off in his panic. As he bent down, feet firmly in place, he suddenly felt a creepy-crawly sensation up and down his legs, and he startled again, dancing awkwardly away from the earpiece as the feeling suddenly increased tenfold. Hundreds of ants were leaking rapidly out of his backpack, dropping to the floor and skittering down his body as they scattered, leaderless and confused.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he repeated as a mantra, a large swarm now between him and the earpiece with even more uncomfortable pitter-patter down his legs. He ignored the disconcerting feeling and took an extremely careful step forward, the larger ants parting way for him but the smaller ones either not noticing or not caring. “Get out of the way, you little – “ Scott ordered through gritted teeth, balancing on his toes.
Footsteps suddenly came down the hallway behind him, and Scott whipped his head around to see Hawkeye himself, staring disbelievingly. “Hi, I’m Scott,” he greeted, rooted in place as he internally cursed his entire existence.

The other man shook his head wordlessly. “I don’t even have a witty remark for this,” Hawkeye stated, his voice half incredulous and half deadly serious. “We recruited a guy who packed a bag full of ants. We’re all gonna die.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” Scott said quickly, putting his hands in the air, then closed his eyes and grimaced. *What the fuck, he’s not arresting you, dumbass!* “No, I just- just give me a second,” he implored, taking another cautious step forward.

Heavier footfalls sounded just then, and Scott gave it up for lost and made a mad dash for the earpiece, dodging insects as best he could, finally scooping up the device and shoving it in place. Instantly, the entire swarm of ants stopped in place, then turned around to look at Scott. “Jesus, guys, can’t take you anywhere,” he chastised, the rest of the ants that had been crawling down his body making their way to the ground. Scott finally took off the backpack, seeing that the lid of the ant farm had come off, probably when he’d half-fallen into the wall.

“Back inside!” Scott ordered pointedly, placing the glass case on the ground, and seconds later, all the ants had disappeared into the sandy labyrinths. “No, not you, Ant-tonio, I’m holding you personally responsible. Mutiny,” he grumbled, and the little creature alighted on his shoulder again. Scott fastened the lid more tightly this time, then finally turned fully back around.

Hawkeye’s eyes had widened slightly, but that was nothing compared to the look of stunned surprise on none other than – “Oh my god,” Scott breathed. “It’s – you’re Captain America!” He automatically held out his hand, and the other man automatically took it, both of them staring wide-eyed at each other. “Whoa, you’re strong!” Scott proclaimed, feeling his grip.

“Nice to meet you,” Captain America recited, sounding entirely taken aback as he glanced at the insect perched like a pet bird beside Scott’s face.

Scott almost giggled, turning to Hawkeye. “Oh my god, this is awesome. He’s Captain America!”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Hawkeye replied acerbically. He shook his head again, then pushed past the two of them. “Come on, Coulson and the others are waiting.”

“Right, yeah,” Scott nodded, a goofy grin still plastered on his face. He dashed back around to grab the ant farm, shoving it into the backpack and hurrying after Hawkeye. He heard Captain America follow after a moment later and suppressed another giggle. *A girl was kidnapped, this is serious, jackass!* he berated. He still couldn’t stop smiling, though.

Moments later, though, it disappeared as he found himself in a large office packed full with every member of the Avengers and a few people he didn’t recognize, the myriad of scents and famous faces all directed towards him. Scott swallowed more nervous laughter.

“Mr. Lang, I’m Phil Coulson, Director of SHIELD,” a calm and collected-looking Beta introduced himself, and Scott shook his hand as well. “Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“Yeah, yeah, no problem,” Scott managed, heart pounding in his chest. “Call me Scott. And, uh, sorry about the, er, thief thing a while back,” he tacked on.

“Bygones,” Coulson replied coolly. “You’ve already met Captain Rogers and Agent Barton, and you know Sam Wilson.”
“Hey, again,” Scott responded, waving awkwardly at Sam across the room. Sam returned it, eyebrows raised as he suppressed a laugh.

“This is Agent Romanoff, Darcy Lewis, Dr. Jane Foster, Thor Odinson, Dr. Bruce Banner, Tony Stark, Agents Fitz and Simmons, Foggy Nelson, Karen Page, and Matt Murdock,” Coulson said efficiently, gesturing in turn. Scott nodded back at each of them. “Sergeant Barnes is also involved in the operation, currently on recon.”

“Right, um, Pepper filled me on everything. Uh, except for, well,” Scott stammered, suddenly realizing he was still clutching his backpack like a lifeline. He quickly put it down on the floor, wiping his sweaty hands on his jeans. “What I’m doing here,” he finished, fixing his gaze on Coulson.

“I can explain that,” Bruce inserted gently, stepping forward. “The mind control capabilities exhibited by Kilgrave are an extreme form of Alpha voice, and have proven almost impossible to resist, except in Matt’s case,” he explained, gesturing towards the man wearing dark spectacles and standing impassively in the far corner. “There have been several promising studies recently looking into the mechanism of Alpha voice and the response it evokes on the cellular level, and from these and my own private research, we’re currently synthesizing a drug to counter the effect.”

Scott blinked. “Okay, great,” he shrugged. “Mind control problem solved. Who’s, uh, who’s taking it?”

“That’s where we need your help,” Bruce continued. “The drug as currently designed is unstable at concentrations high enough to be effective in fully grown adults. However, with your suit’s capabilities, the drug will work on you when you’re, um, small.”

“From the information gathered by Captain Rogers, we’ve been able to devise the following plan,” Coulson took over, bringing up a satellite image of a huge mansion on the wall screen across the way. “You and Mr. Murdock will quietly infiltrate the location. You will be responsible for shutting down the security systems, while Murdock goes after Kilgrave. The other Avengers will enter and help with the guards while Captain Rogers retrieves the hostage and -”

“Excuse me, Director Coulson?” Scott interrupted, uneasiness rolling off him in waves.

“You don’t have to raise your hand, Scott,” Coulson replied, eyeing him with amusement. Scott lowered his hand again. “Okay. I just have one question.” Coulson raised his eyebrows.

“Where is this, what are the security systems, where are they in the house, who’s the girl we’re rescuing, why wouldn’t Pepper tell me anything about her, is this drug gonna kill me, why is the blind guy fighting the supervillain, who is the blind guy, why was there blood on the floor outside, how is mind control even possible, what the hell is actually going on here and can I go back to California, now, please!? I said in a rush, trying his best not to freak out any further.

“Why does your backpack have five different kinds of ant species in it, Mr. Lang?” Matt countered simply, facing the wall across the room. Foggy facepalmed beside him, Darcy giggled, and Scott stared in shock.

“How the hell did you – “ Scott started in disbelief, but he was cut off by Sam.

“Alright, obviously some more debrief on both sides is needed,” he inserted. “Look, Scott, the girl’s name is Ryan, and we’re trying to protect her anonymity. We’ve already screwed up her life enough, we’re not spreading around more details, even to you. It’s the Avengers’ fault she was
taken by that psychopath, and we need outside help on the rescue op, which is why you and Matt are here. Matt’s able to throw off the mind control, and he’s got other abilities, too – “. Here Sam looked to Matt to jump in, but the man remained silent.

“And he’s more than capable of taking down Kilgrave,” Sam continued anyway. “Bruce’s drug has risks, but if anything goes awry, you can grow up big again and then your body should get rid of it, no problem. If that happens, we’ll figure out a new plan from there. And Steve is just about to tell all of us about the security systems.” He paused. “We good?”

“…yeah,” Scott nodded, still rather on edge.

Steve stepped forward then. “The security system is twofold: voice recognition and fingerprint scans along with surveillance on the outside of the house, and a highly sophisticated electric fence, originally developed by HYDRA, along this perimeter,” he reported, gesturing in a circle around the mansion on the screen. “We’ll need transceiver devices to pass through the fence without getting shocked; it’s completely invisible, but extends up to two hundred feet in the air and several dozen feet underground. It’s created and powered by individual units that connect to each other, each held inside the electric field. When one is disabled, the fence line readjusts to the next unit over to keep the perimeter intact. Anything living larger than an insect is shocked and alerts the system. It’s likely programmed to not register anything smaller than human-sized to set off the alarm, but they would still be electrocuted.”


“Not now, Tony,” Bruce interrupted, lightly touching his arm.

“The plan is to get Matt inside as quickly and quietly as possible,” Steve continued. “But he needs Scott to go in small and take out the cameras first. Bucky is staking out the mansion, waiting for someone to cross the line so he can steal a transceiver device. Once we have it, Scott will take the drug as protection from Kilgrave, shrink down, get inside with the transceiver, locate the internal security system and shut it down, then get another transceiver to Matt. There’s a problem, however,“ he admitted. “The guards will most likely still be under Kilgrave’s control even after he’s knocked out. Unless we figure out a way to get that fence down, it’ll be Matt and Scott against a small army to get Ryan out; there’s multiple guards on every floor and more outside. Bucky doesn’t know how to bring down the fence. Tony, we’re hoping you can- “

“Hang on a sec,” Scott interrupted again, eyebrows furrowed. “The individual units, are they about the size of, like, a fist? Nickel-molybdenum alloy, basically indestructible?”

“I haven’t actually seen them, but that fits the description,” Steve replied. “Why?”

“Here, excuse me, sorry – “ Scott pushed his way behind the desk, leaning over the computer and inserting a thumb drive he produced from his pocket. He double-clicked the file labeled “LEAVE MY SHIT ALONE LUIS!!” and a moment later, an extremely layered and complex schematic popped up on the screen. “It’s this, right?”

“Yes, yes, this would do it - good lord, it’s beautiful,” Fitz breathed, staring transfixed.

Tony had a similar reaction, exclaiming “Oh my god, the circuit design – where the hell did you get this?!”

“Uh, Kurt pleads the Fifth,” Scott answered quickly. “You’re not going to arrest my friends, right?” he directed at Coulson. “I swear, our days of breaking in places and stealing shit are over. Mostly.”
“If SHIELD refused to work with anyone who had committed a crime, the only person here would be Agent Simmons,” Coulson said drily.

“Technically, I did shoot a superior officer in the chest once,” Simmons replied with a smirk. All eyes in the room turned to her for a moment.

“So, anyway,” Scott said, his voice a little high-pitched. “I already know how to get past it. And, thankfully, I brought everything I need, I think.”

“No offense, bug guy, but how did you figure this out? This is the best I’ve ever seen!” Tony insisted, snapping pictures with his phone.

Scott shrugged. “I’m a former thief, I have a Master’s in electrical engineering, and Baskin Robbins wouldn’t hire me back. I had some free time.”

“The electric field encapsulates the devices, and we’re not sure if you can get small enough to get through,” Steve cautioned. “It’s a big risk, the fence is lethal to regular people.”

“Yeah, no, I’d die if I did that. But I won’t be going through,” Scott replied. “That’s what Ant-tonio is here for,” he said, gesturing to his shoulder. Ant-tonio flapped his wings as everyone stared. “And once I’m on the other side, Paratrechma longicormis-es take care of the fence.”

“Crazy ants!” Jemma exclaimed, mouth open in shock. “Their conductive capabilities, that’s brilliant –“

“– but you’d need electrical coils, extremely precise movements, how do you even control – “ Fitz interrupted.

Scott turned his head and brushed aside his hair, showing them the earpiece inserted in his ear, and Jemma clapped her hands to her mouth in excitement.

“Are you able to shut down one section at a time without causing the system to readjust the line?” Coulson interjected before the scientists got too off track.

“No, there’s no getting around that, the whole thing has to be blown at once,” Scott answered. “And it won’t be quiet, there’ll be some sparking and stuff.”

“We have two options, then,” Natasha spoke up for the first time. “Wait until we can get a transceiver and avoid blowing the fence, or go in sooner but have Matt face more opposition. It’s your ass, Murdock. Your choice,” she proffered.

“The guards won’t be a problem if we can knock out the power to the house,” Matt stated. “I have the advantage in the dark.”

“Sunrise is near seven, it’s… about 4 AM now. We have a small window of time,” Clint offered.

Coulson nodded. “That’s the plan, then. Scott, your orders are to get in, take care of the guards watching the cameras, and cut power to the security first without setting off any alarms. We can’t have anyone getting to Ryan and smuggling her out. You’ll then… use ants, to take out the fence,” he continued, looking like he couldn’t believe the words coming out of his mouth. “That will alert the mansion to our presence, so cut the main power as soon as you can after to slow them down. Matt will enter next and take out Kilgrave. Matt, we’ll be watching the live security footage until it’s down, but we won’t be able to give you precise updates on where Kilgrave or the guards are afterwards, so be careful.”
“I won’t need updates. I’ll be able to hear their movements from outside,” Matt maintained.

“Good. The mind control almost certainly remains intact when Kilgrave is unconscious, or else it would wear off whenever he went to sleep. So Scott, after you take out the fence, you get to Ryan as quickly as you can and make sure she’s not taken anywhere. She’s in the basement area, Rogers will show you the map of the house he drew. Kilgrave will have her either in shock cuffs still or possibly a specialized containment room. Don’t try to get her out, just keep her safe until Rogers and Barnes get there. She doesn’t know you and they’re familiar faces; she’ll cooperate with them, and they can get her out of any specialized restraints.

“Wilson and Romanoff will enter the house at Matt’s signal to help take out the rest of the guards. Try to stop any civilians that might have standing orders to harm themselves as best you can. Barton, you’re long-range, take out the guards outside the house. No, Thor, you’re not going, you’re injured and a high risk target should anything go wrong,” Coulson retorted sternly as Thor opened his mouth to speak. “Stark is staying back as well to monitor the security feed and update us before we begin. Banner and Simmons, we’ll need you on medical standby off-site but close, we can’t bring in regular civilians unless absolutely necessary. Remember, it’ll be pitch-black for Matt’s sake, so night-vision goggles for those that need them. Everybody keep your comms open and listen for any changes in the plan. Clear?” he finished.

"Just - why am I not just going in and taking out Kilgrave myself? If I'm small, he won't even see me coming," Scott piped up.

Bruce and Jemma looked at each other uncomfortably for a moment. "The drug is entirely untested outside of computer simulations," Bruce answered resignedly. "It's more a precaution; we don't actually know how well it'll work, or if it'll work at all. Matt's the only one who can definitely go up against him. I won't lie to you, what we're doing is wildly reckless by medical standards. You need to stay away from Kilgrave if you can; we don't want any more added danger." He paused before softly adding, "You're allowed to say no, Scott. No one will fault you. We know we're asking a lot."

Scott didn't say anything for a minute or so, his eyes fixed on the schematic on the wall. Then he straightened up. "It's fine. I'll do it," he accepted quietly.

Coulson nodded briskly. “Thank you, Scott. Everyone, remember this is a high-risk operation for us all, not just Matt and Scott; we've never dealt with a threat like this before. We will be in constant communication through the comm systems, so keep your ears open. Any unauthorized deviations from the plan puts us all in danger," he directed to the room at large. "Getting Ryan to safety is our main objective, but getting Kilgrave in custody is a close second. Any other questions?"

No one raised any objections this time. "Bruce, when will the drug be ready?" Coulson inquired.

“Little under an hour,” Bruce replied. “Tony, is the inhaler – “

“3-D printer’s already on it, another half-hour and we’re good to go,” Tony nodded.

“Excellent. Scott, Tony and Fitz had to specially design an inhaler for you because of the drug’s chemical restrictions, but it will work just like a normal one,” Bruce informed him. “You’ll press the button, inhale deeply, hold your breath for five seconds, then immediately shrink down. Wait a few minutes for it to take effect. Remember, though, you can’t come back to normal size until after Kilgrave is knocked out, or the drug will be metabolized almost instantly and you won’t be safe anymore. All it takes is one word from him for the mind control to take effect.”

Scott gulped. “Right. No problem,” he shrugged, hoping he was coming off convincingly nonchalant. “Just no one step on me,” he joked. No one laughed.
“Suit up,” Coulson ordered. “The plane leaves at 0500.”

*** *** ***

“So I’ve been out here freezing my rear off for nothing, is what you’re telling me,” Bucky’s voice sounded quietly through the phone. Steve heard the eagerness behind his words and smiled.

“I’ll be back in just over an hour,” he assured him, walking slowly along the inside of the fence border. His breath just visible with his enhanced night vision. “And an hour after that, Ryan will be safe.”

The line was quiet for a moment. “You need to get her alone,” Bucky muttered low. “There’s a thousand windows on this building. Soon as Murdock passes one with Kilgrave… only way it could pass as an accident.”

“Stray bullet from one of the semis in the fight, lucky timing. It was dark. You were with me the whole time,” Steve replied. “No one will buy it, but no one will look too close.”

Another short pause. “You sure you’re alright with this?” Bucky asked. “If you say no, I won’t.”

Steve considered again. “He brainwashed over a dozen people in the past two days. He killed two innocent men in front of us, tried to murder our entire team and more,” he listed. “HYDRA, not even Loki could do that. He wakes up at the wrong time, manages to get a gag off, he kills us all and walks off scot-free. The power containment cell didn’t even stop him. And there’s no simple explanation for cutting out his tongue.”

“None of that’s why I’m doing it, Steve,” Bucky said even more softly. “I need you to be okay with that, too.”

“I know,” Steve replied. There was a squirming sensation growing in his chest. He sighed. “I…”

“Alright,” Bucky whispered. “I won’t.”

“I’m just as mad,” Steve said quickly. “I’m fucking furious. I want him to rot in hell, I swear. But… that’s just it, we’re angry, and we’re… And now we’ve got a good plan. She’s going to be okay, and… she’s not ours.” Not yet. “We got no right to. It’s wrong.”

“I know,” Bucky echoed. “But I’d do it anyway. Big part of me still wants to.”

“Big part of me wants to let you,” Steve admitted. “But if it were just me, I don’t know if I could. And I’d never let it rest on you.”

“My hands are already bloody, Steve,” Bucky countered.

“If you’re looking at it like that, so are mine,” Steve shot back fiercely. “Buck, the things I’d do for you– “ For her? “It scares me sometimes. And sometimes I don’t even know if it’s because I’m your Alpha, or if I’d burn the world for you anyway.”

Bucky chuckled humorlessly. “I know, Stevie. Trust me, I know,” he sighed. They were silent for a minute, Steve processing it all. “Is it later, now?” Bucky asked.

Steve huffed a short laugh too. “Probably shouldn’t be. There’ll be time, after.”
“Alright,” Bucky said. “But, Steve…”

“What is it?”

“If Ryan… Nat was right. We’re – I’m too close to this. If anything goes wrong, you need to stop me.”

“You haven’t had a flashback in months. Pamela cleared you for active duty.” Steve reminded him, invoking the name of Bucky’s SHIELD-appointed therapist. “I’d been wondering why Coulson wasn’t calling us up for missions. It was because they suspected Ryan, not anything about you. You can handle this.”

“When we attacked Stark, I was halfway back,” Bucky revealed. “I would’ve ripped out his arc reactor if Clint hadn’t stopped us.”

“That was different,” Steve insisted. “We both reacted… instinctively. We know better now, it won’t happen again.”

“Stevie, please,” Bucky begged suddenly. “Just promise me.”

Steve closed his eyes. “Of course, Buck. Anything.”

“Thank you,” Bucky replied. “Now quit yapping and go get ready.”

“You do remember that I outrank you, right?” Steve teased.

“Shut up, punk.”

“Love you too, jerk.” Steve hung up the phone and quickly jogged back inside, blowing into his chilled hands. Around the corner, he all of a sudden scented earth and redwoods, then heard a slightly tinny recording of a woman passionately singing out, “Let it go! Let it go!” Scott’s normal voice quickly replaced it.

“Hey, peanut, it’s the middle of the night there, what’re you doing up?” he whispered gently into the phone, and Steve blinked in surprise. “I know, I know, I’m so sorry, but… you remember last summer? When I had to help Dr. Pym and Hope?” He paused. “Well, some other people need my help, it’s an emergency.” He sighed deeply then. “Was it the same one? …I know, but I came back, right? I always come back.” His voice was a little thicker now. “Hey, hey, don’t cry, peanut. I’m coming back this time too, I swear. …Go wake up Mommy if you need to, okay? But you get to sleep, it’s a school night. Wait, Cassie? I love you. I love you so much.” He sniffed once. “Okay. Goodnight, peanut.”

Steve found himself around the corner before he thought it through. Scott looked up, then immediately dropped his gaze, trying to wipe his eyes discreetly. “I didn’t know you had a mate and kids,” Steve said quietly. “I’m sorry we took you away like we did.”

“No, no, it’s alright,” Scott responded quickly. “I’m, uh, I’m unmated, actually,” he admitted. “My daughter, Cassie, she lives with my ex. I was just supposed to have her for a few days.”

“How old is she?” Steve asked.

“Seven,” Scott answered with a small smile. “Here, I’ve got a picture,” he said, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket and revealing a grinning brunette sporting a princess tiara and fairy wings, hugging the ugliest toy rabbit Steve had ever seen.
“God, she’s adorable,” he proclaimed, and Scott’s smile widened.

“Yeah, she really is,” Scott echoed. His smile faltered then. “Last summer, when I first… with the suit, she got caught in the crossfire. She’s had nightmares ever since.”

Steve didn’t know what to say, so he stayed silent. Scott crossed his arms, looking down the empty hall. “I wanted to give it up, give the suit back and forget about it all afterwards,” he confessed. “I couldn’t stand the thought… but then she said she was so proud of me, and I just…” he shrugged as he tapered off. “But I just keep hurting her.”

“You could save the whole world, but it doesn’t even matter unless she’s happy,” Steve mumbled.

Scott gave him a strange look. “Yeah, exactly,” he said. “Look, I don’t mean to pry, but this all seems kinda personal, for everyone, somehow. I know Sam said it was ‘the Avengers’ fault’, but… I’m not an idiot, no matter how much I looked like one earlier. I get this is stupidly dangerous. I just need to know it’s worth it.”

Steve was silent for a few beats. “Ryan was – is, our friend. That’s what I believed, anyway,” he responded slowly. “Not everyone agreed, and it cost her. It was never her fault. We’re trying to make it right, now.”

Scott considered him a moment longer, then nodded. “Far be it from me to give Captain America advice, but when you love someone, just tell them,” he added. Steve stared at him, stunned. “Sometime soon, Cassie won’t say it back every time, but I gotta tell her anyway.”

Steve blinked, momentarily struck dumb. Scott smiled again, looking rather weary, and started to walk away.

“Scott?” Steve called after him, and the man turned back around. “Call me Steve.”

“Sure thing, Cap,” Scott smirked, swinging on his backpack as he left.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Tears leaked endlessly out of Ryan’s eyes, the aching in her arms, head and side only intensifying over the hours. There were new points of pain, too, where what seemed like endless amounts of blood had been drawn out of her. She’d resisted the first time. Now her ears rang and her vision was slightly obscured by the puffiness of her right eye.

Some machine beeped, and the doctor rushed over. “Eureka!” he cried, the first noise he’d uttered since Kilgrave left. The chilling grin returned in full force. Ryan watched him pull out a cell phone and scroll on the screen. “It’s ready,” the man reported, holding the phone to his ear as he fixed his gaze on her. “Yes, the implants too,” he continued. “Yes, sir.” He hung up the phone and opened another cabinet, pulling out a wicked-looking instrument reminiscent of a gun.

“Hold still now, or it’ll be much more painful,” he threatened as he inserted small capsules inside the long barrel. He quickly strode over and grabbed Ryan’s left arm, and she screamed and sobbed through the gag as a tearing pain ripped through one forearm, then the other. The man released her, and she felt yet more trails of blood now dripping down her arms. An exhausted voice in the back of her mind wondered how she even had any left to lose.
The doctor then attached some wires to her head, stretching out to some other machine she didn’t recognize. A moment later, he flipped a switch on the wall, and a humming sound she’d not realized was there in the background shut off. “Excellent,” he breathed as he inspected a screen turned away from her, and Ryan dropped her head forward, too exhausted to hold it up as her tears added to the dampness of the floor.

She didn’t hear footsteps coming down the stairs, but then Kilgrave was there, shoving her head back and staring coldly, from what she could tell through her blurred vision. “Oh, Ryan,” he sighed. He shrugged, then turned away. “Come on, let’s do it, then,” he commanded, and the doctor filled a syringe with a clear substance and just as quickly plunged it into Kilgrave’s arm, just below the rolled-up sleeve. “How long until it can be tested?” Kilgrave demanded.

“Immediately, sir,” the man answered, and Kilgrave whipped back around.

“Ryan, turn your head to the left,” he insisted eagerly.

She felt nothing, no insistence to obey, and it didn’t cross her mind to fake it, barely able to keep her head up to see him in the first place. She watched as a horrible scowl grew on his face.

“Why isn’t it working?!” he shouted at the doctor, who was rapidly shuffling through papers.

“The implants are fully functional, her powers are completely nullified, but we didn’t plan on – since it’s developed from her blood, the serum – “

“Fix it, now,” Kilgrave snarled, and the man jumped back into action as though scalded. Kilgrave stomped back up the stairs, slamming the door behind him. Ryan dropped her head again and waited for the end.

Chapter End Notes

Me @ me: SHUT THE HELL UP ALREADY THE CHAPTER’S WAY TOO FUCKING LONG

Me also @ me: no

“Scott,” Matt muttered.

“Oh, sorry!” He’d not even realized he was speaking aloud. The dull roar of the plane engines should’ve covered it, though. Oh, wait - “The super hearing thing, I forgot – it’s super hearing, right? And that makes up for the, um…”

“Blindness.”

“Oh, um, yeah. How, uh, how does that even work? Like, can you see anything, or… I babble like an idiot when I’m nervous, and I’m going shut up now,” Scott said firmly, staring up at the ceiling to avoid looking at anyone else sitting strapped into the back of the plane like military special ops. The ride had been quiet, too quiet, even though it was barely a half-hour flight to the coast. Last time he’d done something like this, Luis had whistled It’s A Small World After All through their comms until Scott almost shrunk him down just to get some quiet. Last time, he hadn’t had to ignore worried scents and hurried good-byes-but-not-good-byes between mates and family. Now, a man in a black mask sat motionless beside him, and Scott clenched and unclenched his gloved hands.

“A world on fire.”

“What?!”

“I can’t see. Not like I used to,” Matt explained. “Sounds, smells, temperature and pressure variations in the air, electric fields, other things I can sense all blend together. It looks like a world on fire.”

Scott blinked. “Jesus. That… sounds awful.”

The side of Matt’s mouth quirked up. “A friend told me it’s why I like to hit things so much. She was half right.”

Scott chuckled quietly. “Understandable. I’d never heard of you, before, but it makes sense you didn’t make the news out in SF. You, uh, you ever been out to Cali?”

“Before now, I’d never left New York State,” Matt said. “Only been out of the city a few times. Never really left Hell’s Kitchen behind.”

“Well, assuming we both survive this, you should come out! You and your mates, they seem great,” Scott smiled. “I’ll show you the sights! Well, not the… the air smells nice too, y’know, with the bay, and everything..."

A ghost of a smile passed over Matt’s face. “I’m used to the smog by now.” He paused a moment. “You’ll get back to your daughter, Scott. I’ve faced men like this before.”

“Did they have wicked superpowers, too?” Scott asked baldly. He didn’t know how Matt knew about his daughter, but right now he didn’t care.
“No. But Kilgrave’s abilities don’t work on me.” Another pause. “The evil is in him. The mind control isn’t evil, inherently.”

Scott huffed. “Is there a difference at this point?”

“Yes,” Matt countered, surprising Scott somewhat. “It’s not people’s abilities. It’s how they use them.”

Scott cringed again. “Shit, I’m sorry, man, I didn’t mean to be insulting.”

“It’s not me I was referring to.” Just then, Scott felt the wheels of the plane bump up against the ground. He hadn’t even noticed the descent.

He followed the silent others out into the pre-dawn cold and into a waiting SUV. His car followed another, an unlit ambulance trailing last. The final stretch to the mansion was another twenty minutes of silence, Falcon and Hawkeye riding with Scott as Black Widow drove. It felt like the setup to a horrible joke. 3 superheroes and a ex-con drive up to bar...

The cars stopped on the side of a road, dense forest on both sides as the ambulance kept going. Scott exited the car, meticulously checking his pack one last time. Ant-tonio’s wings buzzed pointedly in his ear.

“Yes, yeah, I know, I’m being neurotic,” he muttered. “Now get inside, it’s too cold for you to stay out the whole time.” Ant-tonio zipped inside the ant farm, and Scott quickly closed it up.

“The mansion is a half mile through the woods. Bucky’s waiting for us on the southeast side,” Steve stated to the gathered group, attaching his shield to his back. “Let’s move.”

Five branches to the face later, Scott thought, Y’know, I live in The City for a reason, stupid East Coast and its stupid trees… A few minutes after, he just barely made out a looming shape in the distance. They were here.

“Bucky,” Steve murmured, and the Winter Soldier gave Captain America a small, crooked smile that spoke volumes to Scott’s eyes. “Mission go?”


“Scott Lang, it’s – wow, you’re as much a legend as Steve, this is…” Scott cleared his throat, Bucky’s intense stare unnerving. He saw Bucky look at Steve, who gave the slightest nod. Bucky returned it, not looking entirely convinced, and all three of them turned back to the others.

“Comm systems on and open to base,” Steve ordered, and everyone flipped a small switch on their earpieces. “Coulson, come in.”

“Copy, Captain. Commence operation when ready,” Coulson’s voice sounded in everyone’s ears.

“Clint, find a good vantage point. No closer than five feet to the fence,” Steve said, and Clint took off, a small rustling disappearing in the dark. “Scott, Matt, remember, we won’t hear outside sounds through the comm systems until Kilgrave is down, in case his commands can work through them. You have to open your channel to send anything through. Scott, you’re up. Security first, and stay silent.”

Scott nodded, then opened his backpack and pulled out the inhaler and the ant farm. “Alright, guys, to your posts,” he ordered, and a thick swarm of orange-red ants wearing tinier metal backpacks scurried out, zig-zagging down into the ground.
“Your ants know where they’re going?” Bucky said disbelievingly.

“They can sense and conduct electricity. I’m telling them to find the sources right now.” Scott paused as a large group of larger black ants exited next, forming a battalion-like square on the frozen leaf litter. “The crazy ants are small enough to get through the field, I calculated it. These guys aren’t, but they’ll be a big help once the fence is down. No one step on them!”

“What do they do?” Steve asked, frowning slightly.

“They’re number one on the Schmidt pain index. And ironically, it’s pretty hard to shoot bullet ants.” Scott zipped the ant farm securely away in the suit’s pack, Ant-tonio hovering by his ear. “Okay. I’m good.”

Tony Stark’s voice came into his ear. “Scott, Kilgrave is awake in the upper left quadrant of the house. The surveillance room is in the lower right. Down the hall, first door on the right from the side entrance. Three guards in the front, one by the monitors.”

Steve nodded once, head held high. “This is it, everyone. Begin the count.” Steve looked to Natasha, Sam, Matt, Bucky, then Scott in turn. “Scott, T-minus ten minutes to bring down the fence. We’ll keep radio silence unless there’s movement from Kilgrave or other significant updates.”

“No one dies, Captain,” Matt reminded gruffly, and Scott startled. Had the others planned on killing people?!

Steve nodded again. “No lethal force. Ready, Scott?”

Scott exhaled, closed his eyes, then held up the inhaler and sucked in a breath. He jabbed the side of his helmet, securing his mask and tossing the inhaler away. He pressed the button on his right glove, and suddenly Steve was six feet instead of six inches taller than he.

“Holy shit,” Bucky muttered from above. Sam chuckled for a second.

“Come on, Ant-tonio, up and at ‘em,” Scott encouraged, and he jumped atop the ant’s back and soared up into the sky. He kept a close eye on the altimeter on his wrist as they dodged their way through bare branches frosted with ice. “Okay, high enough boy,” he muttered, and suddenly they were zipping in towards the mansion. Scott released a worried breath as they approached. “We’re over. T-minus nine minutes to fence breach.”

Seconds later, he hovered a few feet from the side entrance. The guard looked half-frozen, but his hand remained locked on the trigger of the gun.

“Okay, buddy, give me a good launch,” Scott whispered, and he stood up on the ant’s back before being flying off in the direction of the lock. He’d never been more grateful that Hank had slammed him into all those doors when first practicing with the suit as he passed neatly through the keyhole and landed inside. “I’m in,” he sent through the comm, taking off at a sprint down the hall.

A minute later, he slipped inside a door, panting a little. Normally he would’ve sized up for this part, but the drug’s limitations meant he needed some creativity.

A quick shove, and the door slammed shut. The guard started, looking back and forth far above him, confused expression tinted bluish-white in the light of the video monitors. Scott grabbed a silver-blue disc and flung it like a frisbee at the guard’s chair. With a yelp, the man thudded to the ground, chair rolling off to the side. One punch, and he collapsed unconscious.

Scott leapt atop the now-tiny chair and pressed a silver-red disc into it. Momentum flung him up and
atop the counter as it shot back up to size.

“Stark, did anyone hear all that?” Scott breathed, drawing a minuscule black box out of his pocket. He laid it carefully on the desk, and another red disc doubled its height.

“No movement from Kilgrave or the other guards, you’re good,” Tony’s voice replied. “Starting system hack, and – done.” The monitors went dark, and Scott switched on his suit headlights. “Eyes are dark, everyone. Scott, get to the fence.”

“Roger,” Scott breathed, then hopped back down and zipped past the guard and out under the door.

Back at the side entrance, he drew the ant farm back out. Another silver-red disc, and the case shot up above him, fire ants pouring like lava out the top. “Okay guys, beam Scottie up!” he encouraged as they coalesced into a makeshift tower, reaching back up to the doorknob.

“Sorry, sorry,” he apologized as he climbed, grabbing antennae and legs as they chittered around him. Back out the lock and onto the waiting Ant-tonio, and together they zoomed back to land on the frosted lawn, searching for the transmitter. “Please, please, please all be in place,” he muttered into the dark.

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Matt stood still as a shadow, listening carefully. He couldn’t hear past the buzzing of the electric fence, and it irritated him. He took a few silent steps closer.

A cold, solid hand grabbed his arm and yanked him back. “The fence line is right there, Murdock, Jesus Christ!” Bucky growled in his ear.

“I can sense it,” Matt spat back, jerking his arm free. “I’m trying to hear past it, the buzzing’s too loud to listen inside the mansion.”

“You could hear inside? From here?” Steve said, sounding impressed.

“I can smell Clint 1500 feet that way,” Matt answered as he pointed to the side. “And 30 feet up. And I can hear the ants inside that transmitter,” he added, pointing down and to the left.

Steve and Bucky glanced at each other, eyebrows raised.

The buzzing suddenly sharpened to a whine. Matt quirked his head to the side. “Lang’s about to blow the fence. Get back.”

“All set to blow the fence,” Scott’s voice said in their ears not a half-second later. “In 3, 2, 1 – “

A blinding burst of sparks lit up the dark, exploding ten feet in the air. Steve and Bucky instinctively jerked back as electricity crackled in front of them. Matt didn’t even flinch, outlined black against the glow. They were thrust into darkness again, and in the space between two heartbeats, Matt disappeared.

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“Security, fence – power.” Scott directed Ant-tonio to the side of the mansion. This part of the plan was definitely the simplest. The power meter appeared, and he flew Ant-tonio practically in a freefall down to the ground. A silver-blue shrinking disc, and the windows went dark as sparks spat angrily out at him.

“Power’s out,” he reported into the comm system.

“Excellent. Get to Ryan as quickly as you can,” Coulson ordered in his ear.

“C’mon, we’ve gotta go fast,” Scott said, and Ant-tonio buzzed him back towards where the others were still waiting. As soon as he was close enough, he yelled, "Let's go, guys!" and the square of bullet ants took off behind him, the mansion looming in the dark.

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Matt could hear everything now, and there was a lot to hear. The first guard went down easily, unable to see him in the moonless night. Guard number two dashed around the corner, but with a whooshing thud, he cried out in pain, an arrow slicing through his shoulder blade. Matt knocked him out a second later.

A third heard the struggle and shouted for backup. Matt ducked and rolled as the first gunshots sprayed out, then leaped up and hurled his baton. A sickening crack, and the gunshots ceased.

Dashing forward, he heard sparking come from the other side of the house, lights clicking off. A guard fell with a kick to the chest, and Matt reached the front door. He placed a hand atop the lock and rapped his knuckles on the wood. The deadbolt was too strong to kick through, the vibrations hummed. He leapt back and smashed a window instead. Swinging inside, he was met with three guards at once.

“Hands where I can them!” the ringleader shouted, a Glock trained on Matt's chest. No, the metal tasted wrong on the air - an assault rifle. Really?

Matt chuckled. “Pretty sure none of us can see.”

He grabbed the muzzle and jerked the butt of the gun into the man’s face. He howled as a sickening crunch left blood pouring down his front. More shots rang out. Shouts and groans and heavy thuds followed.

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Gunshots pounded from the house, and Ant-tonio reared back in fear. “No, no, boy, it’s okay!” Scott reassured, scritchting his head between the antennae. “Come on, almost there.”

They rounded the corner and flew through the broken window, the bullet ants skittering through the glass shards below. Three bodies lay on the ground, bloody and unmoving.
“Holy lord,” Scott muttered, then shook himself. They zoomed down the hall to the left, past a towering marble staircase lined with crystal vases on pedestals. The basement door stood ajar, and Scott spotted a flashlight waving below. A man in a lab coat came into view, pointing the beam towards –

“Oh my god!” Scott exclaimed instinctively. Blood streamed down Ryan's face and arms, battered and bruised and strung up in chains. Her skin shone deathly pale, and she wasn’t moving.

“Who’s there?!” the man shouted, the light flashing frantically in search.

“Whoops.” Scott raised a hand to his earpiece, and the bullet ants swarmed down the stairs. The man loosed a high-pitched scream, backing away across the cement floor as they charged. Scott zoomed towards Ryan, relief coursing through him as she slowly blinked at the lights.

“Hey! Hey, can you hear me? I’m Scott Lang, I’m here to rescue you! Oh my god, I’ve always wanted to say that!”

Footsteps thundered on the stairs, and Ryan’s eyes widened in terror.

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Matt dashed up the stairs and around the corner toward the heartbeat he was seeking. Below him, he heard more men following – wait, no, they were going down the basement hallway. Kilgrave was his priority, and he broke into a flat-out sprint. Two more men cocked guns up ahead.

A single shot rang out. Matt bit back a shout as it tore into his side. Blood soaked his hands where he pressed them to his side. It should’ve been pitch black, how –

A bead of warmth on his face, and Matt threw himself into a side room before shots fired in rapid succession. He pressed himself against the wall, silent as a shadow. Laser scopes on the semis stole his advantage, and he had nowhere else to go.

The firing stopped, running steps drowning out heartbeats. His stomach roiled with nausea, and he swallowed back the pain as he released his wound, clenched his hands to fists.

The men were three steps away when suddenly, Kilgrave’s voice echoed down the hall. Everyone froze in place. Including Matt.

*Oh no.*

*** *** ***

Boots thundered on the stairs, and three guards held flashlights aloft beside their guns. Scott quickly flicked off his own lights, then whistled for Ant-tonio. Zooming up close, he drew out more blue discs and hurled one at the first guard’s gun. It shrunk to the size of a pea, and the other guards jumped in surprise. Scott whirled back around and landed another on the second guard’s weapon, but suddenly the third had yanked Ryan’s head back by the hair, the nozzle of his gun
Show yourself or I shoot!!” he screamed, and Ryan started hyperventilating through the gag. The other two guards searched around for Scott as he flew up beside Ryan. One more disc, and the minuscule gun clattered to the floor, useless.

Suddenly, an immensely bright light blinded him, and Scott threw his hands up in front of his face.

“What the fuck?!” the guard shouted, then flung his hand up to swat at Ant-tonio. Scott managed to dodge, flashlight beams weaving treacherously in the air.

“It’s a tiny guy! On top of an ant!” the first guard shouted.

“What the fuck?!”

“Shut up, idiots, just find him or we’re dead!”

Scott, meanwhile, crouched beneath a computer monitor on the counters. With a thought, he sent the bullet ants forward, and guard number one shrieked in pain as he fell. One of the guards turned his back to help, and Scott flew at him, knocking him to the ground atop the unconscious scientist. Another leap to Ant-tonio, and he flew dead-on for Ryan.

Suddenly, a hand appeared out of nowhere, and Scott yelled in pain as Ant-tonio was struck out from under him. They careened towards shining cement, and Scott threw out his arms. A second later he smashed headlong into the wall, hands-first and bouncing off with a grunt.

Instantly, he exploded to full size, collapsing onto the floor.

“SHIT!” he shouted, and smashed the button on his hand. He shrunk down in an instant, but the damage was done.

“What the fuck?!” one of the guards screamed again, eyes wide and frantic.

“Get her out!” the one who had swatted Scott screamed back. Scott searched around frantically for Ant-tonio, calling him back, but the ant was nowhere to be seen. He closed his eyes for a second, fighting back angry tears. “Fuck it,” he breathed, then pressed the button on his right glove again.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Well, it appears Dr. Klein’s serum was good for something, at least.” Kilgrave smirked at Matt’s frozen frame, pale and bloody in the fluorescent light of the torch. Matt couldn’t even struggle, holding onto a last shred of rational thought by a sinew. Whatever serum he was talking about, it made him almost as strong as Ryan had been. “Answer me truthfully now. Can the others I assume are with you hear us?”

“No,” Matt’s mouth answered without his permission.

“And who is it downstairs trying to kidnap our Ryan?”

“Scott Lang, the Ant-Man.”

Kilgrave sneered. “The Ant-Man? Well, the nicknames get more and more colorful.” His cold
purple eyes shone with excitement, smile widening. “Are Captain America and the Winter Soldier present? They seemed quite fond of her.”

“Yes. They’ll come inside as soon as I give the signal,” Matt intoned.

“Invite them in, then! I’d love the chance to catch up.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

The scenery around them grew more visible, the distant thrum of ocean waves more insistent as the world began to awake. Steve was practically itching out of his skin waiting for Matt’s signal. Multiple gunshots inside the mansion, and neither he nor Scott had reported in.

“It shouldn’t be taking this long,” he muttered to Bucky, standing still and silent beside him.

“It’s been seven minutes and forty-eight seconds,” Bucky replied, though his scent reflected his impatience. “Give ‘em ten.”

“Kilgrave’s down,” Matt’s voice suddenly sounded in their ears. “Civilians at risk, get them clear.”

Steve and Bucky had switched the comm systems fully on and were halfway to the mansion before Matt’s transmission finished. Five more guards spilled onto the front yard, and Steve pulled Bucky behind the shield with him as they opened fire.

Arrows whistled through the air, and two of the men yelled in agony before Bucky shot back upright, firing two guns simultaneously. Both his targets collapsed to their knees, and the last guard shouted in fear, yanked back into the shadow of the house. Natasha emerged moments after, twirling a knife.

Steve dashed forward again, covering the 500 yards to the house in seconds. He didn't slow before barreling through the front door, oak collapsing to splinters.

Four more men rushed into the foyer, and Bucky sprang forward with a vicious growl. Too quickly, they were all unconscious on the floor. In the far back of his mind, racing through darkened halls to a single open door, Steve was just a little turned on.

At the bottom of the stairs they found Scott, full-sized, fighting hand-to-hand with two guards amidst swinging flashlights. He grew and shrunk with each punch as he tried to stop them reaching –

“Ryan!” Steve shouted, and he grabbed the guard beside her by the neck and threw him bodily across the room. Bucky dispatched the other with one punch. Grabbing a flashlight, Steve shone it at the wall.

Ryan’s eyes were huge and terrified, as wide as they could go while bruised and swollen half-shut. “It’s okay, it’s okay!” Steve breathed, immense, euphoric relief rushing through him, leaving him almost dizzy. “We’re here, you’re going to be okay a ghrá, I promise – “

“Ryan, sweetheart, shh, it’s alright, don’t cry,” Bucky added, cupping her cheek with a hand. He reached up with his metal hand and grabbed the chains attached to her wrists, and with a grunt he yanked them clear out of the wall, a small cloud of dust raining down. Ryan whimpered as her arms fell in front of her, Steve ripping out the chains on her ankles.
“Holy shit, you guys are strong,” Scott muttered from behind them. Steve ignored him, examining every inch of Ryan as Bucky carefully untied the gag. Red-hot anger surged through him at the sight of her bloodied arms and side.

“Did he inject you with something?!” he breathed in horror, looking closer at her forearms. Ryan jerked away from him as he reached for her, almost falling over.

“He – “ Ryan croaked, then dissolved into a dry, hacking cough, clutching at her side and gasping. Her scent was weak and distressed, and Steve’s heart thudded in panic.

“No, no, don’t try to talk, it’s okay,” Bucky breathed, “we’re getting you out. We’re gonna help you, you’re gonna be fine.” He reached for her, but Ryan took another step back.

Steve searched the floor, straightening back up when he found the small key beside the unconscious pile of guards. “Here, let me take those off,” he pleaded, holding up the key.

Ryan blinked, then silently offered her hands, grimacing at the movement. Steve carefully reached for her, supporting her arms with one hand as he unlocked her left wrist, then her right. Ever-so-gently, he rubbed his hands over where the shackles had lay as Bucky knelt down to her feet.

“Well. Isn’t this a touching reunion.”

Ryan screamed in terror, her voice hoarse and rasping. Bucky launched himself towards the staircase, both guns drawn. Kilgrave’s voice ordered, “Stop,” almost lazily. Steve, Bucky, and Scott all froze in place.

“I have had just about enough of the Avengers interfering in my plans,” Kilgrave sang, tapping lightly down the stairs. “Even the junior members now. But perhaps we can work this out civilly, yes?”

Ryan tried to run across the basement, but there was nowhere to go. She made it a few feet before she stumbled over one of the bodies and fell, cries of pain growing weaker.

Kilgrave sighed, rolling his eyes. “Perhaps not, then. Captain, you can carry her this time. Come, the others are already waiting on the lawn.”

Steve felt his limbs move against his will, scooping up Ryan and grasping her tight as he started back up the stairs. Tears fell silently down Ryan's face, quiet resignation in her eyes. Steve tried with every fiber of his being to speak, to yell, to _scream_ at her to keep fighting, not to give up. He kept walking.

* * * * * * *

Ryan tumbled to the freezing ground, dropped unceremoniously at Kilgrave’s command as Steve went in line with the others. Bucky, Sam, Clint, Natasha, Matt, and the man in red she didn’t know all knelt silently, men holding guns at the backs of their heads. A firing squad, she realized. With all her might, she tried to just nudge one of the guns to the side. The implants really did work.

“Let this be a lesson to you, Ryan,” Kilgrave said, watching Steve kneel. “People like you and me can accomplish _anything_. You simply have to be bold enough.”
“Please,” Ryan whispered, unable to rise, barely able to move past her shivers. “Please, I'll stay with you forever, just let them – “

“No, no, my dear,” Kilgrave soothed. “It’s better this way. No more distractions, no more reasons to doubt. It’ll just be you and me.”

Then he clapped his hands together. “I have a splendid idea. These are heroes of legend, and they deserve a proper ending to their stories, don’t they? What better than a final showdown?” He snapped his fingers, and the men dropped the guns to their sides.

“Captain, Sergeant, you never did finish your last battle, did you? How about now?” He strode up to Steve first, jeering coldly. “You’re free to defend yourself however you like. But you will kill him, or he will kill you.” He turned to Bucky. “You are the Winter Soldier. Captain America is your target. No guns, I prefer good sportsmanship. Ten paces apart now.”

Steve and Bucky immediately stood up and stepped off to face each other, a wide swath of lawn between them. Kilgrave took a step back, then saluted. “Good luck.”

Instantly, Bucky surged forward, a feral look on his face. Steve’s eyes widened. “Buck, it’s me!” he screamed, grabbing his shield off his back. “It’s Steve!”

Bucky’s metal fist clanged into the shield, echoing like a gong across the lawn. Then they were wrestling for it, deadly but graceful movements as Steve rolled and ducked. With a chilling growl, Bucky wrested the shield off his arm, Steve barely dodging a blow to the chest.

“I’m your mate, Buck!” Steve screamed. He jumped back, metal fingers flashing red in the sunrise aimed at his gut. “‘Til the end of the line! Remember!”

Bucky drew a knife from its holster, twirling it in his fingers before rushing forward. Steve dodged and Bucky thrust, their movements almost too fast for Ryan to track. Kilgrave smiled toothily as he watched.

Steve twisted Bucky’s wrist to the side, and the knife flew directly at Ryan. It clipped the side of her face before she managed to dodge. She cried out in added pain, clapping a hand to her cheek, but Kilgrave didn’t notice or didn’t care.

Bucky landed a punch to Steve’s gut, and Ryan heard him gasp as he doubled over. Bucky fastened his hands around Steve’s throat, a triumphant look in his eye. Steve scrabbled at his grip, gasping and spluttering.

“No, no, not them - Ryan’s mind was half-blank with shock when a light glinted in her eye, a bright reflection of the still-rising sun. Bucky’s knife had bounced in front of her, outer edge dripping crimson.

A thought, a horrible thought, flashed in her mind. But she could end this, end it now. Kilgrave stood yards away, too far, he’d stop her if she even tried to stand. One option left. She dove forward before she stopped herself, shielding the knife from Kilgrave’s view as a violently trembling hand grasped the handle. She heard Steve’s gasping breaths, looked up to see Bucky’s cold stare, and plunged the knife into in her right arm.

She screamed in agony, blood watering the ground as she dug through her skin to find the metal capsule, sobbing and heaving. Metal ground into metal, and she pried the device out of her arm. Kilgrave didn’t even glance over.

Ryan retched violently, bile spilling from her throat. Then, somehow, she flipped the knife to her
other hand and plowed it inside her left arm. Blackness crept at the edge of her vision, heart pounding in her ears as blood gushed down her arms. With a horrible squelching sound, the other implant fell to the ground, and she gasped at the sheer power coursing through her.

She stumbled to her feet, strength to stand at last. “KILGRAVE!”

The man stiffened, expression blank as he turned to her. Ryan raised a blood-soaked hand, eyes shining blue, and jerked her wrist in a circle. A terrible snap, and Kilgrave collapsed to the ground.

*** *** *** ***

Instantly, Bucky’s eyes widened, and he shot back from Steve like a bullet. Steve gasped for air, falling to his knees and heaving. Distantly, he heard the others came back to life, panting for breath. A few moments later, Steve’s vision cleared, and he looked back up to see Kilgrave curled on the ground, head askew at a sickening angle. Beside him, Ryan’s entire form glowed bright blue, white dress stained red shuddering in the breeze.

Her eyes were huge, limbs almost convulsing as blood ran in rivers down her arms. She stared at Kilgrave, and her ashen skin somehow paled even further. One bloody hand shot up to her mouth, covering up a keening cry, and suddenly all the windows on the house behind them exploded outwards.

She whirled around, then crumpled to her knees with a horrible scream. Shockwaves of blue light blasted out from her the mansion quaking and ground rumbling.

“Ryan! There’s still people inside!” Matt yelled, dashing up to his feet, one arm clutched to his side. He was jerked back by nothing, thudding to the ground. The entire upper level suddenly burst like a dam, debris crashing down as it collapsed.

“Ryan,” Steve wheezed, his vocal cords half-crushed. “Ryan, it’s okay -”

A harrowing wail, and Steve surged to his feet, blinking through the spots in his vision. He stumbled forward, her scream rattling in his bones. “Ryan! Please!”

“Ryan!” Bucky called out, pained and desperate.

At their combined voices, one last pulse of light shot out, and the glow started to fade. Steve made it another few feet, still breathing heavily, before Ryan suddenly collapsed fully to the ground.

He broke into a sprint and yanked her into his arms. She lay limp and pale, too pale, oh Christ, so much blood - “SHE’S NOT BREATHING! GET HELP!”

Instantly, Sam was there, grabbing at Ryan. Steve caught his arm and growled furiously, protective instincts roaring.

“I’m trying to help, would you let me just- !” Sam exclaimed, shoving at his shoulder.

Steve blinked, then quickly lowered her to the ground. He saw Sam feel for a pulse, watching her chest. No movement. “Someone bind her arms!” Sam barked, pressing his hand together and starting chest compressions.
Out of nowhere, Natasha appeared, shoving Steve back and away. Clint dropped to his knees beside them and flipped open a switchblade, ripping through the blood-soaked skirt and knotting tourniquets with the scraps.

A vehicle screeched to a halt on the driveway behind them, and Jemma and Bruce appeared. Steve watched dimly as Ryan was lifted onto a stretcher and hurried away, his mind half-numb. Instinctively, he searched out Bucky, feeling for his hand, sniffing for his scent. He whirled back around, heart pounding. His mate was nowhere to be seen.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Scott breathed, transfixed on the ruins in front of them. “What the hell, Sam!”

Sam glanced over and met Scott’s wide-eyed stare. He creased his eyebrows together, trying to wipe blood off his hands with blades of grass.

Scott gestured wildly at the wreckage. "You - you told me I was helping rescue a kidnapped girl! You didn’t say she was a god!”

“She’s not,” Natasha said quietly. Her face was blank, inscrutable, until Sam noticed her eyes. They were flooded with tears. “Gods don’t bleed.”

Chapter End Notes

A ghra = my heart, traditional Irish term of endearment for lovers/partners

Phew. That was a roller coaster. As always, thanks so much for reading and commenting!

And if anyone's interested, here's a Tumblr post I made based on my visual inspiration/aesthetic for Ryan! Don't worry, all pictures used with permission :)

http://tinyurl.com/jlg6ss7
In Which Act Three Begins and Wounds Start Getting Stitched Up

Chapter Notes

Hover over or go to the end notes for translations.

“Scott, I need your help,” Matt panted, steps faltering as he pitched forward. The sun had fully risen now, and with the light the lawn had dissolved into chaos: guards stumbling around in fear and confusion, guns abandoned as Sam, Natasha and Clint rushed in and out of the mansion, bringing out other just as terrified and bewildered staff. Steve and Bucky had disappeared, and the destroyed upper floors creaked ominously as the wind picked up. Kilgrave’s body went ignored.

“Oh shit, what happened?!?” Scott exclaimed, spying the blood staining Matt’s hands.

“Gunshot wound. I thought it grazed me, but I haven’t stopped bleeding. Get one of the guards to get supplies,” Matt ordered through gritted teeth, clamping his hands to his side as he swayed in place.

“Oh, hey! Hey, you!” Scott yelled, and one of the men looked over. “Get a first aid kit! He’s injured!”

“Are you kidding? I’m not going back in there!” he shot back, putting his hands up.

Scott rolled his eyes as he shouted, “Fine, just tell me where it is!”

“First floor bathroom,” he responded, and Scott took off at a run. Sam pushed past him as he entered, dragging out an unconscious body fireman-style.

“Lang! Get the guys from the basement!” Sam yelled over his shoulder.

“Matt got shot! He needs help!” Scott shouted back, and Sam swore, dropping the guard he was carrying to the ground outside.

“I’ll take care of him, you get the others out before this whole place comes down!” Sam ordered, and Scott replied, “First floor bathroom!” before taking off to the left again. He heard rumbling and groaning from above, and he hastened down the stairs. The bullet ants were all swarming around, and four unconscious bodies lay in the dark.

“Sorry I left, guys, I promise it won’t happen again,” he muttered, quickly ordering them back up and out of the house. “Everyone accounted for?” he asked quietly, ignoring the pang in his heart at the question as the last of them disappeared upstairs. Suddenly, he felt tiny legs skittering up his own, and he shined his light down to see –

“Ant-tonio!!” Scott cried out ecstatically, and he scooped him up carefully in his gloved hand and bringing him to eye level. “Oh no,” he exclaimed, smile morphing to a horrified stare. Ant-tonio had lost a wing.

“Oh god, I’m so sorry,” Scott breathed. The carpenter ant’s antennae twitched mournfully in
response. “I’m going to make you a new one, ok? I’m an electrical engineer and know nothing about prosthetics, but I’ll figure it out, I promise,” he vowed, and he set Ant-tonio onto his shoulder. “We’re all going to be alright,” Scott declared, trying to convince himself with the words as he looped his arms under the first man’s shoulders. “Oh shit, you’re heavy…”

*** *** *** ***

“Bucky!!” Steve screamed desperately, crashing through branches in the early morning light. “Bucky, please!” he half-sobbed, chest heaving as he dashed left and right, not even sure where he was going. Don’t do this, he thought as he gripped his hair in his hands, vision blurring through his search for any sign, any trace of a trail. There was nothing.

“Steve!” Natasha’s voice suddenly sounded in his ear. She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook as hard as she could, jerking him out of his panicked trance. “Snap out of it!” she ordered, staring him down intensely.

“I have to find him!” Steve insisted, breath coming in gasping pants, adrenaline surging through his veins as the world started to spin. “He can’t, I need him, Ryan needs, I have to –”

“Breathe!” she demanded sternly. “You need to calm down. Let me help,” she insisted, eyes pleading even as she commanded him. She took a deep breath, and Steve had the presence of mind to copy her, the overwhelming chemical rush slowly starting to ebb. “I searched already, he didn’t leave a trail. But maybe Murdock can track him, it’s only been a few minutes,” Natasha reasoned with him as the fog receded from his brain.

“Murdock,” Steve muttered, blinking away the last of his tears. He took another deep breath, then gently pushed Natasha away. “Where’s my shield?” he asked quickly, realizing its absence and almost panicking again.

“You left it by the mansion, come on,” Natasha indicated.

Steve’s head was clearer now, and he kept breathing carefully as he started after her. “Is everyone out?” he asked, breaking into a fast walk.

“Clint and Lang are getting the last of them. Sam is patching up Murdock, and Coulson’s on the way with more help,” Natasha reported, jogging beside him. “As soon as the scene’s under control, we’ll find him.”

Seconds later, Steve burst back onto the lawn to see Clint carrying out an older woman in a maid’s outfit, depositing her with other shell-shocked staff gathered on the driveway. Scott was absent, and Sam was kneeling in front of Matt, stationed beside an open first-aid kit by the front door of the mansion with his shield leaning up beside them. “What happened?” Steve called out, running over and stripping it to his back.

“Bullet grazed me,” Matt answered, breathing carefully as Sam tied off a suture to the gunshot wound on his ribcage. It looked deeper than a graze to Steve, but he nodded anyway.

“Can you move alright?” Steve asked, and Matt gave a curt nod in response. “Bucky disappeared, can you track him?”

“Maybe.” Matt pushed away from Sam, replacing his shirt and tugging his mask further down. “But
the mansion’s about to collapse, Ryan cracked the foundation. We have to get the serum.”

“What serum?” Natasha asked in alarm as the mansion groaned threateningly. Matt ignored her to dash back inside the door and disappear.

“Coulson, the mansion’s coming down, we need to get the civilians someplace safe,” Steve reported, one hand to his earpiece as he followed Matt inside.

“Copy, Captain. ETA 10 minutes, SHIELD will handle the clean-up,” Coulson’s voice echoed back as Steve jumped down the stairs back to the basement-turned-laboratory-turned-dungeon. The bodies of the guards were all outside now, and Matt was rifling through drawers and throwing loose papers haphazardly into a pile.

“What’re we looking for?” Steve questioned as he shone a flashlight onto the scene and began gathering up files and notes from the floor.

“Kilgrave said some Dr. Klein developed a serum, it enhanced his abilities,” Matt rattled off quickly, feeling along the countertop. “It was why he could control me.” Steve scented a sudden wave of guilt, and Matt hesitated for a half-second before continuing.

“There, over on the other counter,” Steve pointed out, spying a series of liquid-filled glass test tubes in a rack on the next bench over.

“Bring everything you can find. They most likely used Ryan’s blood forcibly, the research legally belongs to her,” Matt ordered, snatching up the rack. “If nothing else, we need it reliably destroyed.”

Suddenly, the cracked ceiling above them shook, and a few chunks of plaster fell down before the rumbling stopped. Steve decided that was enough; he grabbed all the papers he could hold and ran up the stairs, Matt following quickly behind.

“Is everyone out?!” Steve shouted as they made it back onto the front lawn, Natasha, Clint and Sam waiting for them.

“We got the last of the civilians, they’re all out,” Clint reported, quickly counting heads. Then his eyes widened in panic as the groaning got louder behind him, and he whipped his head back around. “Dammit, Scott went back in for the ant farm!” Clint shouted, a look of alarm on his face.

Matt instantly reversed, dashing back around. Just before he got inside, there was an almighty crack, and Matt threw up his arms instinctively as wood splintered and walls burst, the entire fourth floor collapsing at once. Steve tore forward and yanked Matt underneath him, covering them with his shield as rubble crashed and rained down on them. The cacophony was deafening as the world quaked and shook, screams of fear from the staffers piercing through the thundering smashes of glass and stone hailing from above.

What felt like hours later, the din finally subsided, and Steve pushed upwards with a grunt, launching debris off and away, peering through the thick cloud of dust surrounding them. “Matt, are you alright?” he asked quickly as a hacking cough sounded from beneath him.

“I’ll be fine,” Matt exhaled heavily, ears ringing painfully. “Nothing hit me.” He paused for a moment, catching his breath as he waved away the dust. “Thank you, Steve,” he muttered quietly.

“You’re welcome,” Steve nodded, then rapidly took in the scene. Nothing was left of the once towering, magnificent house, now a mere mound of wreckage around them. The top floor’s collapse must’ve started a chain reaction, Steve reasoned, and the cracked foundation broke apart the rest.
The staff and the other Avengers were on the driveway, thankfully a safe distance back. The maids, the cook, the guards, Natasha, Sam, Clint – “No,” Steve breathed in horror. “Scott! Scott, come in!” he yelled into the comm system. There was no response. “Avengers, find him!” Steve shouted, shoving into the mountain of rubble.

“Wait!” Matt barked, pushing past and leaping nimbly atop the wreckage, bringing his right ear to the pile and feeling carefully alongside. The silence was only broken by slightly shifting rubble and a gentle but chilling breeze. Suddenly, Matt shot back up, yelling, “He’s alright – he’s small, he and the ants are at the bottom of the pile, they’re climbing back out.”

A huge sigh of relief swept through everyone, Clint dropping into a crouch, Sam bringing his hands to his head, and Natasha and Steve meeting each other’s eyes as the tension drained out of them. “Everyone stay away from the wreckage, we can’t move anything or Scott might get hurt,” Steve ordered as Matt lightly jumped back to solid ground. “Natasha, Clint, wait for SHIELD and keep the civilians calm. Sam, wait for Scott and get him medical help if he needs it. Everyone, go back to headquarters when SHIELD arrives. Do not, I repeat, do not come for me or Bucky, it’s too dangerous. Matt, please, we need to find him,” Steve begged, desperation starting to permeate his tone.

“What direction did he go?” Matt asked, shaking off bits of debris as they hurried towards the woods.

“I didn’t see, no one did, he just – wait, his earpiece!” Steve exclaimed, an idea suddenly sparking in his mind. “He would’ve dropped it so we can’t track him, start there.” He broke into a run, only to have his arm caught by Matt.

“Steve, go back to the others,” Matt commanded shortly. “If I find his trail, I’ll call for you. I can’t track with you here, you’re half-panicked and your scent is overpowering everything.”

Steve opened his mouth to protest, then clacked it shut with a growl of frustration. “Do not engage him without me, he could be more dangerous than you know right now,” Steve warned, starting to back away.

“Understood.” With that, Matt took off into the wood, and Steve turned back to the lawn. Kilgrave’s body was still lying there, in front of everything. Steve wondered if dragging it to the ocean and tearing off pieces to feed to the sharks would be met disapprovingly. He trooped forward again and waited for SHIELD to arrive instead, his mind consumed with worry.

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He didn’t know where he was going, but he tore through the forest at top speed anyway. He didn’t know where he was coming from, or when he could stop, so he didn’t. Right then he didn’t know his own name – Вы активами, 32557241...

Thought, emotion, instinct – цель приобретенный, понимать. – jumbled up and fused together, warred with each other and spurred him on, the tumult screaming constantly as he wrenched his body forward – he had to escape, he had done something horrible, unforgivable, earth-shattering, and he had wanted to. Had he? Who had wanted, who was –

“Copy, Captain. ETA 10 minutes out, SH – “ he suddenly registered voices in his ear – стереть
Disjointed images tore violently through his mind – a screaming child drenched in crimson, a ramshackle brownstone building, fiery explosions in the dead of night, dancing to nonsense words, cigarette smoke blowing off a rooftop with fireworks blasting in the distance, a treacherous mountainside deluged in ice – холодно, мне так холодно…

A blonde-haired boy and a blue-eyed girl stood in front of him, blocking his way. What – who – they couldn’t be there, they were in danger, they had to go – “Да отвали ты от меня!” a snarling growl echoed from far away, until he realized it came from him, and the words were suddenly deafening. He whirled around, dashing the opposite direction, or perhaps it was the same way? Yes, no, the ghosts were there again – he turned and ran, breath in anxious gasps, frost-covered trees blurring into filthy city streets as blood rushed and roared and pounded in his ears and on his hands –

Wait. A scent, a sweet scent like gingersnaps – его мать сделала их - чья мать? Кто он? - blew past him, and he froze in place, his rapid panting visible in the chilled air. It was wrong, that wasn’t the scent he was looking for, not his target, he was seeking an Alpha – no, an Omega, but her, not that one – why was he searching? He wanted, needed them both, he was theirs and they were his – no, they had to run, they were in danger, they couldn’t be near him – Но я знал, что его…

He had to kill him. That was his mission, he had failed his mission, twice he hadn’t eliminated the target, he would be punished – terror seized his muscles, icy floods and fire together in his veins. A deadly blast of blue-white light, tumbling, screaming, a hand reaching out, he was falling, he was falling…

“Bucky! Buíochas le Dia - mo anamchara, it’s Steve, can you hear me?”

Time froze and sped forward at once, and he lashed out with a snarl before stopping short, eyes widened with fear. The world around him was spinning, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t move, but somehow he was doing both -

"I'm with you, 'til the end of the line, Buck." The phrase tore through the veil, and he stared at Steve, one hand clamped around his lover’s neck and the other shoving him back against a tree. Steve wasn’t resisting at all, breathing calmly though his blue eyes shone a little too brightly. He tore back again, but didn’t run this time.

"Friends? Is everything alright?” Thor's voice spoke out quietly from behind them, hammer in hand but lowered near the ground. He whipped around, grabbing for his knife, but it was missing.

"Bucky.” Steve whispered softly, comfortably. "Тá sé ceart go leor, mo grá, tá tú sábháilte. Le do thoil, ní mór Ryan dúinn."

Ryan. Steve. Those were their names. And his was Bucky.

*** *** ***

“Alright guys, almost there,” Scott wheezed, pulling himself up heavily onto yet another board.
There was daylight up ahead, he could see it above, but the ant farm weighed heavily on his back, and sweat plastered the suit to his skin.

“The things I do for you all,” he panted, collapsing onto his stomach for a moment. He would never leave his insect comrades behind, it was unthinkable, but he wished there’d been another option besides shoving Ant-tonio inside the farm and shrinking them down in the heat of the moment. There wasn’t space to resize them under the rubble after the collapse had subsided, and he needed the ant farm intact or they could all freeze before he could get them safe. Unfortunately for his upper body and his lungs, that meant more climbing then he’d done since falling off the ropes course in grade school.

There was a nail sticking down out of the next highest board, that should be easy to climb up, he noted. When he could move again, that is. It had been about twenty minutes since he’d uncurled himself from the ball he’d rolled into and realized he and the ants weren’t actually squashed—by whatever miracle—but like an idiot, he’d taken out the comm system earpiece after Ryan had saved everyone, and he’d had no way to contact the others to tell them he was alright.

He’d yelled up as loudly as he could, hoping that maybe Matt could somehow hear him, but he was under at least forty feet of rubble and was about a half-inch tall; he had no idea if it’d worked. After that, he’d started his slow ascent through the cramped dark, praying no one would go looking for his supposedly crushed body and end up actually crushing him. “Okay, a yard more and we can size up again,” he promised himself, then flopped back over and reached for the nail. “I gotta start going to the gym.”

A short while passed, and he estimated only another three feet before freedom above him. Good enough, he thought exhaustedly, positioning himself carefully and double-checking for nails or glass shards that he might run into. “Okay everyone, going big on three,” he announced to his backpack. “One – two – three!”

Instantly, the yard exploded into view again, and the next second it was gone, the rubble shifting underneath him as Scott lost his balance and fell with a yelp atop the wreckage. “Ow,” he moaned pathetically, contemplating not getting back up for a while.

“Scott! Jesus Christ, man, you scared the shit out of us!” Scott turned his head to see Sam running up to the edge of the ruins. “You hurt?”

“Just going to be ridiculously sore tomorrow,” he groaned, releasing his helmet and pushing himself upright slowly. “Who the hell are they?” he asked, seeing a swarm of people rushing around, more black SUVs pulling into the driveway and a helicopter landing down by the beach.

“SHIELD’s here,” Sam answered, extending a hand forward. “We can go home now.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Darcy!? Darcy, Darce,” Clint cried out, sprinting out of the back hatch of the plane and crushing Darcy in his arms, Natasha yanking them into her embrace the next second. Darcy was weeping and shaking, holding them as tightly as she could, and Clint thought he might never let his mates go again. His own tears drenched her shirt as all three of them shivered in the cold together.

Darcy’s voice sounded incoherently between them, hiccupping with her sobs, and Clint pulled back
the slightest amount to hear her better. “The comms, w-we heard – I tho – you were dead, oh god, I th-thought you were d-dead – “

“We’re fine, we’re fine, I swear to God we’re fine, oh Darce,” Clint babbled, clutching her impossibly tighter. Her perfect scent, like carnations and sugar, pressed in with Natasha’s pure Alpha, and for the first time in days, Clint felt like he could actually breathe. Distantly, he heard the door to the outside crash open, and he glanced up to see Karen and Foggy dash out to Matt. Even Matt was crying, he noted as Karen tore off his mask to reveal his gray eyes once more before was engulfed in his mates’ arms.

A few minutes later, Natasha released them and kissed Darcy’s forehead, temple, cheek. Clint took her hand, bringing it to his lips to kiss the back. “Is everyone else okay?” Darcy sniffed, looking behind them to the empty plane.

“Matt got grazed, nothing too serious,” Natasha explained, wiping her own eyes. “And Bucky… had a relapse,” she added, for lack of a better word. “Matt tracked him, and Steve was going to try to talk him down. He ordered us to leave, said we couldn’t help.”

“Oh god,” Darcy exhaled, pressing still-shaking arms around herself. Clint quickly wrapped her in his arms again. “Is that w-why you called Thor?” Darcy asked, her voice quivering from cold and fear.

“He’s the only one besides Bruce stronger than Bucky. Steve needed backup,” Natasha nodded. “I promise, sweetheart, they’ll be fine.”

“Babe, please, how’s Ryan? Where is she?” Clint breathed, red-rimmed eyes meeting Darcy’s matching pair.

Her face fell. “She’s here, but… well, come and see,” Darcy said, pulling them inside behind her.

Suddenly, from behind them, Foggy yelled, "Matt? Matt!!" and Karen screamed, "Someone get help!" Clint whipped back around to see Matt collapsed in Foggy's arms.

Chapter End Notes

Bucky's Russian:

Вы активами. - You are the Asset.
цель приобретенный. понимать. - Target acquired. Affirmative.
стереть его. подтвердил, начиная процедуру. - Wipe him. Copy, initiating procedure.
холодно, мне так холодно... - Cold, I'm so cold...
Da отвали ты от меня! - Get away from me!
его мать сделала их - чья мать? Кто он? - His mother made them - whose mother?
Who's he?

Но я знал, что его... - But I knew him...

Steve's Irish:
Buíochas le Dia - Thank God
mo anamchara - my soulmate, Steve's term for Bucky
Tá sé ceart go leor, tá tú sábháilte - It's alright, my love, you're safe. Please, Ryan needs us.
“Out of the way, please!!” Jemma shouted down the hall, hurrying to kneel next to Matt where Natasha and Foggy had laid him inside. The small crowd parted for her, and she threw a medical bag down beside Matt’s head as she cursorily scanned his vitals. “Agent Romanoff, prop up his legs. Pulse is in v-tach, I need the defibrillator in my bag,” she ordered as she cut through his shirt, exposing his bloodied chest. “Everyone else give us space, please!”

Foggy held Karen tight as they looked on, scents matching tones of fear while Natasha yanked out the defibrillator. Darcy had started crying again, and Clint whispered comfortingly in her ear as he held her.

“Starting defibrillation, put his legs back down,” Simmons said as she placed the paddles on the upper right and lower left sides of his chest. “And - clear!”

The machine whined, and Matt’s torso jerked up as the shock ran through him. Immediately, he threw his head up with a pained gasp, scrambling away from Simmons and crashing backwards into the wall.

“Mr. Murdock! Please, don’t move – “

“Jesus Christ, Matt, you scared us – “

“What the hell happened!“

Matt clamped his hands over his ears with an agonized cry, hyperventilating and curling into himself as his scent burst with panic. Immediately, Foggy grabbed Simmons as she reached for him, and Karen jumped in between Matt and the others, urgently pushing them back. “He’s having sensory overload, we need to give him space,” she whispered, gesturing frantically for them to leave.

Natasha quickly grabbed her mates and pulled them away, Darcy wide-eyed and Clint looking grim. Jemma saw them go, then turned back to Matt. His breaths hadn’t slowed, still too rapid and shallow as blood continued to flow from the wound in his side. Foggy was yanking off his suit jacket and shirt, laying them down beside Matt’s head. Karen bundled her shirt next to his, and she stood there in her bra next to Foggy’s bare chest, both watching Matt with worried eyes.

“He’s in respiratory distress, I need to –“ Simmons insisted, reaching for him, but Foggy shook his head violently, catching her arm again. Karen put a finger to her lips, eyes pleading. Jemma turned back to Matt’s tightly-wound form, closely watching for any worsening problems.

A few tense minutes later, though, she heard his breath start to normalize again, the wheeze gone from his lungs. He nudged ever-so-slightly towards the clothing on the ground, and he managed to take a deep breath. Another minute, and his unseeing eyes reopened.
Foggy reached out and lightly tapped two fingers against the wall. Matt winced and gasped sharply, teeth gritted, and Foggy and Karen stood still as statues for another minute, Jemma utterly captivated by the proceedings. The hallway seemed dead silent, yet Matt still laid there blocking out sound and other stimuli with all his might. He took another deep breath, and seemed to relax infinitesimally. Jemma counted another two minutes before Foggy reached out and tapped the wall again. This time, Matt didn’t grimace, and Foggy quickly tapped a few more times in rapid succession. It was a message in Morse code, Jemma recognized with fascination, but she didn’t recognize the dots and dashes well enough to decipher it. A few seconds passed, and Matt managed a nod, slowly removing his hands from his ears.

Jemma looked back up to Foggy, and he nodded at her. “Mr. Murdock? How do you feel?” Jemma breathed as quietly as possible.

“Don’t touch me,” Matt managed to whisper back, leaning in closer to the shirts beside him and inhaling deeply yet again. A few minutes passed, and they waited. Eventually, Matt reached out a hand and touched the cotton of Foggy’s jacket, and he smoothed the material between his forefinger and thumb. Seeming satisfied, he released it and then made to push himself back upright.

“No, please, you need to stay down,” Jemma whispered, automatically reaching to restrain him. No one stopped her this time, thought Matt yelped again as she pushed against his shoulders to lie him on the floor.

“Can she stitch you up?” Karen murmured, kneeling down beside him.

“No,” Matt grunted, and he pressed his hands to his seeping wound. “I still –mmph,” he choked off with another wince.

“Agent Simmons, please, give us a minute?” Foggy muttered as he knelt beside Matt as well. Jemma hesitated, then backed away as quietly as she could down the hall. Foggy and Karen had joined hands and were hovering them near Matt’s face as she turned the corner.

“Is Matt alright?” a girl’s voice called out, and Jemma saw Natasha, Clint and Darcy all waiting on a couch nearby.

“Shh, he likely can still hear us,” Jemma whispered quickly back as she approached. “He’s improving, but he needs another few minutes.”

“I thought my sense of smell was annoying sometimes, it must be god-awful for him,” Clint murmured sympathetically.

“Scenting might actually have helped - it appeared Foggy and Karen were using their scents to try to focus him again,” Jemma theorized. “All his sensory abilities seemed to have been overwhelming him at once, so they focused him on only one as a calming mechanism. It’s effective for anxiety or panic attacks, and the symptoms were similar.”

“What caused him to collapse before? He didn’t lose too much blood,” Natasha questioned.

“No, the wound was mid-depth, but it didn’t appear to damage any organs or major blood vessels,” Jemma replied. “I suspect the blood loss along with the sudden temperature and altitude changes from the exposure outdoors and the flight, combined with the hormonal swings of the emotional aspect of the trauma, caused a simple vasovagal syncopal episode. The shock to normalize his heart rate seems to have overstimulated his regular sensory functions – well, regular for him. But he’ll recover fully with rest.”
“What about Ryan? She lost a lot of blood, is she alright?” Clint added quickly, concern marring his features.

Jemma hesitated for a moment. “Ryan is still unconscious,” she murmured. “She went into hypovolemic shock, and her heart stopped twice on the emergency evac flight. Right now, we’ve stitched her up, she’s receiving fluids and transfusions, and we’ve brought in a trusted ER doctor to supervise. Currently, there is no sign of organ damage, but we won’t know for sure until we can run more tests. We’re monitoring kidney function, but she’s not stable enough for an MRI or CT scan yet.”

Clint looked pale, and Darcy pulled him against her as Natasha swallowed once. “Her arms – is there nerve damage?” Natasha asked quietly, taking Clint’s hand.

“We’ll test for function when she awakes. She’s on prophylactic antibiotics and we’re monitoring for signs of infection, and for gangrene in her hands,” Jemma explained. “We’ll know more in a few hours.”

“Can – can we see her?” Clint stuttered, blinking quickly.

She shook her head. “The doctor recommends that visitors wait. We don’t want her crowded when she wakes up.”

“We… we’re sure she’s going to wake up, right?” Darcy whispered, and Natasha reached around to stroke along the back of her neck. Darcy relaxed back into the pressure.

“All we can do now is wait,” Jemma whispered, standing back up. “I’ll send someone when there’s news.” With that, she walked back down the hallway, despondent and worried scents behind her and a bleeding man in front.

* * * * * * *

Bucky hadn’t said a word since they’d found him, and Steve was starting to think they might not make it back to the SHIELD base anytime soon. Coulson and various agents were all swarming around the ruins of the mansion, and Bucky wouldn’t go any closer than the edge of the woods where they’d first waited, eyes hard and carefully blank. He’d refused to move until Steve and Thor went ahead of him, and now the mere sounds of the helicopter nearby had Steve scenting muted anxiety again.

“We’re going someplace safe, Buck,” Steve assured him, standing several feet away with Thor even further off. “The fastest way is in a plane, but we can drive if you need it. Or, if you can’t do either… we’ll walk, I guess.”

“If you deem it alright, Steve, I shall return to the base and keep you updated on Ryan’s condition during your travels,” Thor offered.

“We’re fine. Thank you for your help,” Steve replied quickly, and Thor nodded.

“Of course. James, I shall see you once you’ve fully recovered. It will not be long, I am sure,” Thor smiled at him. A moment later, he’d swung his hammer and took off into the sky, disappearing almost instantly.
Steve turned back to Bucky, whose stony expression hadn’t changed. “It’s up to you, Bucky,” he murmured. “But please, we have to go back to SHIELD somehow, I – we can’t abandon her.”


Steve wanted to ask if he was sure, wanted to hold him close and never let go, but he didn’t think either would be appreciated right then. “Alright. Stay here, I’ll arrange it. No one will come over without my permission. I’ll be back in three minutes tops.”

Bucky nodded curtly again, and Steve took off at a run towards Coulson.

“The helicopter is already set to return to the airfield,” Coulson called out from beside a large SUV as he approached. “I can have Barton or Romanoff come back to pilot if that would help Sergeant Barnes.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Is there any update on Ryan?”

“Last I knew, she was being stabilized. We’ve brought in an ER doctor to supervise Bruce and Jemma as well,” Coulson reported.

Steve nodded, breathing a small sigh of relief. “Thank you,” he yelled over his shoulder as he hurried back to Bucky. “Ryan was being stabilized, last Coulson knew,” he recited, stopping a few feet away from his mate. “The helicopter over there will take us to the airstrip, and it’s the same 20 minute flight as before. The pilots are SHIELD agents, they’ll show us credentials. Ready?”

Inscrutable eyes met his own, and together they jogged to the helicopter, Bucky at Steve’s six.

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Bucky’s mind was his own again, but every sudden move in his peripheral was a threat, and focusing on his own shallow breathing was the only reason he was able to survive the hellish ride in a too-cramped tin can. The adrenaline and stress were finally beginning to wane somewhat, however, and in their place exhaustion was quickly taking hold, even his highly enhanced abilities worn out from the ordeal. He fought the looming fatigue as best he could. The nightmares would only make things worse.

“Just another minute,” Steve murmured, sitting a seat away from him. “There’s no update on Ryan yet.”

Ryan. Ryan, Ryan. God, but it was all he could do not to tear himself apart. He continually relived the sight of her bloodied form shining in the sun, screaming and shaking and, in that moment, utterly alone. He was busy crushing the life out of his mate, his Alpha, half of his very heart.

A fresh wave of guilt stopped his breath short, leaving him dizzy and nauseated. He’d cowed to the will of others, let his mind and body be stolen from him again, and he’d rather have lost his other arm than feel this searing, screaming pain and know he deserved it. He closed his eyes so he wouldn’t see any part of Steve or himself. He shouldn’t have come back. Steve shouldn’t have come for him. He was a danger to them, the worst enemy he could imagine.

“Bucky,” he heard in a whisper as the plane jutted to a halt on the ground. “Le do thoil. Ní raibh sé do locht.” Steve. Always seeing good where there wasn’t any, taking the world on his shoulders
instead of properly assigning blame. He wasn’t even worthy of cleaning the blood off Steve’s shoes. The blood his failures had put there. Bucky stalked off the plane as soon as the doors opened, eyes darting automatically, scanning the entrances to the building and across the rooftops. No one else was present.

“Bucky!” Steve called after him. He ignored him, disappearing swiftly and silently inside the compound before Steve could catch up. He heard footsteps in the distance and doubled his speed, ducking into an empty room and locking the door, barring it with a chair. There were no windows, no other points of entry. Just a single unmade bed and table beside the chair he’d taken. He turned off the light, dropping to the floor, gripping his hair in his fists.

“Bucky! Bucky, please, open the door,” Steve’s voice pleaded, the knob jiggling but holding fast. Bucky didn’t answer.

“Steve,” a more muffled voice sounded. It was Sam, coming down the hallway from the central hub. “I think he wants some space, don’t you think?”

“Don’t do this, Buck, please,” Steve begged, appearing to ignore Sam. Bucky gripped his hair even tighter, screwing his eyes shut though it made no difference in the pitch-black room.


“I won’t abandon him! Not again!” Steve hissed, then pounded on the door yet again. “Bucky! Just let me in!”

Bucky remained silent, a hollow feeling - something like loneliness, but darker, more visceral - spreading through his chest. It was marginally better than the tumult of self-loathing. He retreated further into it, the outside world turning fuzzy and dim in his ears.

*** *** ***

Steve slammed his fist into the door so hard it might even leave him bruised. He wouldn’t break it down, wouldn’t cross that line, but with each passing second of silence, his heart splintered in his chest a little more.

“Please, Buck, I need you,” he whispered, leaning his head against the door.

“He needs time,” Sam insisted again. “Steve, we’ve all been through a trauma, and you can’t force him to deal with it how you want. As long as he’s not harming himself or others, we can’t help him unless he wants it. You know that.”

Steve screwed his eyes shut, shoving back tears. “I’m not leaving him. But… Bucky, please, Ryan!” he ended, half-yelling.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t see her right now,” Sam replied, laying a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “She’s still out, and no one goes into the room until after she wakes up and we get her settled. Doctor’s orders. So now’s a great time to get some rest.”

Ryan, Steve thought desperately, and the pieces of his heart clenched in his chest. He straightened back up, steeling himself. “I’m fine, Sam.” And with that, he sat on the floor, sitting with his back against the door. In his peripheral vision, he saw Sam shake his head and roll his eyes.
“I’m going to bring back some food, and if you don’t eat it, I swear to Christ…” Sam retorted, then turned and left.

Steve dropped his head back against the door with a small thud. “Bucky,” he murmured, the tears he forced back before starting to well up. “Mo am anachar a. You didn’t hurt me, I swear. I’m already healed.”

Still no answer. “You didn’t hurt me,” Steve repeated, closing his eyes again. “And when you’ve punished yourself enough, I’m right here. I’m never leaving you again. I love you.”

Exhaustion rolled over him like the tide, warring with the anxiety pulsing in his veins. Whatever Sam recommended, Steve knew he wouldn’t be able to rest for a long time.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Hi Daddy!!”

“Cassie!! Oh, peanut,” Scott sighed, light-headed with relief. “Oh god… Um, how was school? It was a half-day for parent conferences, right?”

His daughter’s tiny nose scrunched up on the phone screen as she giggled, not noticing his half-meltdown in her reminiscing. “Ms. Halley made us look at bugs in science, but I said I didn’t need to cause I had Ant-thea already and she’s a female carpenter ant and she likes meatloaf!”

Scott sniggered heartily, surreptitiously wiping away tears. “Cass, you know we can’t feed Ant-thea meatloaf, she needs to have – “

“She already eats my carrots and broccolis and I wanted her to have a treat and she really really liked it!”

“Alright, alright, just don’t tell your mom and Paxton that you’re not eating those,” Scott smiled. “But remember our deal: either do your homework – “

“Or eat my vegetables, I know,” Cassie exclaimed, rolling her eyes. “Paxton makes me do both, I wanna come stay with you! When are you coming home??”

“I – I’m not sure yet, I… finished helping the people that needed me, but someone’s really sick, and I want to see if she’s okay first. But right after that, I’ll be home. And we’ll have ice cream and go annoy Hope in her lab again, okay, peanut?”

“I don’t want ice cream, I want you, Daddy,” Cassie insisted, and Scott’s heart melted in his chest.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can, I swear,” he promised, but the door opened in the background and Cassie jumped up and hid the phone behind her back, ignoring him.

“Angela and her mom are here,” Maggie’s voice called out. “Cassie, I was looking for my phone, what are you – Scott? Scott, what’s going on? Where have you been?!” The view on the screen blurred as Cassie dodged her mother’s grab.

“I wanted to talk to Daddy!” Cassie shouted, and Scott quickly jumped in.

“Maggie, Mags, I’m alright, everything’s okay!” he exclaimed. “Cassie, please, give the phone to
Mom, we have to talk for a minute.”

“Fine,” Cassie sighed dramatically, and she bounced on her bed over to her mom. “Wait!” she cried, and she held the phone up to her face, the screen going dark for a moment as she pressed the phone to her lips with an exaggerated “Mwah!”

“I love you too, peanut,” Scott smiled, swallowing heavily.

“No, Dad, that was for the sick person! Kiss them better like you do with me!” With that, Cassie threw the phone at her mother, and Scott heard her jump off the bed and run out the door, shrieking for her friend downstairs. Scott didn’t think he’d ever loved his daughter more than in that moment.

“Cassie, do not throw Mommy’s phone!” Maggie yelled after her. “Scott? God, Scott, you look awful, what the hell happened?” Maggie insisted, and Scott broke down into tears.

“Oh my god, Scott! Are you okay??” Maggie implored, and Scott managed a nod through his heaving breaths.

“I – I’m f-fine,” he gasped, putting the phone down and wiping furiously at his eyes. “R-really, it just – god, it was – “

“Breathe, Scotty, just breathe, it’s okay,” Maggie comforted, and a minute or so later Scott managed to catch his breath and pick up the phone again.

“Sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to – “

“No, Scott, it’s okay, god,” Maggie whispered. “Jesus, you scared the shit out of us, disappearing like that,” she admitted.

“I’m sorry, I – Cassie can’t hear us, right?” Scott asked.

“No, she’s with Angela and Denise outside, it’s warm today,” Maggie replied, checking out of a window. “What happened, Scott? Do I need to get Paxton?”

“No, no, the police can’t know, no one can,” Scott insisted, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I – the Avengers called me.”


“Green guy’s name is Bruce, he’s actually really nice,” Scott smiled weakly. “There was – someone was kidnapped by a guy with… well, a psychopath, essentially. They, uh, they needed my help to get her back.”

Maggie appeared to stifle a laugh. “I’m sorry, it’s not funny, just – the Avengers needed you, Scott?”

“Alright, I’m hanging up on you now,” Scott said, rolling his red-rimmed eyes.

“No, no, I’m sorry! I’m sorry,” Maggie apologized, covering a smile with her hand. “So – the suit, then, right? Did… did everything go okay?”

“I – no, but in the end, yeah,” Scott hedged. “It was just… insane, is all.”

“Can – can you tell me any more? Or is it… I don’t know, is what they do classified?”

“Um, yeah, some of it probably is,” Scott shrugged. “But honestly, I’m not even sure if anyone
would believe me if I told them.”

Maggie shook her head. “You’ve always had a knack for getting into trouble,” she sighed.

“I’m not in any trouble. Not anymore,” Scott promised. “I told Cassie, I’ll be back soon. I know I missed my weekend, but…”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Maggie said, waving her free hand. “I know we decided on weekends because of your work and her school, but you know you can come anytime you want.”

Scott exhaled heavily, dropping his shoulders. “Thanks, Mags. I just – I really need to see her.”

“Just make sure you’re okay before you do, alright? She woke me up from another nightmare last night, she can’t – sense any baggage, or anything,” Maggie warned.

“No, no, of course not,” Scott replied, shaking his head. “And please, don’t tell Paxton anything. Not yet, at least. I’m not sure I was even supposed to say any of that to you.”

“Alright. Please call when you get home,” Maggie asked, giving him a stern look.

“Yeah, sure. I’ve, uh, I’ve got to call Luis now though, let him know I’m alright, so – “

“Oh yeah, tell him he and the boys are invited for dinner next week. And you too, obviously,” Maggie smiled. “We’re having a party to celebrate Donny’s retirement from the force.”

“Yeah, yeah, that sounds great. Jesus, I can’t wait to get back to California weather, it’s freezing here,” Scott exclaimed. “I think I hate Jersey. Oh, shit!”

“Alright, I’m hanging up before you do anything else stupid, good-bye!”

“Bye, Mags,” Scott murmured as the screen went black. He took a deep breath, then slowly stood back up. “Guys, I’m going to sleep for several lifetimes now. Behave,” he ordered sternly to the ant farm on the table beside the couch as he stretched his arms over his head.

Just then, Sam approached from down the hall, his normally mellow scent muted and stressed. “Hey, man,” Scott called out, and Sam paused. “Not to be a jerk or anything, but you don’t look so great. You alright?”

Sam huffed a small laugh, smiling grimly. “No. But thank you for actually asking.” With that, he walked away, and Scott sighed deeply. Then he turned on a lamp to keep the ants warm and laid down on the couch, shoving his face into the back corner and falling asleep almost instantly.

* * *   * * *   * * *


The irritating sound drilled through the fogginess in her brain, and Ryan reached for her phone to shut off the alarm. Her arms were too heavy, though, and even dragging open her eyelids was a debilitating exhaustion. Bright lights overhead were blinding, and she dropped them shut again.

Beep. Beep.
God, would her stupid alarm ever shut up? But she couldn't ignore it, she'd be late for work, Bruce would be disapp...

Bruce. The Hulk. Confrontation, pain, terror, runningyellingfightingscreaming -

*BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP*

Chapter End Notes

Steve - Please. It wasn't your fault.

I'm so sorry it took so long for this trash chapter to come out guys, it took me forever to be even remotely satisfied with it. The next one will have a bit more action, I promise <3
“Steve?”

Steve startled; he hadn’t even heard Clint approach, and his scent was deliberately muted. “Is Ryan awake?” he asked quickly.

“No, not yet,” Clint replied quietly. “Sam came by, and… I, uh, I wanted to talk to Bucky, if that’s cool.”

Steve blinked in surprise. “Uh,” he said eloquently.

“Look, I get it, I’m the last person you two want to see, but – “

“No, I mean,” Steve interrupted. “You don’t need my permission, it’s Bucky’s choice, and I – look, there’s still… stuff to hash out, but Ryan’s safe again. Kilgrave’s dead. We can… hash, later.”

Clint’s mouth quirked up the slightest amount. “You sound exhausted, Steve. Maybe close your eyes on the couch down there, give us a minute?”

Steve hesitated, torn. “… Sure,” he finally acquiesced. He was tired of the discord, and just plain tired, multiple adrenaline crashes having hit him at once even while he fought off more waves of anxiety. “Bucky? Clint wants to talk to you. I’m going just down the hallway. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” There was no answer, but there hadn’t been before anyway.

“Thanks, Steve. I’ll be quick,” Clint promised. Steve hesitated another moment, then left.

Clint sat down facing the door, legs crossed and hands fiddling idly with an arrow from his quiver, still slung across his back. “Hey, Bucky,” he began rather timidly. “I know you don’t want to talk to anyone, especially me. I get it. If you hate me for the rest of your life, I get it. I’m gonna hate myself for all this that long,” he confessed. “If you’re not even listening, that’s cool. But what I wanted to say… You and me have something in common we’ve never talked about. I know you know what happened, on paper, and maybe even from Steve’s perspective.

“But he and I hadn’t met then, and when Loki brainwashed me… I know what it’s like to do horrible things, and have no control over your own body. It’s… like your mind’s raped, over and over again. And I was actually raped, as a kid, so I know what I’m talking about,” he choked off in a whisper. His hands were shaking, and he put the arrow down before he stabbed himself accidentally.
“You had it a million times worse than I did, but I still know how it feels. And the point of me bringing up our collective worst memories,” he added with a dark laugh, “is that right after Loki, I hid from Nat. I ran away, even though we’d finally been talking about actually mating. I… I couldn’t stand what I’d done, and I was terrified of what I might do. I didn’t know if there’d be… well… but, you know Nat, can’t hide anything from her, myself included.”

He paused a moment, listening to tell if Bucky was hearing him. There was nothing. “It was the angriest she’s ever been at me,” he continued anyway. “She beat the shit out of me, verbally at least. Although she punched me once or twice in there, too, I think. Neither of us are that great with feelings,” he said with a slight chuckle.

“But, anyway, she told me she didn’t care about what I’d done, because it wasn’t me. I argued with her, cause I’m an idiot. And…” he paused, holding back tears at the memory still. “She said I hadn’t hurt her then. But I was hurting her now by running instead of letting her help me, and that was my choice.”

The first sound from the room, just the slightest shifting. Clint looked up at the door from his hands, hoping. “You don’t have to let anyone in. But don’t make the same mistakes I did, is all I’m trying to say. Cause I think it’s fair to say both our mates will win a stubbornness contest.” He swallowed thickly, then stood back up. “We mated soon after, and then we met Darce within a year,” he murmured. “Good things do still happen, after.” He turned away, wiping his eyes, and went to fetch Steve. Distantly, he heard a small click, and a smile almost came to his face.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Steve ran back down the hall and tried the door again. It was unlocked, and he was almost breathless with relief. “Bucky,” Steve sighed, entering quietly and leaving the door open the slightest crack for light. “How are you feeling?”

“Little less like my brain is scrambled eggs,” Bucky intoned, looking away from him as he sat on the floor. His scent was despondent, like a darkened downpour instead of its usual airy freshness, and Steve’s heart sank. He came closer through the unlit room, sitting down on the floor across from him. “Can I touch you?” he whispered softly.

“No,” Bucky replied flatly. Steve closed his eyes, and they sat in silence for some time, only punctuated by their breathing.

“We’re going to have to talk eventually,” Steve whispered, breaking the desolate quiet a half-hour later.

“Nothing to talk about,” Bucky replied.

“Bucky, please,” Steve implored suddenly. “What’s it gonna to take to convince you?”

Bucky shot up instantly, a snarl marring his face. “When are you gonna get it through your thick head that I’m not worth it?!” he shouted. “Jesus fuck, what happens when I finally snap for good? You gonna just let me kill you?! You gonna leave her all alone?!”

“For god’s sakes, Buck, what about the year we just had together?!” Steve yelled back, pain coursing through his heart as he stood. “All the flashbacks we worked through, all the nightmares I held you after?! Everything we’ve already overcome!! How can you EVER think I’d leave you?!”
“YOU WON’T, THAT’S THE PROBLEM!!!” Bucky screamed in his face. “You and goddamn loyalty, waiting to go out in a blaze of glory together! I can’t live without you, Steve! You and – “, he suddenly cut off, teeth clacking together as he turned away. “Someone took control and made me almost kill you. Again,” he muttered despairingly. “And it’ll happen again, one way or another, and if it doesn’t kill you, it’ll kill me. And Ry – “, he cut off again, panting harshly.

“Bucky,” Steve breathed, just barely holding himself back from touching his mate. He hadn’t been given permission, he couldn’t, no matter how it pained him. “You were gone for less than a half hour. You remember how long it took to get you back, the first time you had a flashback?”

Bucky stayed silent, but tears were glittering in his eyes, reflecting in the light from the open door. “Five days,” Steve answered himself. “Right after you came back, and there was that police chase we witnessed when we went out, and you heard the sirens and gunshots and ran. I found you almost a week later on the roof of the apartment building we lived in before the Tower, down in Brooklyn. You were punishing yourself then, too.”

“I didn’t try to rip your head off then!” Bucky spat venomously.

“You did the next time,” Steve countered quietly. “That night, you had a nightmare and I woke up underneath you, your metal arm choking me.”

“You’re proving my point pretty well there, Steve,” Bucky snarled, swiping his flesh hand furiously across his eyes.

“Soon as you realized, you let me go. And as soon as you let me, I held you in my arms and told you exactly what I’m telling you now,” Steve continued doggedly. “You’re mine, and I’m yours. I love you. What those fuckers did to you is my worst regret, my biggest failure. And as far as it is in my power, no one will ever hurt you again.”

“Fucking hell, it’s not on you! It’s on me!!” Bucky shouted desperately. “All the people I’ve killed, everyone I’ve hurt, it was my body they used!”

“Bucky,” Steve exhaled shakily, a small ray of hope blooming in his chest. “A year ago, you would’ve said it was you that did it. Not that HYDRA used you. And you said ‘Someone took control, it’ll happen again’, not ‘I’ll do it again’.”

Bucky blinked once, silent tears streaming. “You’ve come so far,” Steve whispered. “We’ve come so far. You’re healing, Buck. We both are. Before now, you hadn’t had any flashbacks or nightmares for months.

“And everyone was controlled by Kilgrave, except Matt and Ryan, and even Matt fell under his spell later. But Ryan stopped him, she saved you. Saved everyone. She’s the last person to be in danger from you, even if you were dangerous to her. And you’re not dangerous to me, either. I’ll say it as many times as you need me to.”

“Telling a lie a hundred times don’t make it true,” Bucky muttered, voice cracking.

“Then I’ll tell it a thousand, ‘til you realize it’s not a lie,” Steve countered simply, quietly. “’S like I said, mo anamchara. You’re mine, and I’m yours. ‘N like you tell me every day, I’m a stubborn idiot. I’m not letting you go.”

Bucky swallowed a sob, a wrenching sound emanating from his chest. Then, still looking away, he reached out his right hand, and Steve grasped it tight, bringing it to his lips and gently kissing the palm. A few minutes later, Bucky’s shoulders stopped shaking, and he exhaled heavily. “I think I
need sleep, I can’t think,” he whispered. “But I – the nightmares, I can’t – “

“I’ll get Bruce to give you something, you won’t dream,” Steve promised. “Ryan’s still out, I’ll wake you when she’s up.”


“You won’t hurt me,” Steve insisted. “But I’ll go, if that’s what you need. Thank you for telling me.” He kissed Bucky’s hand once more, then released it gently. “You wouldn’t have done that a year ago, either,” he noted with a small smile. “I’ll get the medicine, no one else will come in without my permission.”

Bucky nodded. “Go raibh maith agat, m’fhíorghrá,” he whispered shakily. “Ní féidir liom dul-“

“Is breá liom tú. Alán,” Steve inserted. “Ag dul duit gach rud, mo anamchara. An chuid eile anois, agus beidh mé a fheiceáil tú go luath.” He smiled once more, and then closed the door behind him.

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“Jemma? You in here?” Fitz asked, entering the biochemistry lab in search of his mate. There was no response, but he noticed her leaning over a lab bench, a vial of blood in a rack next to her, looking absolutely engrossed in whatever she was doing with the pipette in her hand beside the microcentrifuge. “Jemma?” he called out a bit louder.

“Oh!” she startled, clapping a latex-gloved hand to her chest. “Fitz, you gave me a fright! Has Ryan woken up?”

“Sorry, sweetheart, and no, I set an alert on your phone so you’ll find out. But, what’re you doing, though? Dr. Lawson was taking care of Ryan’s bloodwork, wasn’t he?” he questioned, coming to sit on a free stool beside her.

“He wouldn’t think to run the test I’m doing,” Jemma replied, carefully inserting a few microliters of blood at a time into the microarray. “I thought of a way to test our hypothesis about the mechanism of Ryan’s powers.”

“Of course you did,” Fitz remarked fondly. “What is it, then?”

“Oh come now, Fitz, you’re smart enough to figure it out, too,” Jemma smirked, laughing.

Fitz rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Give me a hint to start off with, then?”

“Natural selection, dear. What would be the ultimate survival advantage, even beyond telepathic mind control or physical atomic manipulation?”

Fitz’s feet wandered, getting up and pacing back and forth as he pondered the riddle. Just as Simmons inserted the cassette into the reader, it hit him. “Oh my god!” he gasped, clapping a hand over his mouth. “Do you really – no, people have been researching it for decades, there’ve been no major breakthroughs, how could – “

“I have no idea, it’s incredible to even think of,” Jemma proclaimed, shaking her head. “But is it any
more incredible than everything else she’s capable of?”

Fitz exhaled heavily. “I suppose not,” he admitted, intense curiosity burning inside his chest. “I mean, I know we ran across it once before with Daisy’s mother, sort of, but she’s obviously nothing like the Inhumans, and even then it couldn’t be nearly the same – “

“No, I know, I have no idea how this could even begin to work!” Jemma interrupted, sounding much more elated than someone entirely clueless should. “Do you think she’ll let us study her further?”

Fitz’s excited expression instantly fell flat. “Oh god, Jemma, what you’re doing – it’s illegal, she hasn’t given any kind of consent!” he hissed, eyes wide.

“No, it’s not! It’s not. Per se,” Jemma defended in a fervent whisper. “This obviously has medical implications, and could affect how she’s treated now and in the future. It’s a… precaution, is all.”

“Jemma,” Fitz sighed, running his hands through his hair. “After everything you were worrying about with the ethics of SHIELD’s actions, now you’re doing this?”

“Leo, I’m just confirming this hypothesis. That’s it! And besides, if it’s true, don’t you think she needs to know? It won’t be long before she notices on her own, if she hasn’t already. She deserves to know how her powers work, if we can tell her. I know she hasn’t given express consent, but this is potentially life-altering information!”

Fitz sighed again. “I… suppose that’s true,” he gave in. “But just this, we can’t do anything more, and we keep this a secret from everyone except Ryan.”

“Obviously, Fitz, I’m not an idiot,” Jemma spat, rolling her eyes at him. “But if I’m right, this even explains how she wasn’t affected by Kilgrave. We need to understand that, too, in case we ever again face anything like that monster. It even explains why Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes have reacted so strongly to her, biologically speaking, at least.”

“Yeah, yeah, alright,” Fitz said. “Store the results on my encrypted server, yeah?”

“Already done, dear.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

Ryan’s eyes flew open, adrenaline surging, and blurry shapes swam in her sight as she jerked upright. Tearing pain shot through her torso and arms, and she crumpled into herself with a shout. Her heartbeat pounded rapidly in her ears, synchronized with the incessant beeping as she blinked hard, trying to clear her vision.

“Ryan!” an unfamiliar voice called out, and a scent like a sunny field of wheat suddenly invaded her nose. “Ryan, my name’s Dr. Lawson, I need you to lie still, okay?”

A man she’d never seen before was running up to her, and Ryan screamed in terror as a mass of hospital equipment surrounding her came into focus. No, no, she wouldn’t let this happen again, they couldn’t –

Her hands protested, burning pain shooting up her heavily bandaged forearms as she spied a needle poking through the crook of her elbow and yanked it out violently, blood spurting out and splattering
onto the sheets. A small device taped to her chest was next, and she threw off the cables pooled on the bed.

“Hey, Ryan, it’s okay!” the man shouted, grabbing her arms and restraining them to her sides. Ryan screamed again, voice thin, and instinctively she threw her head forward, headbutting the man with a grunt. He released her with a shout of pain, and Ryan focused a moment and thrust out a hand, her heavy arm burning with pain. The man froze in place, outlined in a blue glow, and Ryan threw herself to the side and rolled off the bed to her feet. Suddenly, the world spun around as dizziness overwhelmed her, and she managed to stumble halfway to the door before her legs gave out.

“RYAN!” another voice yelled, and strong arms deftly caught her just before she smashed her head on the ground, grasping the back of her neck with a firm hand. Instantly, the fight drained out of her, and she slumped bonelessly in his embrace as the smell of warm cinnamon surrounded her.

“Hey, it’s okay! You’re alright, mo chroí, tá tú ag ceart go leor, tá tú sábháilte...” Steve’s soft words devolved into gibberish as her head spun painfully, unable to protest as she was lifted effortlessly back onto the bed and carefully laid down. His face swam in and out of focus above her, deep blue eyes trained on her own and mouth curved in the slightest smile. Just before everything faded to black, she registered a hand ever-so-gently trace down her cheek.

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Steve almost panicked as Ryan went limp onto the bed, head lolling as she fell unconscious. Wide-eyed, he quickly leaned in and put an ear to the top of her chest over the flimsy hospital gown, watching for movement at the same time. Her heartbeat was strong and steady, chest rising naturally, and Steve felt a surge of relief. He leaned back again, gazing down at her face. She was still so pale, swollen eyes darkened from smudged makeup and exhaustion. Her skin was cold to the touch, especially in her hands as he grasped one tightly, his other hand cradling her neck. God, but even now, splattered with blood and dirt, she was beautiful. Even now, she smelled like heaven come to earth, like she was made for him and his mate, and his heart soared in his chest. “Bí láidir, mo chroí,” he whispered, stroking her skin lightly. “Táimid anseo le haghaidh duit.”

“Sir, I need you out of the way!” the other man suddenly插入, darting forward and reaching down to Ryan’s neck near where Steve’s hand rested. Instinctively, Steve grabbed the other man’s wrist in a tight grip, growling fiercely as he stared him down.

“I’m checking her pulse and readministering fluids, if she doesn’t finish the transmission her condition could deteriorate,” the man countered, staring right back at him.

“Steve! Steve, let him go,” Bruce’s voice called out, and Steve scented a familiar lavender as a hand tugged on his arm. Steve blinked, then released the other man, letting Bruce usher him back a few feet. “You can’t be in here right now, I’m sorry,” Bruce said calmly as the other man darted around Ryan, checking her over and inserting a new IV line.

“No, stay,” the man ordered, hurrying over to insert something into the IV. “She panicked when she woke up but you calmed her down, if she comes to again – just wait back there, please.” The beeping of the heart monitor restarted, and the man breathed a sigh of relief. “Alright, pulse is good, breathing’s normal. She’ll be fine,” he reported, turning to them. “And I think we can rule out nerve and motor damage. She’s got some fight in her,” he noted with a smile, cracking an ice pack from a drawer and holding it to his forehead. Steve bit back a protective growl aimed at the stranger.

“Who are you?” he managed with some semblance of politeness as he moved beside the bed,
hovering over Ryan.

“I’m Dr. Lawson, the ER doctor that Mr. Stark flew in,” he introduced cordially, extending his free hand. “But please, call me Hank.”

Steve paused a moment, then shook his hand, gripping just a little too hard. “Steve Rogers,” he replied curtly.

“Nice to meet you, Steve,” Hank smiled. “And thank you, for catching your mate when she fell. I should have anticipated she’d be… similar, to you guys. Although I’ve never heard of any confirmed cases of telekinesis before.” He was remarkably calm about the whole situation, and Steve stayed silent, unsure whether he should trust or distrust the doctor because of it.

“Um, she’s not his mate, she’s not mated,” Bruce inserted, his cheeks slightly pink. “And yes, she has several enhanced abilities. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed the extent to which you’d been informed - we can go over what we have of her medical records now, if you haven’t already?”

“Bruce, wait,” Steve called as Bruce rifled through files on the far counter. “Bucky needs to be here, wait with her while I get him.”

“Actually, Steve, I’m sorry, but I think you need to leave now,” Hank inserted calmly.

Steve did growl this time, laying a hand on Ryan’s left shoulder unconsciously. “She needs us, you just said – !” he started, but Hank interrupted.

“That was just for the moment, in case she recovered quickly. But she needs rest, and I’ve administered a sedative and her next dosage of painkillers. She won’t wake up for some time now, and you look like you could use some sleep, too.”

“I’m fine, I’m staying with her,” Steve replied firmly, and Bruce was starting to get anxious from his angered scent and the tension in the air.

“Steve, Hank is her primary physician, we have to follow his orders for her own good,” Bruce said, taking a deep breath. Steve looked more than ready to start a fight, and Bruce wasn’t in the right headspace to deal with it. “Please, there will be time later.” He gave Steve a pointed look, and Steve’s jaw clenched. But he nodded tersely, stepping away from Ryan.

“Bucky needs something to help him sleep without nightmares,” he said curtly.

“Of course, Steve. I’ll come by in a few minutes,” Bruce nodded, and Steve stole a last glance at Ryan, eyes worried, before stalking out of the room. Hank turned towards Bruce, both eyebrows raised. “He’s very… protective,” Bruce acknowledged with a small smile, moving to the far end of the room so as not to wake Ryan. “But I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Why couldn’t he stay?”

“I’m concerned by his behavior,” Hank said with a frown, joining him. “He was overly protective of her for even if they were mated, and their scents are remarkably well synced for not being so. I’ve never come across non-mated scents so well-coordinated. The only time it happens to that extent, as far as I know, is rare cases with identical twins.”

Bruce paused for a moment, then moved back over beside Ryan and sniffed the air where Steve had waited. “You’re right,” he murmured, surprise in his tone. “She doesn’t scent as mated, but the way their scents mesh together…”

“You can understand why I’m cautious,” Hank said. “I have no idea what the implications of that and Steve’s actions just now could be, but I’d like to find out.”
“Well, the protectiveness is just Steve’s personality, I can assure you,” Bruce mused. “I – I’m not sure what to make of the rest though, it’s hardly my area of expertise.”

“We might be able to offer some insight, doctors,” Simmons inserted, entering the room quietly to stand by them, Fitz right behind her. “But as it’s not relevant to her current condition, I’m not sure if we should discuss it with anyone besides Ryan. Oh, and Mr. Murdock is doing fine, his mates are forcing him to rest.” Bruce nodded in response as Hank continued to frown.

“I’m sorry, I think it is relevant,” Hank disagreed. “She instinctively calmed when he touched her neck, that’s a Beta/Omega response to mates. That, on top of their scents, and the fact I saw Steve already has a mating scar and was talking about someone called Bucky? I know a little of Captain America’s history. It’s highly unlikely Ryan’s related to him, and even if she was, I’d still be surprised at how well their scents coincide. And his behavior is a little extreme - and honestly, inappropriate - for just being cousins, or siblings, if it was even possible. If we don’t have a better answer, I’d like to comb through Ryan’s medical history and draw some blood from both of them, start looking for one.”

“Steve’s blood and its composition are listed as top secret because of the serum,” Bruce noted. “Tony had to fight for it to legally belong to him when he woke up. They won, but only a few authorized personnel can have access to it. We would have to go through a lot of red tape.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Fitz shook his head. “We only need Ryan’s.”

Simmons added, “I understand your concerns, but I can almost entirely assure you she and the Captain are not biologically related, should our theory be correct. And I believe I can confirm it with a blood serum analysis.”

“What is it you’re searching for, Dr. Simmons?” Hank asked, looking more and more concerned.

Jemma hesitated, looking to Fitz. He gave a small nod, and she returned it. “I’ve had an idea about her powers’ mechanism, and if I’m right, it will explain why her scent is so similar to one of being mated to Captain Rogers. And Sergeant Barnes as well, I would assume. Right now, I’m testing her p16 levels.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not following,” Bruce frowned.

“Why would the levels of a normal tumor suppressant protein explain – well, any of this?” Hank added.

Jemma looked back out the door nervously, and Fitz took her hand. “Because as I’m sure you know, p16 concentrations increase linearly with age,” Jemma explained in a murmur. “And if I’m right, hers will be approximately at the level of an 18-to-20-year-old, not a 26-year-old.”

“She’s 25,” Bruce automatically corrected, stunned. “And you…”

“You think she isn’t aging?” Hank interrupted, a look of disbelief on his face.

“She is 26, her birthday was back in October. And we think a lot more than that,” Fitz answered with a shrug. “But for starters, yes.”

Chapter End Notes
Bucky - Thank you, my true love (Bucky's special name for Steve). I don't deserve -

Steve - I love you. So much. You deserve everything, my soulmate. Rest now, and I'll see you soon.

Steve - My heart (traditional Irish term of endearment for lovers), you're alright, you're safe... Be strong, my heart. We're here for you.

I PROMISE next chapter Ryan will be fully awake and starting to deal with everything. But hey, if you got this far, you're the one who chose to read my terrible writing, that's on you ;)}
The med bay was entirely silent, except for the blips of the heart monitor across the room. Bruce looked stunned, and Dr. Lawson torn between incredulity and concern for Jemma’s mental health.

“I know this sounds, quite frankly, fantastical,” Jemma admitted. “But once the results are in, I can explain everyth – “

A vibrating buzz interrupted, and she whipped out her phone and keyed in the password. Everyone crowded around, peering at the numbers displayed on the report. Jemma exhaled heavily, a little overwhelmed even though she’d been expecting it. “Well, it seems I have some explaining to do.”

“We need to run more tests, confirm the… diagnosis,” Dr. Lawson said, seeming rattled. “The sedatives will wear off in a few hours, she needs a full body X-ray, MRI and more bloodwork.”

“What else will back up the results?” Bruce questioned, leaning back against the counter and looking a little pale.

“Different bones fuse together by the time full adulthood is reached around age 18, such as the lower end of the radius and femur growth plates,” Hank answered. “And the MRI will give us better insight into brain development. There are other tests we can run for more specific aging as well. But those p16 numbers are about typical for a 21-year-old, and I have no idea what developmental stage she might have… reached stasis in, if that’s what’s really happening.”

“I would hypothesize all the tests will show the same result as this,” Jemma inserted. “I didn’t take into account bone fusion until you mentioned it just now, but 21 could be the age her body fully finished developing, yes?”

“For females, it’s more like 18,” Hank disagreed. “It’s possible it took her a little longer, but another three years? Unless she had significant nutritional defects in childhood, it’s doubtful. And her other bloodwork didn’t show any kinds of problems that might accompany stunted growth.”

Jemma and Fitz met each other’s eyes, communicating silently. “No, you’re right, that would make sense,” Jemma mumbled, nodding at him. “Dr. Lawson, if you had to hazard a guess, are her p16 levels closer to those of someone age 20, exactly 21, or closer to 22?”

“Between 21 and 22, but a bit closer to 21,” Hank answered. “Why?”

“Yes, yes, she is still aging, then,” Jemma said distractedly, starting to pace. “Just somewhere about one-third of the normal rate, after she was fully grown, of course – evolution can only build on
what’s already present, there’s no way around the eventual telomere degradation linked to aging without a completely new branch of cellular development, which is far more difficult than simply— “

“I’m sorry, Agent Simmons, did you just say evolution?” Bruce interrupted, eyes wide.

Fitz nodded, speaking up. “Again, this needs more testing to confirm, but so far it all points to a modified version of it,” he explained. “Ryan gained her powers over time throughout her childhood, and Jemma was able to draw correlation between developmental stages – physical, social, emotional, psychological, et cetera - and the onset of each specific ability. From the testimonies we listened to, it seems likely her only real ability is adaptation. A sort of… evolutionary superpower, if you will. The slowed aging confirms, as it corresponds – “

“To increased survivability,” Bruce finished, nodding. “It’s the ultimate advantage, simply not dying as long as you can. I just – her abilities evolved to help her survive, that’s… wait,” he muttered, looking off at nothing in the distance. “She had met Kilgrave before. And he… she evolved to be immune to his powers, didn’t she?”

“Exactly, Dr. Banner,” Fitz affirmed. “We don’t yet have a solid understanding of the timetable for her powers and abilities to develop, but it was seven years between their meetings, yeah? More than enough time for her, it would seem.”

Hank was shaking his head. “I wouldn’t believe any of this, if she hadn’t frozen me in place by just throwing out a hand a minute ago,” Hank noted. “But you said this also explained Steve’s behavior? I’m not following.”

Jemma and Fitz met each other’s eyes again, looking more apprehensive than before. “Ryan was born unprocessed, to two unprocessed parents,” Jemma explained. “She has also been homeless on and off most of her adult life, after her parents died when she was 11. She presented as an Omega about a week ago now, in a rather memorable fashion.”

“Well, I’d say that’s impossible, but clearly it’s not for her,” Hank sighed. “Okay. But evolution needs a trigger, something to happen to make one trait more advantageous for survival than another. What triggered that change?”

The two scientists hesitated for a moment, before Fitz blurted out, “Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes.”

Bruce and Hank’s eyebrows elevated to new heights. “It had never been advantageous for her to present earlier; her abilities seem to focus on her survival, not passing down genes like the normal evolutionary strategy,” Jemma explained. “She would’ve been able to stay under the radar in her varying unstable situations, never had to expend energy on mating or bearing children when there wasn’t a suitable biological partner or setting. But when she moved into Avengers Tower, her life was more stable than it had been for years, and she was surrounded by potential mates, except for the one trio already present.”

“Wait, wait,” Bruce interrupted again. “Steve and Bucky, their behavior, Steve’s scent meshing so well with hers –“

“She presented to be their perfect biological mate!” Jemma exclaimed. “Her heat was so intense so as to be enticingly attractive to them.”

“Why was – why did the other guy go after her, then? Why wouldn’t she be attractive to only them?” Bruce asked quietly, and Jemma couldn’t meet his eyes as she answered.
“They have found her especially attractive, we’ve seen it in their behavior, but there’s no way to present so as to only be appealing to them. Ryan’s abilities might be able to specialize her scent towards them, but their biology can be attracted to Omegas in general, just as Omegas can be attracted to Betas or Alphas. So Ryan has to scent as an Omega in the general sense as well. Combine that with the intensity of her heat as just described…”

“Yeah, I understand,” Bruce nodded brusquely. “It explains why their scents coordinate, then.”

Jemma nodded as well. “Scents gain new undertones when people mate to designate family groups, which is why it can happen to a certain extent to children and their parents, and even more with twins, though their scents are underdeveloped until their own presentations. But Ryan and Captain Rogers – and Sergeant Barnes, I would suspect – scent almost as though mated because, in a sense… they’re meant to be.”

Everyone was silent for a few moments. “Physical soulmates,” Bruce intoned, shaking his head. “I’m… going to go get Bucky his sleep aid,” he finished, rifling through a medicine cabinet.

Hank still looked disbelieving. “All her life past age 13 or so, the earliest she could present, there was no one and no time that was ever advantageous for her to do so? On that note, why them instead of anyone else in the Tower?”

“Right now, it’s the best explanation we have,” Fitz shrugged. “And… well, this might be speculating a bit, but factors such as emotions, social setting, personalities, and more could’ve been taken into account; they’re all part of the greater environment. If Ryan hated someone, or they simply didn’t get along well, being mated to them wouldn’t help her survival even if they were a good biological match. He, she, or they would have to be special, somehow, for all this to occur. It… might even be based on her feelings towards them, or theirs towards her, or both. Or it’s another phenomenon we don’t yet recognize or understand.”

“So they’re not just physical soulmates, but possibly actual ones,” Hank sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, okay. I think I need a break, too. Dr. Simmons, keep an eye on her, please.”

“Of course, sir,” Jemma nodded. “And please, I’d like to be the one to explain all this to her when she awakens, if that’s alright. Woman to woman?”

“I’m not fighting you for that job,” Hank said with a small smile. “Good luck. You’re gonna need it.” He and Bruce left the med bay in opposite directions, and Jemma and Fitz took seats across from Ryan’s bed, holding each other’s hand.

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It’d been hours since he’d been kicked out of Ryan’s room, now approaching late evening, and Steve was lying on a couch alone, frustrated out of his mind. He’d considered returning to the gym, destroying Coulson’s equipment for a while, but that would mean leaving Bucky, and he couldn’t do that. Even though Bucky was peacefully asleep, had been ever since Bruce had come with the meds, seeming distracted and nonplussed. Steve had gotten nothing out of him except a vague assurance that Ryan was still fine, and he’d hurried away immediately. No one else had come by, and Steve didn’t seek out company.

It was giving him plenty more time to think, at least. If he could concentrate past his anxieties for
even a minute. He’d managed to ignore them somewhat before Ryan had been rescued, able to focus on trying to find and save her, but they were insistently intrusive now.

Was he angry at Clint, Natasha, and Tony? He’d thought the answer would be easier than it was.

Kilgrave’s face flashed through his mind, and he wanted to punch a wall, bare his teeth, rip the earth apart at its seams. He’d tried to take everything from Steve, destroy his mate, his team, Ryan. His new, chosen family, if he was being honest. And… Kilgrave had the same ability Ryan did. Clint, Natasha and Tony… how was he supposed to hate their actions, when he could understand their reasons so well?

Ryan was nothing like that monster, the furthest thing from him. But the single similarity was undeniable. It could’ve been Ryan that did what Kilgrave did. She would never, no! But Steve had trusted her, and the others hadn’t, and honestly? It had simply worked out in his favor this time. What if it had been him that was wrong?

Their prejudices, the distrust, the secrecy, the lies – all of that he could hate, in principle. But none of it was to hurt him, or Bucky, or even to hurt Ryan. That had been the result, but not the intention. No, he had to believe the intention was good, because otherwise he had misjudged all of his teammates and everything they stood for. But now, he had to decide what wrong actions with good intentions meant in the long run.

The long run. The future. Before all of this, he and Bucky had been content to live as Avengers. Had been looking forward to working missions together soon. Had wanted to keep doing their part to serve, as long as they still could. It was all they’d known, how they’d lived for so long now. And if Steve was honest with himself, he loved it. He loved making the world a better, safer place, in ways no one else - except perhaps Bucky – could because of his abilities. It was part of who he was. Bucky had never had that same intrinsic drive to throw himself into the fight, but he found value in it all the same.

But their trusts had been broken so many times now, and Steve didn’t know how much more he could take. He couldn’t ask Bucky to work for SHIELD after this. He didn’t know if he could go back himself. The old SHIELD had been infiltrated before it began, and those Steve really trusted had been on the right side in the end. Now? He didn’t know where the lines were anymore, much less where everyone stood.

And Ryan. Ryan, Ryan. The thoughts he least wanted to face were the ones regarding her. She could hate them all, and he wouldn’t blame her. He wouldn’t blame her if she got up and walked out of their lives forever. It had to be inevitable. Even though it would break a part of him he could never fully patch back up.

He didn’t want to say the words yet. Didn’t even want to think them. It might make things easier, when his worries came true. But not doing so felt like lying to himself, and his Ma had taught him to always be honest. But maybe he didn’t need to. The truth was screaming in his bones, his heart, his very being, regardless.

But what if she just - left? What if everything had finally fallen apart for good? What if nothing had, except Bucky didn’t feel the same as he? What if Bucky did? What if Ryan… no, that was impossible, she couldn’t, how could she? But what if she did? No. Any hope was a pipe dream. But could she ever… God, was she ever going to wake up? What were they going to do when she did? How could they even begin to make this right? Did he even deserve to try?

Anger and anxiety flared again, and he was right back to where he started: worrying incessantly and trying not to grind his teeth.
“You shouldn’t be thinking so hard alone,” Sam’s voice called out, and Steve sat up as he approached. “Lord only knows how many circles you’ll spin yourself in.”

Steve refused on principle to admit how many times he’d already spun. “Is Ryan awake?” he asked, quickly standing up.

“Not to my knowledge, no. But, I finally got some sleep, and I’m feeling a bit better now. How ‘bout you?” Sam replied.

Steve knew what he was doing, and frankly wasn’t in the mood. “What is it?” Steve questioned flatly.


“What is it?” Steve repeated, irritation coloring his tone.

Sam smiled, small and close-mouthed. “I’ve been around for pretty much all of this, except for when you fought the Hulk and Tony,” he began. “I saw the first part on the security after. And Scott mentioned a little while ago about what happened in the basement, back in the mansion,” he continued. “When you threw a guy across the room by his neck, and Bucky took down the other in about two seconds flat?”

Steve raised his eyebrows at Sam. “And?”

“Seems like you and Bucky both reacted pretty strongly,” Sam noted casually.

“It’s not like you to play games, Sam,” Steve huffed. He knew he was being petulant, but right then he didn’t care.

“There’s no need to pick a fight, Steve. We’re just having a talk,” replied Sam with the same gentle smile. “I wanted to ask you how you were feeling when you did those things.”

“Gonna charge me for the session if I answer?” Steve retorted, glaring as he towered over Sam.

“Please, an outpatient visit on a weekend? You can’t afford me,” Sam teased. More seriously, he added, “I’m worried about you, Steve.”

“Sam, I’m fine,” Steve returned impatiently. “Can I wait for my mates in peace now?”

Sam blinked. “No. Because last I checked, you only have one mate, currently,” he countered simply. Steve’s face colored red, and he looked away. “You feel that seriously about her, then?” Sam queried.

“How’s this any of your business, Sam?” Steve spat. Then his eyes dropped closed for a second, and he wiped a hand over his face with a sigh. “Sorry.”

He looked as exhausted as Sam had ever seen him, and it worried him. Now probably wasn’t the best time for this, he thought, but knowing Steve, it might be his only chance before the man did something impulsive. “It’s alright,” Sam offered graciously, standing up and walking to Steve. “It’s not my business, if you don’t want it to be. But you oughta talk to someone about what you’re feeling. Get some perspective, some clarity.”

Steve took a deep breath and met Sam’s eyes again. It seemed the truth was bursting out of him whether he liked it or not. No time like the present. “I love her. That clear enough?”
Sam’s eyebrows shot up in surprise before he could catch himself. He really hadn’t expected that, even with all he’d seen and heard. “Actually, no, Steve, it’s not,” he answered carefully. “You love Ryan? Same way you love Bucky?”

Steve hesitated for just a moment before nodding, “Yeah.”

“Have you told Bucky yet?”

Steve’s jaw tightened a moment. “Haven’t had the chance,” he rumbled. “Been busy trying to rescue Ryan from a psychopath, remember?”

“No, I remember,” Sam agreed with a smile. “She saved our lives instead, though, as I recall.”

“Yeah,” replied Steve, his voice a little softer. “Are we good?”

“So, she presented just a few days ago,” Sam persisted. “And obviously you found her heat scent attractive. And now she’s saved your life, and your mate’s life for the second time.”

Steve sighed. “Just say it already, Sam.”

“Steve… I’m not making any kind of judgments, pronouncements, or anything. You don’t need to defend yourself to me or anyone. I’m just making an observation.”

“What?”

Sam sighed through his nose, arms crossed in front. “Just that nobody saw any of this coming. Including yours and Bucky’s reactions.”

Steve stared at him, eyes intense, and his tone was tinged with sarcasm. “Sorry, did you want us to take it lying down when – ?! “

“Steve,” Sam interrupted exasperatedly. “You know that’s not what I meant.” He sighed deeply; he didn’t really want to fight. There was a reason counselors didn’t work with family. “Look, you’re my friend. So’s Bucky. Ryan was, too, and if she doesn’t rightly hate all of us after she recovers, then she’ll continue to be. Have you even thought about what she – ” He looked away for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “Know what? Let’s ignore whatever Ryan’s feelings might be for now, cause we don’t know, we shouldn’t assume, and this is about you.”

Steve felt his anger spiking. “You think I haven’t thought about her feelings?” he yelled. “What do you take me for, some kind of – “

“No, Steve, I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant to say, and that’s not what we’re talking about,” Sam cut in. “We’re talking about you. Speaking of you, I wasn’t the only one who called Ryan a friend the entire time we’ve known her.”

Steve stared at him coldly. Sam barely kept himself from rolling his eyes. “She presented less than a week ago. And apparently, the scent of her heat was the best thing since sliced bread. And you’d know, because you used to live in a time without sliced bread,” he pointed out, though his tone was more exasperated than playful. “You fought the Hulk over her, you and your mate saved her life, then you saw her get hurt in front of you more than once. And after that, she saved your life - and your mate’s life, again - and practically killed herself doing so!” He paused, taking a breath. More softly, he added, “It hasn’t even been half a year, Steve. I just - do you even know what her, I don’t know, favorite color is? Cause I don’t.”

Steve sighed heavily then, dropping to the couch as the scent of his irritation began to fade.
Sam sat beside him and laid a hand on his shoulder. “I just want you to be sure,” he said softly, “that what you’re feeling isn’t only instinct, or a – a chemical rush, you know? It could happen to anyone.”

They were silent for a few moments before Steve began. “Coulson was wrong,” he said simply.

“Wanna be more specific?” Sam quipped, raising an eyebrow and dropping his hand again.

Steve half-smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “When he said baseball caps wouldn’t disguise me and Buck.”

Sam furrowed his brow. “I’m not following.”

“I was kinda curious, after I woke up,” Steve elaborated. “I didn’t move into the Tower until almost a year after New York. Then I was in D.C. for Fury a while anyway, when we met.”

“So you, what, wore a hat and sunglasses out every day and no one recognized you?” Sam asked patiently.

“I didn’t wear any kind of disguise,” Steve shrugged, staring down the hall at nothing in particular. “Wore a cap if I felt like it, but I didn’t try to hide who I was. No one recognized me anyway.”

Sam stared at him. “The giant biceps and all-American jawline didn’t clue in anybody?”


“You’re the guy that saved the world in the forties, came back from the dead after seventy years, and then saved the world again three weeks later. How is that possible?”

“It’s not me that’s famous,” Steve shrugged again. “The star on my uniform is.”

Sam blinked, struck dumb. It made a horrible kind of sense.

“You recognized me. You were the fifth,” Steve continued. “The other four were all little kids.” He chuckled for a moment. “They came up to me like I was Santa Claus at the Macy’s store, from back when I was a kid. Asked for hugs, their moms took pictures. I asked they not be published. A little boy said ‘thank-you for stopping the scary aliens.’”

Silence fell between them. Sam waited.

“Bucky always saw me,” Steve murmured softly a few beats later. “Everyone was always looking at him. He was the only one who ever looked twice at me.” He swallowed thickly. “We were wearing baseball caps, the night we met Ryan. She saw us both.”

“She had seen both your faces earlier that day,” Sam offered quietly.

“That’s not what I mean, Sam.”

“Yeah, I know,” he acknowledged. Then they were quiet again.

“From the second we met, I was never Captain America. Bucky was never a brainwashed POW-turned-assassin. We were Steve and Bucky, and she was Ryan, and from there…” Steve continued after a minute. “I know it’s fast. I know what this sounds like. But she feels right,” he shrugged. “She feels the same as when I was five, and Bucky beat up Billy Morrison and Jack Brown for stealing my schoolbag and giving me a black eye, and took my hand to bring me home after.”
“Bucky first met Ryan in a fight, too,” noted Sam wryly. “And me, technically. Seems to be a thing with him.”

“She saved him,” Steve proclaimed. “She showed up out of nowhere and saved Bucky’s life. He’d be dead if it wasn’t for her. Yeah, Sam, I was grateful. More than. But then she gave us her onion rings, and she smiled, and she said she’d do the same for anyone.

“And then she did,” he declared, standing back up suddenly. “She cut herself open and bled out for all of us,” he exclaimed fiercely. “She killed that bastard to save - and now she’s unconscious in a hospital bed, and she almost died.” His voice almost broke on the last word, his scent muddled by a storm of emotions.

Sam shook his head. “No one meant for all this to happen. And we know now Kilgrave would’ve come for Ryan whether or not the others suspected her first,” he offered. “We wronged her, horribly, for sure. But if anyone’s faultless, it’s you and Bucky.”

“No,” Steve condemned. “I knew Natasha and Clint were suspicious of her, Bucky and I talked about it. And I didn’t do anything. I did this to her.”

Sam sighed in frustration. There was no getting through to Steve when he got like this. “Well, to be fair, all of us brought Ryan into the fold pretty fast,” he admitted, diverting the subject again. “Didn’t question it myself, how she got on with everyone so well right away. Normally, you don’t invite someone to move in with your family two weeks after meeting them. But with her, it was… I don’t know.”

“It was like she was meant to be there.” Steve started walking away, and Sam leaned back on the couch, already exhausted again.

“Steve,” he yelled after him, and Steve paused for a moment. “Talk to Bucky. ASAP.”

Steve nodded, then turned to leave again.

“Steve,” Sam called one more time.

“What, Sam?” Steve sighed.

“You have horrible timing, you know that? Like, the worst ever.”

Steve smiled, close-mouthed and small. “Yeah, I know.” He finally got around the corner, the door to Bucky’s room down the hall. His mate was still asleep, but Steve needed him.

* * * * * * *

“A soft whisper filtered slowly into Bucky’s head, and he groaned, flopping sideways onto his stomach. Goddamn Stevie and his 5 AM runs, he never wants to come, why’d that lame-brain keep askin’… This wasn’t their bed. It smelled wrong, it was too cold, where was he, where was Steve –

“Bucky!” Steve’s voice penetrated through the fog, and Bucky gasped in alarm, adrenaline spiking for a moment as he tore his eyes open. “Hey, you’re alright, you’re safe, we’re still at the SHIELD
base,” Steve was murmuring reassuringly, standing halfway between the bed and the open door out to the hallway.

Bucky blinked through the drowsiness. “’M fine,” he croaked, his mouth like cotton as he tried to swallow. “God, what was in those pills?” he muttered, the world spinning a little as he tried to regain his bearings.

“You had to take a bunch so you didn’t burn through it too quick– you have any nightmares?” Steve asked concernedly.

Bucky tried to remember through the fuzziness. “Nah, I don’t think so,” he answered with relief, “but my head’s pounding like a goddamn machine gun.”

“I’ll get you some water, hang on – “

“Don’t bother, I’ll be fine in a minute,” Bucky brushed him off, slowly sitting up. “How… how’s Ryan?” he asked, a storm of emotions brewing in his chest.

“She woke up for a minute when I went to go find Bruce,” Steve answered softly. “She tried to run.”

Bucky sighed heavily. “Can’t blame her, I’d want to get away from us, too,” he said resignedly.

“No, Buck, she was scared because she was surrounded by hospital equipment and the only person there was another stranger,” Steve countered, sitting down on the far end of the bed. “You saw, that fucker experiment on her, she must’ve thought…”

“Well, regardless.” The little light from the cracked-open door landed on Steve’s face. Bucky could always read him like a book. “You been sitting there worrying this whole time?”

“Not the whole time,” Steve retorted, but Bucky knew he was lying. “Sam stopped by.”

“Yeah?”

“He says… it’s later, now. Or it needs to be soon,” Steve said quietly.

“You talked to him before me?” Bucky asked. Steve heard the masked hurt, and held out his hand, silently asking. Bucky obliged, sliding his left into Steve’s right.

“He was worried about both of us. How we reacted… when we found her,” Steve explained, brushing his thumb across the back of the silvery plating. “And you were still asleep. I’m sorry, though. It was wrong of me.”

Bucky smiled a little at that. They’d used to be awful at communicating, he reflected, back when they’d first mated. It had always been them against the world, but they were so young, hadn’t been drawn together through blood and fire like now. It also didn’t hurt that they’d now both been to more therapy than anyone had a right to. “It’s alright,” Bucky nodded. “What’d you tell him, then?”

Steve hesitated, swallowing as he looked away. “That I love her.”

Bucky snorted, his heart pounding with sadness, joy, pain, elation, worry, relief. He hadn’t felt so much at once since the day he’d finally returned to Steve for good. “I’d have paid to see the look on his face,” he remarked with a small smile. He squeezed Steve’s hand, and Steve turned back to him. “Was it funny?”
“Buck,” Steve whispered, eyes starting to mist. “Please.”

“Of course I love her, Stevie,” Bucky proclaimed, and Steve visibly relaxed, sinking down into the mattress a little. Their scents mingled and merged, a sigh of relief that broke the worried tension for the moment.

“You jerk,” Steve chuckled, and Bucky joined in for a moment. “When you say you love her, though…” Steve began again, holding Bucky’s hand a little tighter.

“Stevie. I’d bring down the world for you,” Bucky whispered, a fervent pledge shining in his soul. “I’d destroy everything and everyone if you asked.” He shook his head, feeling the truth in his bones. “Except for her.”

Steve exhaled heavily. “I - I would, too.” He laughed quietly, tears almost falling. “How fucked up are we?”

“You don’t have to tell me we’re no good for her, I already know,” Bucky agreed. He understood it all too well. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph, how did we not see before…?”

“She was unrepresented,” Steve answered, his voice finally becoming lighter. “It just… developed different than we’d expect, I guess.” He smiled then. “But to be fair, I didn’t know I loved you ‘til I woke up one day when I was 14 and it just wallop me over the head. I’ve always been a little slow.”

“I got the looks and the brains, I’m a lucky son of a gun.” Bucky exhaled heavily. “I don’t love you any less,” he vowed, solemn as a judge. Steve heard the thickness in his throat, though, by the way he squeezed Bucky’s hand. “If anything, it only makes me love you more.”

Steve snorted. “Sure you got the brains, dimwit?” he taunted, a single tear trailing down. “You and me, ‘til the end of the line. Never said no one else can come along.” He closed his eyes, wiped the wetness away. “But, for the record, I only love you more, too.”

“The record will show that we are both stupid fucking saps,” Bucky jibed, drying his own tears with his flesh hand. Steve barked a laugh, and his smile was dazzling to Bucky’s eyes. “So when exactly did you fully realize, then?” he questioned, raising an eyebrow. “Since it takes you so long.”

The smile slid off of Steve’s face. “When we found her in the basement,” he replied quietly. “It was like when I found you, I – I could breath again. I mean, when she presented – Jesus, I wanted her, but it was then I knew it was more.”

“You are slow,” Bucky joked weakly. “I knew back when the fucker kidnapped her.” The feeling of Ryan in his arms, even when he was being forced to abandon her, and he’d known. “Right after I saw someone else’s hands on her, I knew,” he said, conviction ringing in his tone despite the ever-growing pain in his heart. They were both avoiding what they knew was coming.

“And you didn’t talk to me about it all the time we spent waiting, because…?” Steve deadpanned.

“Cause I knew you loved her already, and I also knew you didn’t know you loved her already,” Bucky remarked lightly. “Cause I know you better than you do, and you’re slow.”

“Oh, so you know when I fell in love with her better than I do?”

“Course. You attacked Stark for her, probably would’ve ripped his armor to shreds. Broke out of the SHIELD cell on a hunch, screamed at Kilgrave with your Alpha voice. I have an excuse for losing my head in a fight, you don’t.”
Steve huffed another laugh. “Guess you’re right. Not my most level-headed moments.”

Bucky managed a small smile. “I was confused,” he admitted. “When it hit me. I… didn’t know how long I already had, you know? We had thought she was a Beta, then everything changed so quick. I wanted her the second I scented her, but… I think I loved her before.”

“Yeah, well, we’re both idiots,” Steve smiled. “Wasted years pining for each other ‘fore we did anything about it. Least it didn’t take that long this time. And regardless…I wish you’d said something,” he mumbled, looking down at their joined hands. “It’s not like I’d have been upset.”

Bucky hesitated a moment, then bit the bullet. “I was, when you loved Peggy,” he whispered, and Steve’s eyes shot up to his, shock reflected in the blue orbs.

“Buck – “ Steve breathed, broken and desperate.

“I know, I never said anything. It was cause I didn’t know her,” Bucky interrupted. “I got shipped off to war, and in less than a year you managed to find the most gorgeous Omega that century. Whip-smart and capable to boot, putting up with all the shit she did as an Omega woman in the military. I still don’t know how she did it, she was… amazing. It hurt, though.”

“I – I wanted all of us to be a family,” Steve stammered, his eyes tearing up again. “God, Buck, no one’s replacing – “

“I know that, you stupid punk,” Bucky interrupted again. “You’re my Alpha, and I’m your Beta. Ain’t nothing ever going to change that.” He would never deserve Steve, still broken as he was, but he felt he was a selfish bastard at heart. He knew deep down he’d always keep Steve, as long as Steve would keep him. “I was jealous, but I was willing to try with Peggy. We just never got the chance.”

“Fuckin’ hell,” Steve muttered under his breath, wiping his renewed tears with the back of his free hand. “When did you become the emotionally mature one?”

Bucky burst out laughing at that, scent ringing with amusement. “Fuck if I know,” he cracked, still chuckling heartily. “I think Pamela beat it into me. ‘You wanna get better, you’d damn well stop moping and start talking then, James!’”

Steve shook his head, sighing deeply. “I honestly never thought I’d love someone ‘sides you after Peg,” he confessed. “She – she was one of a kind. Ryan’s so different from her, but god… I love her so much, Buck,” Steve whispered. “She’s so strong, so… kind, and brave, and smart, and god, she just…”

“Felt like my heart grew two sizes when it hit me,” Bucky replied, still laughing to himself. “I was going to bring it up when we got her back, you know, before the op went FUBAR and all this shit happened. Maybe around Christmas.”

“Jesus H, you fucking cheese,” Steve snorted, almost giggling. “What, were you going to invite her over, trap her under some mistletoe?”

“Excuse you, my mama raised me better than that,” Bucky cracked, raising one eyebrow. “I was going to trap you, then invite her to join us.”

Steve burst out laughing himself now, dropping his head back against the wall. “I love you, you jerk,” he grinned, meeting his mate’s eyes again.

“You’ve always had my heart, punk,” Bucky replied softly. He really was a hopeless sap, he noted
to himself. “But, if it’s alright with you, I need a piece of it back now. I just found out it belongs to someone else.”

The look of adoration in Steve’s eyes was almost too much to bear. “Can I kiss you, Buck?” he whispered.

“’Bout time, numbskull,” Bucky taunted. Steve threw himself at his mate, lips crashing together desperately, all-consuming, pouring every ounce of his love into the connection. Hands tangled in hair, and with a low moan Steve pressed into his mouth, Bucky drowning in the taste and feeling of his lover. Steve pulled back for air, and Bucky half-whined, half-growled. “Wasn’t done with you yet,” he panted.

“Can’t get carried away,” Steve murmured, brushing his nose against Bucky’s. “Not the time. And, anyway,” he said as he sat back again, “we have more to talk about, still.”

“Jesus, can’t a fella recover from mind control in peace?” Bucky griped playfully. Steve gently swatted the back of his head with his other hand.

“Sam brought up some other things, when we talked,” he said, more soberly now. “And… I’m not sure if he’s right or not.”

“Cards on the table, Steve. We’ve wasted enough time already,” Bucky said, shaking his head. They might as well get it over with.

Steve took a deep breath. “He said he was paying attention to how we reacted to everything. And that… maybe it’s all just, y’know, an adrenaline rush. That what we think we’re feeling is a gut reaction or instinct. ‘S not like I don’t have a savior complex,” Steve whispered, and Bucky felt a sense of dread growing in the pit of his stomach. “You’ve chewed me out for it enough times. And… it’s all been fast. I just… Buck, do you know what her favorite color is?”

Bucky swallowed, a sharp pain in his heart. “Don’t think I ever asked,” he whispered. “It’s probably not blue, though.”

“I told him she felt right,” Steve continued. “And she does. I – we know her, even if we don’t know everything about her. Don’t we?”

“I want to say yes,” Bucky replied. “But… Steve, does it even matter?”

“What d’you mean?”

Bucky huffed a small, sad laugh. “I mean there’s a million reasons why it doesn’t matter how, why, if we love her,” he explained. “Most importantly, there’s no goddamn way she feels the same.”

Steve closed his eyes. “I know,” he said simply, and Bucky felt his heart shatter. He leaned over to Steve, breathing shakily, and was wrapped in his Alpha’s arms instantly. He felt Steve press his face into his hair, and Bucky let his tears silently fall.

“We betrayed her, got her kidnapped and tortured,” Steve murmured heartbrokenly.

“We almost got her killed,” Bucky agonized. “She’ll never forgive us.”

“Our lives are dangerous, and she’s already suffered for it.”

“Who’s to say she’d ever love us, anyway? We’re too f*cked up, god.”
“We’re technically almost a century old each.”

“And the serum…” Bucky lamented. “You know what our bloodwork said. We were gonna have to leave somewhere down the line, anyway. Before people got suspicious.”

Steve sniffed, pulling Bucky a little tighter. “Erskine never told me. I don’t think he even suspected it,” he reflected. “It wouldn’t be right, mating with anyone who’d have to…”

“Watch us stick around, staying young for so long,” Bucky finished. This wasn’t something they often discussed, the complex reality of their shared future. “What’d that government doc say it was?”

“Continuous induced stem cell regeneration,” Steve answered. “It’s how we heal so quickly, why we can’t get sick. The strength and speed and whatnot are ‘cause our cells work so efficiently now, and they regenerate more precisely, or something.”

“’Aging at approximately one-third the regular adult rate’,” Bucky quoted. “Like we haven’t time traveled enough already.”

Steve gently kissed his forehead. “Whenever the end of the line is, I’ll be there with you,” he vowed quietly, stroking Bucky’s hair.

Bucky sighed, closing his eyes. “Well, I guess that’s that,” he grieved. “Now what?”

“Now,” Steve said with a shrug, “we… wait and see what happens next. And later, we figure out what we’re gonna do.”

A knock on the door roused them a moment later. “Guys?” Darcy’s voice called out quietly. “Ryan’s awake.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

Ryan recognized the beeping this time. Her eyes opened easier, and she was in less pain. Physically, at least. She remembered everything clear as day now, and she wished she was still unconscious.

“Good evening, Miss Green,” a soft female voice said from off to her side, followed by the click of heels. Ryan didn’t bother to move. “I’m Dr. Jemma Simmons. How are you feeling?”

Ryan flicked her eyes over, and a scent that reminded her of her many nights under the stars wafted near as she saw a pale brunette standing with a clipboard, pen poised in her hand. Ignoring the pain in her side, Ryan turned over and closed her eyes again. Fine, if you don’t count the fact I’m a fucking murderer. She gritted her teeth and tried not to think, not to feel. It didn’t work. Noxious guilt, horror, fear roiled in her stomach, and a second later she pulled herself up by the bedrail and retched over the side, her entire body shaking and her lungs hyperventilating.

Chapter End Notes
That was so much. Ugh. I'm so sorry. I'm trash. Thank you so much if you actually read this whole monster, I love you all more than Steve and Bucky love Ryan <333
In Which Ryan is Not Okay

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took a while, my darling readers, I value your patience. But I’m now a college graduate, that’s cool, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are we fascists, Pepper?”

Pepper looked up from her emails in alarm. Tony was slumped in an armchair, staring unseeingly upwards. He had been tinkering away at nothing consequential for hours straight after everyone had returned, but he’d eventually retreated to an empty corner and fallen silent. It was unnerving, from him, and Pepper’s frown deepened. “Are there ethnic and/or religious groups you’ve wiped from existence without telling me?”

“No, Pep, I’m serious,” Tony replied quietly.

She sighed. “Can you clarify then, please?”

Tony was silent again for a few moments, then suddenly leapt to his feet and started pacing. “The Avengers are the most powerful group of people in the world that we know of. I’m not bragging, posturing, whatever, it’s the god’s honest truth. It’s why we were created in the first place. And we – I was so afraid of someone taking that power from us that I used every tool in my disposal to ruin the life of an innocent girl. Who was, at the time, part of an oppressed minority group currently discriminated against even with laws for their protection, however inadequate and ignored they are.”

“That’s not what happened, Tony,” Pepper countered, watching him wear a path up and down the hallway.

“Then enlighten me to the truth, oh wise one. Because an elite class that wields consolidated, militaristic power to subject others to their will and maintain their status outside of the law without checks on their authority is the definition of fascism.”

“If you’re not going to listen to what I have to say, then I won’t bother,” Pepper responded calmly. Tony glared for a moment, then dropped his gaze. “Alright,” Pepper murmured. “Tony, why did you believe Ryan was trying to - to take out the Avengers, gain power, kill us, whichever?”

“Because I was a prejudiced coward who thought he knew everything and could play the world’s policeman.”

“Dial down the self-loathing to about an 8, and try again.”

Tony glared, but Pepper held her ground. “Because… she was unpresented, and I didn’t trust her because of it. And she can control minds, and I didn’t trust that she wasn’t.”

Pepper almost smiled. “Thank you. So, yes. You were prejudiced and scared, I won’t deny it. And you acted accordingly and hurt people as a result. But that doesn’t make you Hitler.”
Tony growled in frustration, resuming his pacing. “Pepper, you’re not li – that’s exactly what it makes me, someone who tried to maintain control at all costs because of fucking bigotry and – “

“No, no, Tony, I know you would,” Pepper insisted, standing up and taking his hands. “I have no doubt whatsoever. But babe, please, do you understand me?”

Tony looked away, breathing heavily and holding onto Pepper’s hands for dear life. “I still – “

“You value me much more than power,” Pepper interrupted. “You value our family and keeping people safe more. You trusted Natasha and Clint’s judgment, and it just so happened that their perspective was skewed by the same factors yours was. Mistakes were made, Tony, awful ones, and I’m not excusing them. You and all of us need to make it right. But you still did everything because you care about us, not – not the Avengers as an idea, or a political force, or whatever. And you certainly didn’t mean to get Ryan injured, kidnapped, and almost killed.” She released one hand to tap on the arc reactor on his chest. “Proof you have a heart, remember?”

Tony shook his head, but Pepper was pulled into his arms, his face tucked into her neck. She held him, and deep down hoped beyond hope the worst was finally behind them all. “And babe,” she murmured a minute later, pulling back to stare him down fiercely. “Don’t ever say something like that in front of Steve or Bucky. They lost too much to the war to stop fascism, we can’t make light of everything that happened.”

“Pretty sure they wouldn’t mind tagging me as a Mussolini right about now,” Tony said with the barest hint of a smirk.

“Tony, the only one of us who hates you is you,” Pepper replied. “And I wish I could fix that, but I can’t. But no matter what, I do love you.”

Tony closed his eyes, and they just stood together. “Something needs to change, Pepper. Everything we do, there’s always innocent people hurt or dead. I’m not waiting until it happens again.”

She stepped back from him, unease suddenly twisting in her stomach. “I don’t disagree,” she said carefully. “But let’s be cautious about this, alright? No rash decisions.”

Tony said nothing.

*** *** *** ***

“Here, Miss Green, let me help you – !“

Ryan could barely hear the woman’s words over her heartbeat throbbing in her ears, her breath heaving in her chest even as no oxygen entered her lungs. She clung to the rail of the bed, trying to
force down the acid burning her throat as tears flowed in torrents down her cheeks – *I killed him, oh my god, I killed him, I murdered him, I –*

“Ryan? Hey, Ryan, I need you to breathe with me now,” a voice called out, and through her blurred vision came the same unknown man from before, crouching down beside the bed and taking exaggerated breaths in through his nose and out his mouth. “Good, you’re doing great,” he encouraged as Ryan followed the pattern mechanically, her body calming somewhat as the minutes passed. “Okay. Have you had panic attacks before?”

Ryan opened her mouth, and the words seized up, horror rearing in her chest. Her voice, her words, she had –

“Ryan? Can you hear me?” the man asked urgently, reinserting himself into her line of vision. Minutely, she nodded. “Your heart rate’s elevated again, do you feel another attack coming on?” She shook her head absently, turning to her back and staring up at the ceiling. Her tears had stopped now. She was glad. She didn’t deserve their comfort.

Voices talked around and above and to her, and she ignored them. There was a multitude of scents at different points, and she ignored them. She felt herself slipping away, sliding under to nothingness, and she fought it at every turn. She didn’t deserve blackness or numbness or quiet.


Her left hand automatically went up to scratch an itch on her face. Her left hand, she was left-handed, the hand that had reached out and twisted and –

Ryan suddenly shrieked, an agonized cry without her volition, and she threw her hand to the side where she couldn’t see it. Inhuman sounds were clawing out of her throat as the world suddenly went into fast forward, and she struggled and kicked against sets of hands suddenly restraining her. She hadn’t even realized she was moving, and her left hand coursed with pain from where she’d been smashing it against the bedrail.

“Get them both, now!” the unknown man shouted, and Ryan’s vision suddenly went fuzzy as he inserted a syringe into the IV line and pressed down the plunger. She collapsed against the bed and went under with one last word screaming in her head.

*Freak.*

*** *** ***

“You go,” Bucky murmured, extricating himself from Steve’s arms.

“*Buck,*” Steve sighed exasperatedly “You’re not going to – “

“No, Steve, I know,” Bucky interrupted. “But the last time she saw me, I was trying to rip your head off. I don’t know how she’ll…”

“Dr. Lawson said both of you need to come,” Darcy inserted, now fully in the doorway. “She, um…”

“What?” Steve asked quickly.
“She’s not doing too great,” Darcy whispered. “No, she’s not – she’s fine physically now, she’s stable, but – “

“We’re coming. Thank you, Darce,” Steve cut her off, and Darcy nodded, hurrying away. Steve firmly took Bucky’s hand, and they followed a moment after, closing the door behind them.

A minute later, they arrived at the med bay, Dr. Lawson coming up to greet them in the hall. “Hi again, Steve. You must be Bucky. I’m Hank, Ryan’s doctor,” he introduced, extending a hand. Bucky took it, staring him down coldly. He didn’t trust strange doctors, even if this one appeared and scented as trustworthy. But to his credit, Hank stared right back, his expression on the friendly side of neutral. “So. There’s a lot to explain, but most of it we can’t without Ryan’s permission, because it primarily concerns her health. But suffice to say, we know you both will be a calming influence, and she needs that right now.”


“Yes, but she’s currently sedated again,” Hank interrupted. “She wouldn’t verbally respond to anyone when she first woke up, and then she tried to injure herself.”

Bucky saw Steve’s face turn white, felt his own doing the same as he pushed past both Steve and the doctor and threw open the door to Ryan’s room. The Beta who had interrogated him – Jemma Simmons, SHIELD agent, biochemistry specialist – was bandaging Ryan’s left hand, the knuckles bloody and bruised alongside the other bandages up her arms. Ryan had dried tear tracks on her face beneath her closed, makeup-smudged eyes, and she was even paler than usual. A terrible scent reached him, a swirling mix of emotions he couldn’t separate, but all underscored by a horrific, sickening guilt he did recognize. His heart sank to his shoes.

“Sergeant Barnes, I’m glad you’re feeling better,” Jemma greeted, straightening up and snipping off the end of the gauze. “Where’s – oh, hello, Captain Rogers,” she continued, Steve coming up to Bucky, Dr. Lawson entering last. Steve looked as dazed as Bucky felt, his expression blank. “Has everything been explained?”

“She had a panic attack, and she…” Steve answered, swallowing heavily. Bucky stepped into his side, putting an arm around his waist automatically, neither of them taking their eyes off of Ryan.

“Yes, we surmised she used that hand when…” Jemma trailed off. “Well. If you both would like to take a seat?” she asked, gesturing to two chairs on the left side of the bed. “She’ll be up in an hour or so. We’re hoping having you two here will help keep her calm when she awakens this time. We don’t want to sedate her much longer.”

“Of course,” Steve murmured, and Bucky moved to the chair by Ryan’s pillow, Steve settling beside by her right hand.

“These kinds of extreme responses aren’t typical, but they’re not unique,” Hank said. “She’s been through a huge trauma, emotionally, physically, and psychologically; she needs professional help. We’re looking into options, but right now she just needs all the support she can get.”

Bucky didn’t respond, transfixed on Ryan’s face, and saw Steve only nod in his peripheral vision. “One last thing, then,” Hank added. “Darcy said earlier that during her heat, after the assault by the Hulk, Ryan had a dissociative episode typical of PTSD. It’s possible it’s directly related, but more likely there was a previous occurrence that she was reminded of that triggered it. There’s nothing in her medical records about a diagnosis, do either of you know anything that could help us piece it all together?”
“No,” Steve replied shortly.

“Yes,” Bucky countered. Steve turned to him sharply, and Bucky met his eyes. *We have to tell him, it’s for her health, you know we have to,* Bucky communicated silently, raising an eyebrow and setting his jaw.

Steve glared intensely back. *She trusted us, we can’t –*

**Steve.**

His mate glowered a moment, then turned back to Ryan, eyes softening. “Her parents died in the Towers in 2001. She was assaulted when she was 15, almost raped,” Bucky answered in a growl. “The security footage we saw indicated she and Kilgrave had met before. Start there.”

Hank closed his eyes for a moment. “Thank you,” he replied shakily. “I’m going to make some calls.” He left, and Jemma hesitated following him. She looked back and forth across the hall outside, then turned back to them.

“There’s quite a bit we haven’t yet told you both, and much we can’t unless Ryan gives permission,” she muttered low. “But everyone else now knows about the security footage you haven’t yet seen. Given the situation, I think it necessary for you to watch.”

“We both have SHIELD clearance level 10,” Steve replied.

“On the regular internal network, then,” Jemma nodded, then left.

Bucky looked to Steve, who met his gaze, his blue eyes bright and pained. “We figured out how her powers work before. Could they be talking about anything else?” Steve asked him.

Bucky took a deep breath, trying to calm his racing mind, then blinked. *What the hell –* he grabbed Steve’s hand and brought it to his face, scenting deeply at his wrist.

“Buck?” Steve questioned as Bucky dropped his arm back down.

Bucky leaned in closer to Ryan, to where her regular scent was starting to come through again in her sleep. He exhaled heavily, shakily. “Probably something about why she scents like she’s our mate,” he offered wonderingly.

Steve’s eyes widened, then repeated Bucky’s actions. “Jesus,” he muttered, sounding at once dumbfounded and awestruck. “I didn’t notice before, how did I not…”

“What the hell, Steve?” Bucky asked, trying to stomp out the spark of pure joy in his chest, hovering over the love he’d only just admitted for the Omega in front of them. She wasn’t their mate, she couldn’t – *couldn’t* – he couldn’t help himself; he leaned closer and scented her again, dropping his forehead against the bedrail. He was naturally used to his own scent, barely ever noticed it, but the way it mixed with hers and Steve’s… Two hundred miles from New York and in a stark hospital room of a SHIELD compound, but he was *home.*

“I have no fucking clue,” Steve whispered, sounding as affected as Bucky was. Bucky straightened up again, and they met each other’s gaze.

“She’s not ours,” he whispered, echoing Steve’s words from before everything had gone wrong.

Steve shook his head, but neither of them could deny the hopeful wonder blooming inside. Steve took out his Starkphone, and Bucky laid a hand on Ryan’s still form unconsciously, his metal hand
stroking her hair. After a minute, Steve took Ryan’s unbandaged hand just as absently, holding up the phone between them with the other. The footage queued up, and Steve pressed play.

Five minutes later, the phone was smashed to pieces against the dented wall opposite, and Steve stood breathing heavily, one shaking hand covering his face. Bucky felt cold creeping over him, the familiar numbness, and he started walking around to stop it, keep from giving in. Ryan remained unconscious.

“I should’ve killed him,” Bucky muttered darkly, pausing by the far wall. “It should’ve been me, not her. I wish I’d ripped him to pieces.”

“Can’t change the past,” Steve rumbled in reply. “But if we’d seen that earlier, I’d have let you. Probably helped.”

“Hey, guys! How’s she doing?” Scott called out, entering with his usual easygoing smile, toting along a Mylar balloon with a cartoon face encouraging “Get well soon!” The grin slid off his face as Bucky glared icily and Steve downright growled at him. “No problem, no problem, I’ll come back later,” he said, backing out of the room.

* * *    * * *   * * *

Ryan felt herself resurfacing yet again, and a wry voice in her head noted she was really damn sick of getting knocked out. It was different this time, though. She wasn’t instantly sick with horror; it was muted, somehow. And the room smelled – no, scented, that was how presented people described it… it brought up a picture in her mind, a memory. They’d gone to a Red Sox game at Fenway, and her dad was standing atop his seat in the 7th inning stretch, singing at the top of his lungs to Sweet Caroline, but replacing “Caroline” with “Ryan-girl” as Ryan hid her face in embarrassment.

Then her mother had come back with the hot dogs and smacked him playfully, and he swept her into a dramatic kiss over Ryan’s head as she peered up from beneath them. The look in their eyes as they turned down to her, kissing her cheeks as she yelled that they were so lame… It was the night before they’d moved to New York. Their last hurrah. The last time she’d really felt… home.

Why the fuck the scent of a rainy forest, warm cinnamon, and an un-nameable something else reminded her of that, she had no clue. She blinked her eyes open, and the real world came rushing back.

“Ryan?” a breathless voice asked, and she automatically turned her head. Steve and Bucky were standing nearby, expressions unreadable to her exhausted eyes. “Did we wake you, we didn’t mean to –“ Steve began.

“How’re you feeling?” interrupted Bucky, cautiously approaching the side of the bed. Ryan blinked, shutting her mouth tight. How was she feeling? It wasn’t possible to explain.

“I’m going to get the doctor again, alright? He needs to come check on you,” Steve murmured. When she didn’t respond, he hesitated, but pressed a button on the wall by the door anyway.

“Ryan,” Bucky started again, sitting on the chair closest to her. She stared up at the bland foam-board ceiling, the nauseating self-loathing threatening to resurface. “Ryan, please. It’s okay if you
hate us, we understand, just – try to talk to the doctor this time, okay? We’re gonna make sure he’s only here to help. Or – or we can leave, if that’s what you want.”

Their words took Ryan off guard. Bucky sounded so hesitant, Steve so unsure; it was atypical to say the least. Hate them? Why would she ha –

Oh, yeah. She had existed before, hadn’t she. Or some version of herself. It’s how she knew they were acting strangely. Her parents, the memory, they were from that age, too – no, an earlier one, long gone. Then she’d been alone, as invisible as she could manage, scared and grieving and hiding and moving and working and smiling and… happy? Hadn’t she been, at some point? She thought so. How foreign. She hadn’t been happy lately, though she was at least sedate now.

Good lord, those drugs made her feel trippy. She shook herself back to reality again to find Steve and Bucky staring concernedly, brown and blue glittering bright. What had they been saying? Oh, yeah. She was supposed to be angry with them. Maybe later. She couldn’t muster the energy for hating anyone besides herself right then.

Footsteps sounded from down the hall. “Hey, Ryan, I’m glad you’re doing better,” the brown-haired, fairly large-nosed unknown man from twice earlier announced as he entered. His smile was friendly, but Ryan didn’t return it. “I don’t know if you remember from earlier, but I’m Hank. I’m a concierge doctor from the Hamptons, and Mr. Stark called me in to help. I’ve worked with other high-profile people in the past, so he knew of me.”

Ryan didn’t feel like moving her still-heavy arm to shake his hand, so she just sat impassively instead. Hank’s smile dimmed just a tad, and he moved past Steve to sit in the other free chair. “It’s okay if you don’t want to talk right now, but I need you to answer some questions. If it doesn’t hurt too much, could you type out the answers?”

Ryan almost felt like laughing. Didn’t want to talk? They hadn’t even told him, had they. Didn’t he know what her voice could do? She accepted the cell phone passed to her anyway, notepad app open. They wouldn’t leave her alone until she talked in some form, it seemed.

“Thanks,” Hank said with another smile. “Look, I need to ask you some personal questions about your health and your history. Nothing you say will leave this room. I had Steve and Bucky come here to wait with you before, but if you want them to leave, it’ll just be you and me.”

Steve growled ever-so-quietly, and Bucky didn’t look happy about it either. Ryan didn’t care; it wasn’t like they didn’t know all of her secrets, like she was ever going free again anyway. And for whatever reason, their scents… It’s fine, she typed out and showed him.

“All right, we’ll get started then,” Hank nodded. “So, you were injured a few days ago, and earlier you lost a lot of blood. You’ve had two transfusions now, but on the way over, your heart stopped a few times. But you seem to be doing remarkably well already. You’re quite the fighter,” he smiled. Ryan felt a swooping nausea in her stomach. “We had to get your medical records subpoenaed, because they were sealed from when you were in foster care. But there’s nothing past your state-mandated physical when you turned 18. When was the last time you went to a doctor?”

When I turned 18, she typed.

“Okay, we’ll need to update your vaccinations, you’re out of date for your DTaP and tetanus booster, and a flu shot, if you haven’t gotten one already,” Hank replied. “And I’m going to do a physical real quick, okay?”

Ryan shrugged. Hank had her sit up slowly, her side still pulling painfully. She breathed in and out
when she was told, followed his finger with her eyes, sat still when the blood pressure cuff squeezed her upper arm. Steve and Bucky stood nearby, watching intently. “We’re almost done now,” Hank assured her, snapping off the Velcro. “Everything is just fine, which, honestly? If I didn’t know about your superpowers, I’d be shocked. Especially after everything you’ve been through,” he added.

“Doctor,” Steve growled. “She doesn’t need to talk about that right now.”

“Actually, Steve, she does,” Hank disagreed cordially. “Ryan, I know you didn’t ask us to, but there’s a lot about your powers we’ve been working on figuring out, so we can make sure there aren’t any health problems we missed or didn’t anticipate,” he explained. “We’d have asked your permission first, but, well, you were unconscious,” he offered. Ryan didn’t return it. “Dr. Simmons is finalizing some of the results now, she wants to be the one to explain it to you. And… some of it concerns Steve and Bucky.”


Hank hesitated. “Again, it’s entirely up to you what you want to share with them. They don’t have to be here, we can even tell them separately, if you want.”

Suddenly, Ryan was enraged. Look, what the hell are you doing??

“I – I’m sorry, Ryan, I don’t understand what you’re asking,” Hank responded, handing the phone back to her. “I was called to take over for Dr. Simmons and Dr. Banner, because neither of them are actual MDs, although they did a fantastic job helping you.”

“Ryan?” Bucky asked softly. He and Steve both looked worried, coming near the foot of the bed.

I’m not dead, we already know I’m a goddamn freak, can we just skip to the part where I’m thrown back in that fucking cell, please? Ryan typed out forcefully, throwing the phone onto the end of the bed and burying her face in her hands, ignoring the pain it caused. Someone picked up the phone, she heard the movement over the rushing in her ears. A sharp intake of breath, and suddenly her hands were pried away from her face, quickly but gently, and she was pulled into a fierce embrace from behind. Steve’s arms encircled her and tugged her against his broad, solid chest, and Bucky cupped her face in his hands as they both sat on the bed, Steve behind her and Bucky in front.

“No one,” Steve proclaimed, tightening his arms, “is throwing you in a cell. Not while we’re here.”

“Ryan, god,” Bucky whispered, breathing heavily, “you saved all of us, why – you’re not a freak, don’t say that, please.”

Ryan froze, suddenly overwhelmed. Bucky’s strong, calloused hands were warm on her left cheek, cold on her right, and Steve was holding her so gently, she wanted to collapse back against him. The scent from before strengthened, and she wanted to stay there forever. Why – what – it was too much, she didn’t know what to do or how to feel or even what she was thinking. She dropped her eyes from Bucky’s intense gaze and just sat there, enveloped in his and Steve’s embraces.

“I’ll give you guys a minute,” Hank murmured from across the room, and then it was just the three of them. Ryan shifted a little, and both Steve and Bucky immediately released her and moved away. She almost followed after them; she hadn’t minded. She didn’t know why they’d done it, but it was… nice.

“Sorry, we shouldn’t have done that without permission,” Bucky murmured apologetically. Steve’s
hands lingered on her waist for just a moment, and then they both were standing over her again. She shivered suddenly, cold all over, and she tugged a sheet back over her lap.

“Here,” Steve murmured, and he propped up the pillows against the wall, guiding her to sit back and drawing the blankets up a little further over the flimsy hospital gown.

Bucky suddenly dropped to the edge of the bed, down by her folded legs. “You saved my life. Again,” he whispered, brown eyes shining. “He was going to kill all of us, you saved everyone. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Ryan did laugh then, a sharp staccato exploding out of her before she could hold it back. Steve and Bucky looked startled, and Ryan grimaced, clutching at her side where her injury protested.

“You didn’t,” Steve insisted after an awkwardly silent moment. “It was self-defense, it wasn’t – “

Ryan sat up again to reach for the phone, and Steve quickly grabbed it and handed it to her. Their hands brushed together, and Ryan ignored the twisting in her stomach to focus on her typing. *I could have just made him stop. I killed him instead.* She paused for a second, then handed the phone to Bucky. His face paled as he read. Yeah, that’s what she’d thought. Ryan let herself fall back and closed her eyes.

“Ryan,” Steve started again, voice quieter, shakier than before. “Please. Don’t do this.”

Bucky added, “Don’t hate yourself, hate us. Ryan, please, we’re the ones who got you into this, if it’s anyone’s fault – “

“It’s mine,” a new voice called out from the doorway. Ryan opened her eyes again. It was Clint.

Chapter End Notes

I swear I actually have a plan for the rest of this fic now. And... I might've accidentally come up with a lot ideas for a possible sequel?? Which I definitely did not ever plan to write, but I'm considering it - would anyone want to read it? Well, I guess I should ask that once I actually finish this one ;)
In Which Clint and Ryan Talk

Chapter Notes

Guys. Over 500 kudos? Wow. I love you all <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve angled himself between Ryan and the doorway, Bucky mirroring the pose beside him. “Not now, Clint,” one of them growled, so low Ryan couldn’t distinguish. The underlying message of “get out” rang through clearly, though.

“Ryan, I get it if you don’t want to see me. But I owe you an apology,” Clint said, ignoring them both but not moving either. “Well, a lot more than an apology, but it’s all I’ve got right now.”

His words echoed in Ryan’s head. My fault. It all circled back to Clint, didn’t it? She hadn’t thought it through, hadn’t thought past where it had been him and Natasha, then Steve and Bucky, then Tony – but Steve and Bucky, what if they hadn’t been lying… those two had left the diner all those months ago, left her alone. It was after that she’d run into Clint, and he…

Realization dawned on her. She was angry. No, not angry – furious. Every word Clint had said had been a lie, everything all the Avengers had done for her the same –

Suddenly, cold fear doused the fire in her chest. No, she couldn’t get angry, she did horrible things when she was angry. She panted a deep breath, the pain in her torso complaining, shoving everything down and away. Steve turned back to her, looking concerned, and Ryan nodded slightly. His jaw clenched a little, but he stood aside, and Bucky followed.

“Would it be cool if we talked alone, Ryan?” Clint asked, moving in closer. She nodded again automatically before she thought about it, then paused. She didn’t really want Steve and Bucky to leave, but she supposed it was for the best anyway.

“We’ll be nearby,” Steve murmured as he left. Bucky waited a moment longer, eyes unreadable, then followed after. The door closed behind them, and Clint shuffled his feet before looking up to Ryan.

“Um, hey. So… Jesus,” he muttered under his breath. “C-can I sit?” he asked, gesturing at the chair halfway down the bed. Ryan nodded again, and a scent like sour citrus surprised her. Was that Clint’s scent, then? His jaw clenched a little, but he stood aside, and Bucky followed.

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“Um, hey. So… Jesus,” he muttered under his breath. “C-can I sit?” he asked, gesturing at the chair halfway down the bed. Ryan nodded again, and a scent like sour citrus surprised her. Was that Clint’s scent, then? It left a bad impression behind, like a stomach churning nervously.

Clint blew out an anxious breath. “Okay. So, um, I guess I should start at the beginning.” He looked like he was waiting for some response from her. She looked down to her lap.

“Right. About that first night – y-you saw in my head later – god, that’s weird,” he muttered under his breath, and Ryan flinched. “No, no! I didn’t mean it like that, that’s not what I – fuck,” he expressed, rubbing his hands over his face. “I swear to God I had everything I wanted to say worked out, I just…”

Ryan leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. “Fuck it,” Clint muttered, exhaling heavily. “Ryan,
I’m so sorry. Everything I did was horrible, I – I can’t even believe what I did to you. I was prejudiced, and I was a coward, and a liar, and there’s no excuse for it. And everything I did is the reason you’re here, and you saved my life, Nat’s, and I got you shot and tortured and…” He trailed off, breathing heavily. Ryan didn’t move.

“It was me. It was all me, Ryan, I did this to you. Nat wanted to come apologize, but I’m the one that convinced her and Tony, and I swear to God, no one else knew. We kept it secret from everyone, Steve and Bucky weren’t involved at all. When you ran, you thought they were part of it, I remember, but they weren’t. T-they stopped Tony from going after you, after you knocked out me and Nat…”

Ryan’s stomach clenched, and she closed her eyes through a dizzying wave of nausea. God, she’d attacked them, too, what if she’d…?

Clint’s hands were shaking in her peripheral vision when she reopened her eyes. “I’m going to hate myself for the rest of my life for this, and I’m not asking for – I know I can’t ever make this up. You didn’t deserve it, not at all, and I – ;” he cut off again, voice breaking. He took a deep breath. “I thought you were – I believed you were trying to harm all of us partially because you were unrepresented. I was so fucking prejudiced, I can’t even believe myself. If anyone had asked me, I would’ve said I wasn’t, unrepresented were equal with everyone else, but… that’s no excuse, I’m not trying to excuse myself. And I swear to you, I will never do anything like this ever again.”

Ryan clamped her jaw tight. She wouldn’t scream at him, she wouldn’t say anything, she couldn’t.

But it was like flames searing her entire being. His fault. She’d almost died time after time, lost everything good she’d thought she had, her new life stripped away to reveal the farce it truly was all along. His fault. And he thought he could come here and just apologize?

Blindly, she reached for the phone at her side. She almost knocked it aside, but just caught it, her left hand sore and painful. That hand, both her arms, her side, and the cut high on her right cheekbone from the knife all ached as she typed, the words flowing out like she’d been waiting her whole life to say them.

*Have you ever gone years without touching someone?*

Clint blanched when he read the message. He didn’t say anything, so Ryan continued.

*I counted the days for fun once. How long before someone hugged me, or I had someone to hug. Until it wasn’t fun anymore.*

“I – ;“ Clint choked off, swallowing heavily.

*There have been good people, and I’ve been truly happy. But I went years alone. I couldn’t afford relationships. I couldn’t afford anything, but especially not to really trust people, to actually rely on anyone. You think I wasn’t petrified I’d be found out? Seven years in the system, I could barely even sleep at night sometimes.*

*Then I got thrown out on my own, and found out I wasn’t the only one with my powers. I stole morning-after pills because I didn’t know how to get a prescription and spent every day of the next 4 years forcing myself to forget that night. And after a while, it worked. Then you guys came out of nowhere, and the world trusted people with abilities. I had hope that actually made sense for the first time in a decade. I’d been passing as a Beta somehow, every time I’d used my powers it’d ended up okay. The incident was most people’s worst nightmare. In some ways, it was my dream come true. That sounds fucking horrible, but I’m a murderer, so.*
I didn’t mean to ever run across the Avengers. I came back to New York last year to deal with my own shit. I finally felt good enough to try.

But no. Should’ve known better. I’m too much of a freak even for the team with a mad scientist, a Soviet assassin, and a circus performer. You know, next time, I’d prefer you just tell me upfront. Save me a few more scars.

My parents kept me safe. They’re dead now. The Avengers still keep the world safe. I think they’re dead to me, though.

She held out the phone, staring pointedly away, and rolled onto her side away from him when he took it. She closed her eyes, and waited for him to leave. Everyone always did.

A minute later, she was alone.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Some hazy length of time later, Ryan heard someone enter. They need a revolving door, she thought snappishly.

“Hey, Ryan,” Hank greeted. “I brought you some tea, if you’d like some.”

God, she loved tea. But she really didn’t want to move. “And if you’re up for it, we’re going to take your MRI and CT scan now, and after that, Dr. Simmons is ready to talk with you,” Hank said, sitting down on the chair by the bed and setting down a mug and sugar packets. Ryan didn’t respond.

“Oh, I was asked to tell you,” he continued, “if you make a list, someone will grab whatever you want from your things at Avengers Tower.”

That piqued her attention. She sat back up, and Hank held out the phone to her again. She took it, thinking hard for a moment.

Under my mattress, there’s an envelope, a folder, and some notebooks. Don’t open them. My phone should be on the dresser, the charger near it. My sneakers, the blue flannel, t-shirt and the jacket in the closet, and a pair of jeans and socks and underwear. And my toothbrush, floss, nail clippers and hairbrush. Use the backpack by my shoes.

Hank looked over the words for a moment. “Ryan, I’m going to be straight with you. If you’re planning on leaving, it’ll be against medical advice. You’re doing better than I’d expected, but you need to let us help you.”

Ryan stared impassively, and Hank sighed. “I’ve found a highly respected doctor who specializes in the kinds of trauma you’ve been through,” he added gently. “She’ll be here tomorrow. Will you at least meet her?”

Ryan held out her hand for the phone again. I’m not talking to a shrink.

“Have you ever spoken with a psychologist before?” Hank asked. Ryan shook her head. “She can help us get a firm diagnosis on what we suspect is going on, and help us work out a plan for the future. You don’t even have to talk, not until you’re ready. But you can’t just try to ignore
everything that’s happened, Ryan. It’s dangerous not only for your mental health, but stress and trauma can affect physical health too.”

*I know I have PTSD. Probably some kind of anxiety, with the panic attacks, Ryan typed.*

Hank looked concerned. “You self-diagnosed?”

*I can’t afford doctors or meds. If I wanted to survive, I had to learn all I could. Libraries are good places for homeless people to hang out. I’ve handled it fine.*

Hank’s expression turned to something like pity, and Ryan glared at him. “You’ve been incredibly brave and strong, Ryan. Not many could make it through what you have,” he murmured comfortingly. “But you have a chance now, to not have to do it all on your own. You should at least think about taking it.”

*I’ll survive.*

Hank sighed again. “Well, if you change your mind, I’m right here to help,” he offered, carefully sliding the IV needle out of her elbow and putting on a Band-aid. “Can you try to walk now?”

Ryan grabbed the bedrail and leveraged herself up. The movement wasn’t too painful. Better than the shackles and the needles and the electric zapping. A few tentative steps, and she wasn’t too dizzy, either. “You’re doing great,” Hank encouraged. “Here, just try to get to the wheelchair,” he indicated by the door. Ryan ignored him and pushed out into the hallway, bare feet cold on the tile floor and the rest of her chilly under just the hospital gown. Not as cold as the wind in the city streets.

“Ryan, you have to use the chair,” Hank inserted, coming to stand in front of her. “You shouldn’t be walking long distances yet – “

“Hey!” Steve’s voice called down the hall, and Ryan saw him and Bucky jogging over. “Ryan, what’re you doing up?”

“We’re going to take her MRI and CT scans, once she consents to use the wheelchair,” Hank replied affably. Ryan gave him a cool stare, and he raised an eyebrow with a wry smile.

“Ryan, please?” Bucky asked softly, grasping one handle with his metal hand and holding the other out to her.

Ryan remembered she was supposed to be angry with them. But they hadn’t lied to her, had they. They were Avengers. But right now, they looked more like Steve and Bucky. And she couldn’t spare the energy, anyway.

She sighed irritably, feeling her cheeks flame red, but took Bucky’s hand and sat with as much dignity as she could manage. The embarrassed, petulant huff probably ruined the effect. Bucky murmured something in a language she didn’t understand, and they started moving. Blessedly, the halls were empty.

Lying in the dark, tunnel-like MRI wasn’t too bad, she noted. The CT scan was similar, then Hank had her step on a scale and measured her height while Steve and Bucky waited outside. “Okay,” he murmured, tapping information into an iPad. “You’re 109 pounds at five foot seven, which is underweight, but not dangerously so. How’s your diet, normally?”

*I take vitamins when I can. Avoid sugar mostly. I get fresh stuff on and off. More lately.*
“You can step off the scale,” he instructed. “I’d like to consult a nutritionist to make a plan for you to gain a little weight, so you’re about 120 pounds or so sustainably. But for now, we’re done, and you can talk with Dr. Simmons, alright?”

Ryan nodded mechanically, exiting the machine room to where Steve and Bucky were waiting. “You okay?” Steve murmured, a hand hovering by her shoulder as she sank down into the wheelchair again. She didn’t respond, her heart starting to pump furiously. They’d said they’d been investigating her abilities. Just — how? What could they possibly —

She exhaled sharply, and Steve paused as he grasped the wheelchair handles. “Are you in pain? It’s been a while since your last meds dose, I think — “

Ryan shook her head, trying to calm herself back down. All of this in one day, she just —

“Hey, you don’t have to talk to Simmons yet,” Bucky inserted, dropping to one knee beside her. “God knows you’ve been through enough right now.”

She looked down at him, and his brown eyes were shining, soft and compassionate. Her heart thudded, skipping a beat, and she felt herself flush again. He smiled a little, and she turned away, suddenly overwhelmed. But Steve was there, looking down on her with worry and concern, and she was mesmerized in his gaze. He smiled softly, too, and her heart fluttered in her chest.

Hank walked up, and Ryan snapped away from Steve’s gaze, picking up the phone and typing quickly. I don’t want to talk to Dr. Simmons.

Hank nodded, replying, “Alright, I’ll tell her. It’s getting late, anyway, it can wait. I think you’ll feel better with some rest,” he finished with a smile. He nodded at Steve, and a minute later Ryan got out of the chair and back into the hospital bed.

“Okay, Ryan, I’ve got antibiotics and pain meds for you to take, and if you need anything, just press the call button,” Hank instructed, setting down a glass and a paper cup of pills on the bedside table. “We’ll get you some real food in the morning, too, once your last tests are done. Sleep well.”

Then it was Ryan, Steve and Bucky again, the boys hovering nearby. She grasped the mug left next to the bed for something to do. Her tea was cold.

“Hey again, guys,” came a cautious voice from the doorway. It was the man who’d been fighting in the basement before Steve and Bucky had arrived, Ryan recognized the voice. “Hi, Ryan. I’m, uh, I’m Scott Lang, I don’t know if you remember…”

“Lang,” Bucky growled, and Scott jumped a little.

“Right, right, sorry,” he apologized. “Probably not what you wanna talk about. Not that you have
to talk! No, I just – I, uh, I’ve got a kid,” he explained, and Ryan blinked at the non sequitur. “And I know your family isn’t around anymore, but… Cassie, my little girl. She’s my everything,” he whispered. “And I know if your parents were still here, they’d be so proud of you. For saving everyone, for being so brave and – and just surviving that shitshow. Thank you, for saving all of us, and letting me get back to Cassie.”

Ryan’s eyes flooded with wetness, but she couldn’t help but stare at him blurrily. A small scurrying movement drew her eye, and she dabbed at her eyes to see a small ant crawling down his arm.

“Oh, this is Ant-tonio,” Scott introduced, the insect pausing on his palm. “He actually helped a lot, he’s my transport when I’m small. Well, he was, but it’ll be a while before he can do that again,” he ended sadly.

Ryan saw the ant only had one wing, and was suddenly seized with the urge to do – something. So she dumped out the paper cup of pills, grabbing the glass of water and a sugar packet from beside her leftover tea. Scott stared incredulously as she poured a little of each into the paper cup, swirling gently and holding out her right hand. The ant obediently crawled on, tickling her palm, and she tilted the cup so he could skitter up and drink.

Bucky suddenly stormed out of the room, startling Ryan. She looked to Steve, and was further startled to see him teary. “Sorry,” he murmured, and then followed Bucky out.

Ant-tonio appeared to be full, flitting back to Scott and settling on his shoulder. Scott exhaled a shaky breath, then quickly leaned in and kissed Ryan’s forehead, smoothing her hair paternally. He scented like earthy trees, familiar and pleasant. “C-Cassie told me to kiss you better,” he stammered. “Um, if you’re ever in San Francisco, she and everyone would love you, and it’d be great to see you again. Go to Pym Technologies, ask for Hope van Dyne. It’s easier to find than my address.” He got up and left, the balloon bouncing in his wake. Then Ryan was alone.

She took a deep breath, then checked her backpack. Clothes, charger, crinkled notebooks, the folder, the envelope – everything was there. Good. She fished out a pencil from the bottom, opened the back of a notebook, and started writing.

* * *   * * *    * * *

“Buck?” Steve whispered, entering the room they’d been in earlier.

“She made the ant sugar water,” Bucky quietly replied, sitting on the edge of the bed, head in his hands. “Because it lost a wing. She dug my knife into her arms, and then she used them to – ,” he paused, lifting and shaking his head. There were tear tracks running silently down his face. He took a deep breath. “Scott’s alright,” he added as an afterthought. “But don’t tell him I said so.”

Steve silently sat down beside him, the mattress sinking them together. The solid warmth was comforting.

“If I didn’t leave right then, I would’ve kissed her until my lips bled,” Bucky stated, almost matter-of-factly. Steve leaned in, gently nuzzling against his mate, reaching up to caress the tears on his face. Bucky shuddered, then folded into Steve, who deftly caught him in his arms. They held each other close, hearts in each other’s hands, mourning together.
“Nnngh,” Foggy groaned, dragging one hand over his face. Time didn’t seem to work right inside the walls of a SHIELD compound. He’d just crashed for six hours, having scouted out a spare room for three earlier to force Matt to rest, and now at 1 AM he was wide awake. Beside him, his Omega stirred, blinking his gray, unseeing eyes back open in the light of the compound’s border fencing through the window. Karen was still asleep on Foggy’s other side.

“What time is it?” Matt whispered, feeling along the side table for the glass of water there.

“Just after one, go back to sleep,” Foggy murmured back, sitting up and carefully maneuvering out of bed.

“You need rest too, Foggy,” Matt insisted, catching Foggy’s hand.

“I’m fine, I fell asleep before you,” he replied. “I gotta check the machine at the office again.”

Matt paused, then squeezed Foggy’s hand before letting go. “I need to go back, today.”

Foggy smiled. “I knew you were gonna say that,” he whispered. “Karen should too, make sure the place didn’t burn down. I can deal with everything here.”

“If you two are making plans without consulting me, I’m withholding sex for a month,” Karen grumbled into her pillow.

“Sorry, babe,” Foggy chuckled, and Matt rolled across the bed and curled into her side, scenting deeply and kissing her neck. Karen turned to face him, kissing him quickly on the nose before sitting up and finger-combing her hair.

“What’s going on?” she asked, Matt sitting up beside her with a slight grimace. “Don’t pull your stitches, you’ve got enough scars,” she directed at him, pushing his shoulder to make him lie back down.

“I meditated for hours, it’ll be healed by – what day is it?” Matt questioned, looking confused.

“I have no idea,” Foggy chuckled again, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Somewhere around the 13th? It’s hard to keep track of time here.”

“Regardless, I’m fine now. And… thank you, for getting the others away, before,” Matt murmured. Karen laid down beside him again and draped an arm across his chest, lightly stroking his skin.

“It scares me to see you like that,” she confessed, and Matt put his hand atop hers.

“It was worse before I had you two,” he replied. “And before Stick found me, it happened a lot more.”

“I still can’t believe you were trained by a blind guy named Stick,” Foggy retorted, laying his hand atop both of theirs. “If he was Asian, it’d be a racist kung fu movie from the 70s.”

“Well, I did fight ninjas at one point,” Matt smirked. “Nobu was actually Japanese.”

“Speaking of fighting,” Karen interjected, “Matt, you’re not going right back into it, are you?”

“I have to, Kare,” Matt answered firmly. “I take a night off, people get hurt. It’s been too long
“What, three days? The ten-block radius can manage that long,” Karen insisted.

Foggy sighed. “Kare, as much as I am firmly on the not-letting-our-mate-kill-himself team, he’s also kinda right. No telling what fresh hell the Kitchen cooked up if anyone realized Matt wasn’t there.”

“That’s not his – that’s not your fault, or responsibility!” Karen exclaimed, turning to Matt.

“Whether it is or not, we still have to get back, and soon,” Foggy interjected as Matt opened his mouth to argue. “We got kidnapped days ago, we had meetings - I was supposed to check in with Brett like normal yesterday, I think,” he mused, shaking his head. “The police might even be searching for us, considering the apartment was broken into. Oh, fuck, what if it got left open?!”


“You and Matt start picking up the pieces. I’ll be fine here,” Foggy said reassuringly. “Look, Tony Stark even gave me a swanky new phone!” He grabbed the device off the bedside table and clicked it on, faced with a complex keypad that so far hadn’t responded to his attempts to unlock it. “I have no clue how to use it, but for now, it’s all good.”

Karen sighed long-sufferingly, then kissed Matt’s cheek before rolling out of bed. “Fine. But what are you even going to do? Is Ryan going to sue?”

“It’s up to her,” Matt shrugged, joining them in pulling on clothes. His black compression shirt had a tear in the side showing his bandaged ribcage, but hid the blood in the dark fabric, Foggy noted. His gray suit pants still had bloodstains from the first fight days ago, though.

“Good god, you need new clothes,” Foggy grimaced. “They had spares someplace?”

“It was polyester. Felt like sandpaper,” Matt replied. “Kare, you good to drive? Fitz gave me keys, said someone will grab it later.”

“It’s only a few hours back, I’ll be fine,” she replied, her shirt muffling her words as she pulled it over her head. “Can we check in with Ryan before we go, though? I know it’s late, but Darcy said she was awake and doing fine earlier.”

Matt nodded, and they exited the room, traveling the now well-learned hallways down to the med bay. The lights were still on in Ryan’s room, and Foggy reached to knock on the half-closed door. Suddenly, Matt pushed past him, the door bouncing off the wall in his haste. “Matt, shut up, she’s probably asl –,” Foggy began, then his stomach dropped to his shoes. Ryan was gone.

“Shit,” Karen muttered vehemently, checking the hall as Matt sniffed the air. He abruptly relaxed.

“She’s in the bathroom,” he said, indicating a door at the far end of the room.

Foggy clapped a hand to his chest. “Jesus, no more kidnapping scares!” he declared as the bathroom door opened. Ryan stepped out, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, flannel and jacket combo, sneakers laced on her feet. She looked a little pale, but otherwise alright. “Ryan, what’re you doing?”

She jumped a little at their sudden appearance, but then raised an eyebrow, looking pointedly. “Okay, obviously you’re leaving, but why?” Karen inserted.

“You’re not in any state to leave, Ryan. You need to stay here,” Matt stated.
She ignored them, grabbing the backpack on the floor beside the bed and opening it. She tossed a thick envelope onto the bed next to a folded piece of notebook paper, then zippered the bag shut and swung it on her back.

“How are you even planning on getting anywhere? You going to steal a car?” Karen interjected. Ryan huffed irritably, then reached into her back pocket, pulling out a phone. She typed for a moment, then held it out.

*I can’t drive, I never learned. I’ll walk.*

Foggy relayed the message to Matt while Karen exclaimed, “Ryan, that’s crazy - do you even know where you’re even going? There’s a giant fence around the place, it’s cold as fuck outside – “

*Google maps*, she typed. *A town’s two miles northeast. And I’ve been colder.*

“And the fence? You’re injured, how are you going keep from getting an infection or something? Can you even make it that far?”

Ryan glared at her. Foggy stepped between them, holding out his hands placatingly. “Ryan, please. Just – “ He paused, then sighed. “Matt and Kare are driving back to the city. Let them give you a ride.”

*I’m not going back there.*

“You can go anywhere in the country from New York,” Foggy pleaded. “If you don’t have money for a bus ticket, we’ll get you one, just – *please.*”

Ryan eyed him a little suspiciously. *Why are you staying?*

“I was going to stay to help you,” he answered, “but now I’m just going to tie up the legal loose ends. Make sure SHIELD leaves you alone for good, if that’s what you want.”

Ryan nodded firmly, then paused. *I’ll go with you two.*

“Thank you,” Matt said. “One last thing, then. Can you sit?”

Ryan looked like she wanted to roll her eyes, but she went to the edge of the bed anyway. Matt sat beside her, Foggy and Karen standing in front of them. “In the mansion, they took your blood and developed a serum from it,” Matt stated gently, and Foggy could tell he was listening carefully, making sure she was alright. “Kilgrave took it, and it enhanced his abilities. He wasn’t as strong as you, but close. It was why he could control me then.”

Ryan paled, but sat resolutely anyway. Matt continued, “We gathered as much of the research as we could before the mansion fell, including samples of the serum. No one looked at it or touched it. It legally belongs to you now. And it’s important that it’s taken care of however you want it to be. I’d highly advise you from letting it go public, obviously.”

Ryan shot him a look like he was crazy. *Destroy it.*

“Do you want to look at it first?” Foggy asked. Ryan shook her head firmly. “I know it was done against your will, but it’s probably good insight into – “

Ryan interrupted him by holding up a hand. *I don’t care what the hell Dr. Simmons or that sick fuck found out. I’m never using my powers again, it doesn’t fucking matter. Destroy it, ASAP.*
“Simmons was investigating your powers?” Matt asked urgently, and Ryan nodded. “Did you give her permission?” Ryan shook her head. His jaw tightened.

“Unethical legal and medical practices. Glad to know these are the people that are saving the world on a regular basis,” Foggy retorted.

“Our mate’s a vigilante, Foggy,” Karen offered dryly, and he glared at her, unimpressed.

_Hank said it was for health reasons. Look, I honestly don’t even care. They’re not throwing me in prison, it’s a fair trade._

“Okay, one, that’s not how it works, and two, there’s absolutely no case against you,” Foggy replied firmly. “It’s practically textbook, how much your actions were self-defense.”

Ryan stood up suddenly, scent slightly irritated. _If we’re leaving, can we leave?

Foggy looked at Karen, and they both looked to Matt. “I’d advise against it,” Matt murmured, “but, yes.”

Ryan shouldered her backpack and strode out the door. “Foggy, get all the research destroyed. Who knows what they’ll do with it?” Matt muttered low.

“Duh,” Foggy retorted. “And try to convince her to stay and rest in the apartment a while before she leaves, okay?”


“Love you both,” Foggy replied, leaning in to kiss Matt. “And if you get yourself hurt before I get back, I will figure out how to control minds myself to make you stop.”

“Too soon, Foggy,” Matt said, but he half-smiled anyway. They kissed one last time, then parted ways, Matt and Karen to the left, Foggy to the right.

*** *** *** ***

“Ryan, just – are you sure?” Karen asked as they rounded the last corner. “Did… did you want to say good-bye to anyone?”

Ryan’s eyes flooded with tears, for what felt like the millionth time since all this had begun. A panging in her heart made her pause, look back up the hallway. A voice in her head whispered, _it wasn’t them_…

She shook her head. _Please. Let’s just go._ A minute later, Ryan gratefully collapsed in the backseat, hoping for dreamless sleep despite the pain.

Chapter End Notes
It's been really great to delve deeper into Ryan lately, I hope you guys are enjoying it! :)
In Which Foggy is a Badass Lawyer and The Story Enters a Second Interlude

Chapter Notes

This was a hard chapter to write. I hope you enjoy it!!

Hover over or go to end notes for translations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Just got back. Ryan’s still asleep, but Matt says her injuries don’t sound worse. Claire’s checking her soon, I’ll get prescriptions filled if Dr. Lawson orders them. And the apartment’s fine; Pepper even got the windows fixed for us!

You’re the best, babe. Make her eat something! Foggy texted back. He’d been sitting in Ryan’s room ever since they’d left, thinking and planning and fighting with his new cell phone, finally victorious around 4:30 AM. It was after six now, and he had his bases covered, he thought.

A knock sounded on the door. “Show time,” he muttered, then stood up as it opened, revealing Dr. Lawson. “Dr. Lawson, we didn’t get a chance to meet earlier. Foggy Nelson, of Nelson and Murdock,” he introduced, holding out a hand.

The doctor took it, looking past him with a resigned frown. “Hank. And please, just tell me Ryan didn’t leave on foot,” he sighed.

“She was going to,” Foggy admitted, “but we caught her. She rode back to the city with Matt and Karen.”

“I’ve had runners before,” Hank noted, “but none quite like her, or situations like this.” He went over to the bedside table, picking up a mug, glass, and tiny paper cup. “At least she took her pills.”

“Yeah, Karen just texted me, if you order prescriptions for her we’ll make sure she at least has them,” Foggy replied.

“Good, thank you,” Hank said absently. “She really shouldn’t have left, though.” He shook his head, disposing of the dishes and taking out a prescription pad from his leather bag.

“Well, it’s not like any of us could stop her,” Foggy noted wryly.

Hank chuckled a little. “Yeah, that’s fair. But you’re not the one who has to explain it to Captain America.”

“I can, if you’d like,” Foggy offered. “I’m pulling several of them together to meet as soon as possible, work through the legal stuff left over.”

“No, no,” Hank said, “she’s my patient, or rather, was. Good luck with your meeting, though. I’ve heard Pepper Potts is terrifying,” he ended genially.

Foggy liked him. “Well, alls left to do is wait,” he shrugged, sitting back down in the bedside chair. Suddenly, a knock sounded through the room. “That was fast,” Hank smiled. He turned towards
the entrance, Foggy standing again and mirroring the pose. A moment later, the door opened.

*** *** *** ***

“Clint? Babe, c’mon. You have to eat something,” Darcy cajoled, sitting next to him on the bed. Clint took her hand automatically when she reached for him, but didn’t respond.

Darcy sighed. “Clint, it’s a new day. And all of our days lately have sucked major ass. Can we at least try to make this one a little better?”

“What do you suggest?” Clint intoned sarcastically.

“Getting out of bed is a good start,” Natasha said, closing the door behind her as she entered, toweling her wet hair. “And showering.”

“And after that?” Clint replied. “Then what’m I supposed to do?”

“Eat breakfast,” Natasha shrugged.

“Goddamit, Nat!” Clint suddenly shouted, shoving himself out of bed and moving away from them.

“Don’t yell at her! We’re just trying to help!” Darcy shot back, standing as well.

“Мои любови, пожалуйста,” Natasha interjected, and instantly they both backed down. Natasha didn’t often speak Russian unless she was either completely messing around or deadly serious, oddly enough. And in bed, Darcy thought with an internal smirk.

Clint wiped a hand over his face, looking exhausted despite sleeping all night. “It’s okay,” Darcy said, pulling him into a hug. “We’re all messed up right now.” Clint clung to her, and Natasha guided them to the bed to sit down together.

“Red in the ledger,” she murmured, stroking his hair. “We do what we always do.”

“How?” he said helplessly.

“Sometimes, getting out of bed and eating breakfast is the best plan in the moment,” Nat replied.

“So you don’t know either,” Clint sighed. “Great.”

“I wasn’t trained to apologize,” Nat murmured. Darcy took one arm off Clint to reach down to Nat’s free hand on the bed.

“I swear, how did you two even function before me?” she joked, squeezing them both lightly. “You fuck something up, you say you’re sorry and you’ll never do it again, and then you ask them how you make it right. How else are you supposed to know what to do?”

“And when they say there’s no way in hell you can fix it?” Clint asked, extricating himself to stand up.

Darcy looked down to her hands. “You respect their feelings, I guess. Apologize again, try to fix things if you can find a way… feel like shit for a long time, and then find your own closure best you can. If Ryan’s gonna hate us, she’s gonna hate us. She’s got the right to.”
“Fantastic,” Clint sighed. “Is there any version of this that ends well?”

“It’s not a children’s story,” Nat whispered sadly. Then she paused. “We need some time off.”

“What?” Darcy spurted out, halfway between surprised and shocked. She couldn’t remember the last time they hadn’t been on call for a mission, ready to leave at a moment’s notice.

“Our eyes are tired,” Nat replied. “We only saw what we wanted to see. Not ideal for a pair of spies,” she noted. “And besides. We’ve left you in the red, too. I’d like to wipe that out.”

“The place after Bucharest?” Clint offered, half-smiling despite himself.

“Sex on a beach,” Nat agreed with a smirk. “What do you say, sweetheart?”

Darcy hesitated. “It seems… really wrong, to go on vacation after all of this,” she pointed out. “I mean, it’s not like I’m saying we have to make like Cersei and walk through the streets with a bell-ringer shouting ‘Shame!’, but…”

“I’m planning on torturing myself wherever we are. Might as well be on la playa,” Clint jibed, folding his arms and staring at the floor. Darcy made a frustrated noise, torn between wanting nothing more than her mates together in paradise and thinking they all deserved the polar vortex instead.

“We’re no good to anyone until we get our house in order,” Nat said, interrupting her thoughts. “We both owe you for what we did. Ryan said we can’t make it up to her, and right now…” she trailed off for a moment, looking uncharacteristically vulnerable. “Besides, we’re not the only ones needing time and space. We could sit around and punish ourselves, or…” She shrugged. “We try to fix our tan at the same time.”

Darcy thought for a minute longer, then nodded. “Alright. But we do everything we can here first, though.”

“Конечно. Клянусь,” Nat replied, taking up her hand and kissing the back.

“What was that next step, again?” Clint asked, kissing her cheek.

Darcy smirked. “Shower, you smell disgusting. Then, second apology, then… guilt and sex and guilty sex on the beach. Copious amounts of alcohol included.”

“Perfect,” Clint replied, nosing in her hair. “How the hell did you get so smart?”

“By not growing up emotionally constipated like you two,” Darcy quipped as she brushed him off. “Some of us learned to say we were sorry instead of how to stand on the back of a horse and shoot flaming arrows.”

“And yet, here you are too,” Clint teased. Then the smile slid off his face.

Darcy grabbed his chin none-too-gently and forced his face towards her. “Here I am. And I’m not going anywhere.”

His eyes were pained, but he managed a small smile.
“Ryan?” Steve asked quietly, entering the room. Then he blanched, stopping just past the doorway.

“Ryan!” Bucky called out loudly, voice carrying through the quiet as he searched the room with his eyes. Both of them stared at her empty bed for a moment, then Steve straightened up even further.

“Where is she?” he asked, tone bordering on dangerous.

“With Matt and Karen,” Foggy answered before Hank could.

“No lawyer games,” Bucky growled, tone well into dangerous territory. “Where is she?”

“My client wishes her location to be kept quiet for the time be – “

Bucky stepped forward, eyes deadly, and Steve shot out a hand to the side in front of him. Bucky halted, but his glare gave Foggy chills.

“Gentlemen,” Hank inserted calmly. “Ryan has decided to end treatment early, against medical advice, and has left safely with two trusted friends. As you two aren’t relatives or mates, I’m afraid that’s all the information we can give you.”

“Ryan did leave something behind for you,” Foggy added, and all three of them looked surprised. Foggy pulled the folded note and the envelope that had been sitting on the bed out of his breast pocket. The paper was labeled ‘Tony, Steve + Bucky’.

Steve silently took them both, handing the envelope to Bucky as he opened the paper.

Tony – the money isn’t enough to cover the rent I owe, but it’s all I’ve got. I’ll send more when I can.

Steve and Bucky – you have my permission to know whatever you want from Simmons and whoever else. I don’t know where I’m going, so asking Foggy is pointless.

I don’t blame you.

“Fuck,” Bucky hissed, combing through the envelope. There were almost two thousand dollars in there; Ryan couldn’t have saved much more than that even with her job as Banner’s assistant, it had only been a few months. “How much did she take with her?” he shot at Foggy, who shook his head.

“I don’t know. But I do need you and Captain Rogers, Mr. Stark, Mr. Barton – “

Steve ignored him, crinkling the note in his grip as he stormed out of the room, Bucky close behind. Foggy rolled his eyes, following them quickly. “She doesn’t want to be found!” he exclaimed at their backs.

Steve whirled back around, approaching with a powerful, deadly grace even Matt couldn’t achieve. “She is hurt,” he rumbled, his scent raging protectiveness as he towered over Foggy, “she is scared, she needs help, and I am not abandoning her!”
“So you know what’s best for her? Against her own wishes?” Foggy countered, though his knees were trembling a little. “You’re going to take her agency away from her?”

“She DIED IN MY ARMS!” Steve shouted, and it was Bucky this time who shot out an arm, gripping Steve’s left bicep in his metal grasp. Foggy’s heart thumped wildly as the super soldiers glared at each other, seemingly conversing multitudes in milliseconds.

“She made her choice,” Foggy defended, praying his voice wouldn’t shake. “And it’s not like any of us could stop her, if she really wanted to leave.”

“Gentlemen, if I may,” Hank inserted, stepping up to them. “Steve, Bucky, your concerns are valid. However, as her doctor, I can assure you that she was in good enough health to not require further hospitalization.”

“She practically bled out!” Bucky exclaimed, fire in his eyes. “And she tried to injure herself!”

“She received treatment in time to avoid any complications. And I believe that was an isolated incident,” Hank replied. “Some people have an extreme reaction to trauma once and then are done. She showed no other signs of being a danger to herself or anyone else, and that means I can’t do anything more without her consent.”

"She couldn't even speak!” Bucky argued, gesturing in anger.

"She was choosing not to speak,” Hank explained calmly. "Loss of speech due to trauma is very rare, and really only seen in children, who will be unable to speak in certain circumstances but don't lose the ability overall. Total silence is only in the movies. I'm not saying she doesn't need help, but - "

“Leaving her alone is the best course of action?” Steve spat. “She needs help!”

“I don’t disagree,” Hank shrugged. “I told her leaving was against medical advice, and I tried to keep her here. But in the end, it’s her choice.”

“I only heard the bare minimum of her story,” Foggy interjected. “But she’s survived horrible things before, only to come out fine again on the other side. And do you really think forcing yourselves on her won’t bring up worse memories?”

“We’re on her side!” Steve shouted at him. “I’m not letting her suffer alone!”

“Steve,” Bucky inserted quietly. “D’fhéadfadh siad a bheith ceart.”

Steve stared at him, incensed. “Ní raibh mé ag dul i ndiaidh duit. Níl mé ag déanamh an botún céanna.”

“Bhí mé marbh. Aon duine a chuaigh i ndiaidh na comhlachtaí sin.” Bucky shook his head, looking away. “Tá sí ina marthanóir. Agus ní féidir linn a ghlacadh a rogha as a cuid.”

“Mar sin, lig muid í ag fulaingt ina n-aonar?” Steve snapped.

“Gheall tú dom mo rogha. Cén fáth nach bhfuil sí?” Bucky whispered raggedly.

Steve paused, closing his eyes. “Ní féidir linn a fhágáil léi féin.”

“Shábháil sí dúinn nuair a theip orainn í,” he replied. “Táimid faoi chomaoín aici sin, ar a laghad.”
Steve sighed, then slowly nodded, frustration and pain and helplessness all dimming behind a deep, abiding sorrow. “What did you need us for?” he directed at Foggy, who looked a little taken aback.

“Tie up the legal loose ends,” he answered, sounding relieved. “It shouldn’t take long, with everyone’s cooperation.”


“Talk to Simmons, then get the fuck out of here,” Bucky replied.

“Where do you wanna go?”

They looked at each other, and Steve saw raw pain in Bucky’s eyes. “Far away.”

*** *** *** ***

Foggy was intimidated by the mass of celebrity superheroes and government agents all gathered together in the conference room, but he’d faced less reasonable judges and juries. At least, he figured they’d be reasonable. “Showtime, Nelson,” he muttered, then opened the door. “Thanks for meeting on short notice, everyone, this won’t take long,” he announced, and all eyes fixed on him. The overall scent in the room was slightly uneasy.

Pepper began, “Mr. Nelson, I would be glad to meet with you privately to sort out any – “

“I’m planning on it, Miss Potts,” Foggy interrupted, “but I need to pass along some information to everyone at once.” He shuffled the papers in his hands a moment, pretending it was important work. A lawyer’s best defense for their client was always to start with an impression of the upper hand, whether or not he had it. “My client has chosen to end medical treatment early and leave the premises, and gave me power of attorney to act on her behalf in her absence. She – “

“Ryan has left? But she was gravely injured, surely she should be resting and healing!” Thor interjected, looking concerned. “Where has she gone?”

“I’m sure she appreciates your concern, Mr. Odinson, but she determined the emotional toll taken by remaining in treatment here to be greater than the potential benefits by the alternative,” Foggy said. Barton’s face paled a little, and Stark fiddled with his phone, feigning boredom, but his eyes were pained. “And that leads us to the first order of business: namely, she wishes to dissolve any legal bindings left with Avengers as expediently as possible. As such, she has decided not to sue for any damages.” No one around the conference table met anyone else’s eyes at his pronouncement. “Miss Potts, I’ll be discussing Ryan’s housing situation with you afterwards; however, she left behind a message for Mr. Stark.”

Tony looked up in surprise. Steve passed down the envelope and wrinkled paper, and Tony cursed under his breath as he read, looking away aimlessly. “Pepper,” he muttered, handing them over to her.

Pepper took them both, and looked like she wanted to swear out loud as well. “That won’t be necessary,” she directed at Foggy. “We’ll of course sign whatever agreement you draw up, absolving her of any debt she believes is owed. And if you would please return this to her?”

Foggy nodded, accepting the note and envelope back. “Dr. Banner, I’ll need to discuss the
termination of her employment with you under Stark Industries.”

Bruce nodded, everyone else waiting silently. “Excellent. There is also the matter of the illegal medical research performed on my client.” In the corner of his eye, he saw Captain Rogers’ jaw clench, Sergeant Barnes eerily still beside him. “She has requested that the physical evidence collected by Mr. Murdock and Captain Rogers from the mansion be destroyed, along with the samples of the serum utilized by Kilgrave. Nelson and Murdock have already undertaken that responsibility, but there remains the matter of the continuance of that research by Dr. Simmons.”

All eyes suddenly turned to Simmons, who flushed but remained erect in her chair. “All the research I did was to confirm a hypothesis I developed from the testimonies conducted of the Avengers when they first arrived, in order to best determine the course of medical treatment Ryan needed to undergo,” Jemma stated, not quite meeting Foggy’s eyes. “It was a simple test any hospital or biological research facility would be able to perform on a blood sample, as a supplement to the bloodwork ordered by Dr. Lawson.”

“Regardless of your intentions, it was not mandated by her primary care physician, or even done with his knowledge,” Foggy replied coolly. “My client does not wish to sue for malpractice, but demands the research be handed over to Nelson and Murdock for proper disposal, and a cease and desist order will be following.”

“That won’t be necessary, Mr. Nelson,” Coulson said. “Dr. Simmons regrets her actions, and will, of course, hand over all physical and electronic files and records.”

Foggy was impressed; Coulson knew his lawyer-speak. “Lastly, then. The practices of SHIELD are questionable at best and downright illegal in some areas, as Nelson and Murdock have observed. We have no interest at this time in pursuing legal action against SHIELD for the actions committed against us, considering the circumstances; however,” and he paused, waiting for the dramatic effect. “Should it be discovered in the future that actions of this nature are being repeated, against my client or anyone else, we will not hesitate to bring SHIELD back into the light.”

“I can assure you, our practices are being reviewed and revised based on this incident,” Director Coulson replied.

“Nothing like this will happen again,” Steve spoke up for the first time. “You have my word.”

Foggy wasn’t one for verbal contracts – they didn’t hold up in court well – but at the same time, he believed that statement more than anything else that had been said so far. He nodded once, then said, “On a more personal note, I want to assure you all that Ryan is safe, and in good hands right now. And she does regret the… breakdown of relations. But she also does not wish to be in contact.” He paused for a moment, then finished, “Thank you, everyone. Miss Potts, Dr. Banner, if you could stay behind?”

* * * * * * *

“Steve? Bucky?” Nat’s voice called out as they left. Steve turned back around to see just Natasha, expression neutral and somewhat guarded. “Can we talk?”

“Of course,” Steve replied, indicating a lounge just down the hall.

Steve lowered himself to the couch, his body feeling heavier than usual as Bucky sat beside him.
Natasha settled across from them, and he waited.

“We’re taking a leave of absence, from SHIELD and the Avengers,” Nat said after a pause, and Steve nodded, half-surprised and half-unsurprised. “A month, maybe. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

“I… think we’re going to do the same,” Steve replied after looking to Buck for permission. “Neither of us likes the cold much. Winters in Brooklyn are mostly bad memories,” he half-joked. “And we’ve always wanted to see the Grand Canyon.”

Natasha looked at him curiously. “I would’ve guessed you’d throw yourself back in,” she said. “Show the world how to do it right.”

“I can live without a war for a while,” Steve replied. “Have to know what I’m fighting for, if I’m going to fight. And… everyone needs some time.”

Natasha nodded solemnly, then half-smiled at him. “We’re still friends, right?” she asked lightly, only her eyes betraying the depth of emotion behind the question.

Steve half-smiled back. “Wouldn’t say much of me, if I threw something important away without trying to fix it,” he said. “My Ma taught me better than that.”

Natasha looked to Bucky, whose expression was stony. After a moment, he simply nodded, eyes softening just a little.

Nat nodded back, then stood back up. “I expect awful touristy pictures. Including selfies.”

Steve laughed quietly, then watched her walk away. Barring any world-endangering emergencies, he wouldn’t see her again for a long stretch. Despite the circumstances, he knew he’d still miss her, and Darcy, and Clint. He stood up, stretched a moment, and followed after his mate down the hall. There was one last thing to do.

“Wish it was summer,” Bucky said as they walked. “It’d be nice to take the bikes.”

“It’s always warm in Arizona,” Steve replied with a shrug. “We’ll ship them there.”

Bucky shook his head, smiling a little. “I like the future. Most of the time.”

“Yeah, me too.” Steve paused at the door to the lab. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

An hour later, they exited, and Steve sunk to the floor in the hallway, head in his hands.

“We have to go after her,” Bucky breathed, looking lost and scenting like shock. “She – she’s our mate.”


“She said she doesn’t blame us,” Bucky said desperately. “Goddammit Steve, you were ready to track her down earlier!”

“Before it was our fault all this happened,” Steve replied tonelessly. “You heard Simmons. She presented because of us.”

“So we have to make it right!” Bucky shouted at him.
Steve shook his head. “How?” he shrugged. “She left. Doesn’t want us.”

“She didn’t know!”

“We can’t force her into it!” Steve exclaimed.

“That’s not what I meant,” Bucky snapped. “She has a right to know about her powers. Fuck, she’s aging as slowly as we are!” he ended in a low hiss.

“She’ll figure that out on her own,” Steve said. “Buck… we can’t. We can’t put this on her, too.”

Bucky sighed in frustration. “We can help her,” he pleaded, but only half-heartedly.

“She wants to move on,” Steve said, blinking back tears. “And… we should, too.”

Bucky wiped a hand over his face, then pulled out his cell phone. “What’re you doing?” Steve asked quickly.

He showed him the screen, and Steve nodded. He pulled out his own phone, sending his own message. Silently, he stood, and they walked away together.

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“Ryan?” A soft voice accompanied a gentle touch, nudging her fully awake. Her sleep hadn’t been dreamless, and she tried to shake away the blood and screams still lingering. She blinked a few times to see the pretty Latina woman that smelled like the sea, perched on the edge of the bed she occupied. “Got yourself into more trouble, I see,” Claire murmured with a smile. “Adventuring with Matt, I’m not surprised.”

Somehow, a calm swept over Ryan, and she almost smiled. The words should’ve upset her, she thought. But it was an incredible relief to just be around someone who didn’t know every intimate detail of the worst experience of her life. She spied her phone on a bedside table and grabbed it. Where am I?

“Matt’s apartment. Don’t worry, I changed the sheets for you,” she said, standing up and opening a black leather bag.

You don’t have to check me out, I’m fine.

“No, you’re not,” Claire replied simply, pulling out a stethoscope. “Not until I say so.”

Ryan sat and obeyed as she was checked again. “Well, somehow you’re doing alright,” Claire noted. “Color me impressed.”

Ryan shrugged. It’s not like she had any answers. Everything still hurt, a lot, but she didn’t feel so weak or dizzy anymore at least.

“How long since you last ate?” Claire asked, and suddenly Ryan’s stomach gurgled deafeningly. “A while, then,” Claire laughed, whipping out a protein bar from her bag. “I’m going to go raid the fridge. Don’t even think about getting up.”

Ryan ate gratefully, the chocolate and nuts tasting like heaven. She honestly hadn’t even noticed her
hunger, but the last time she’d eaten… Nope, she thought, shoving the memory far, far away.

“You’d think at least one of these guys would be good at keeping up with the grocery shopping,” Claire said as she re-entered, peanut butter and jelly sandwich in hand. Ryan shrugged again.

“Karen asked me to stay until she gets back,” Claire noted. “Thinks you’ll run off alone, ignore the help you need.”

I’m sorry. I’m not staying, Ryan typed.

“Yeah, I figured,” the nurse admitted. “You’ve survived a lot, haven’t you?”

Ryan didn’t respond. “Tell you what,” Claire said. “Sleep another two hours. I’m going to pick up the prescriptions the doctor called in for you. After that, you can go. No lectures or anything.”

Ryan looked at her suspiciously. Why?

“Nurse’s intuition,” Claire responded with a smile. “Doctors don’t have it, they don’t know anything. But we can always tell, deep down, when people are gonna be alright.”

Ryan honestly wanted to believe her. But she couldn’t afford any more naïveté. I’ll be fine.

“Nah,” Claire replied, taking away the leftover plate of crumbs. “You’ll do better than that.”

If only she deserved it, maybe it could be true. “So, where are you planning on going?” Claire called out from the other room. “Heard Florida’s nice this time of year.”

Ryan thought for a moment. She’d only ever been to Boston and New York City, really. But a brand-new start was appealing. Still needed to be a major city, there was more work and places to crash, and no one looked twice at homeless people. Somewhere further south, avoid as much of the winter if she could. Lots of public spaces was ideal, a transit system for when she had spare cash… Someplace still relatively northeastern, though, she understood the people best. But still far enough away. Washington D.C.

“Sounds nice,” Claire commented. “Never been myself, but hey, lots of history.”

Good way to forget the present, Ryan mused. She didn’t sleep after Claire left, doing some quick research on her phone. She didn’t know the D.C. area or its features, but it seemed to be far less difficult to maneuver than Boston, and had a ridiculous number of free public spaces and parks. A good enough choice, then. She put down her phone to quickly take a shower, wrapping her arms and torso in clingfilm; she didn’t know if the stitches could get wet. The hot water felt amazing. She turned it to cold.

“Ready to go?” Claire’s voice called out as she redressed. She came out with her shoes tied and backpack zipped. “I got your bus ticket, and some extra for food,” Claire said, handing her an envelope and two prescription bottles. “Don’t even think about fighting me on it.”

The calmness she’d felt earlier had entirely disappeared, replaced with all kinds of emotions she didn’t want to explore. Thank you, she typed resignedly. And tell Matt and Karen and Foggy thank-you, too. With a last look back at the apartment, she left.

The trek to the bus station was a half-mile walk Ryan didn’t even remember taking, and an hour after that, she collapsed into her seat on the bus, exhausted to the bone. Just as she closed her eyes, her phone suddenly buzzed, surprising her. A text alert showed on the screen. From: Jimmy Buchanan. She hesitated, then opened it.
If you ever need us, for anything, we’ll be there.

Another buzz. From: Roger Grant.

Thank you. For everything.

She closed her eyes and tried to muffle her sobs.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Natasha: My loves, please. Of course, I promise.
Bucky: Maybe they're right.
Steve: I didn't go after you. I'm not making the same mistake again.
Bucky: I was dead. No one went after those bodies. She's a survivor. And we can't take her choice from her.
Steve: So we let her suffer alone?
Bucky: You promised me my choice. Why not her?
Steve: We can't abandon her.
Bucky: She saved us when we failed her. We owe her this, at least.
In Which the Second Interlude Continues and The Holidays Suck Sometimes

Chapter Notes

Trying some new things in this chapter :) A lot I wanted to communicate. Let me know what you think and enjoy!

Hover over or go to end notes for translations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 18th

The only benefit to the holidays, in Ryan’s opinion, was that businesses were desperate for temporary help to survive the riptide of American consumerism. Enough to hire the girl with the forced smile and inability to speak, apparently. At first, everyone she encountered thought she was deaf, and tried to compensate by yelling and over-enunciating, as though that would help. Every time, Ryan shook her head, lifting her chin and tapping her throat gently. She got even stranger looks for the mutism than the supposed deafness, but finally a harried, frantic manager that scented like old, bitter coffee threw his hands in the air and gave her a job. Restocking and doing inventory on toy shelves was incredibly boring, and rather painful with the injuries still hidden under her clothes, but it was the only task she was allowed. And hey, she got a new employee shirt to wear on her shifts, so that was a bonus.

Claire had gifted her fifty dollars, and the cold snap New York had gone through was long gone, so prospects were good for the time being. The first night, she’d slept fitfully and awoke achy and sore in a quiet alley, unused to the chill and hardness of the outdoors now. Gone soft, pansy-ass, she thought, trudging downtown to the area she’d scouted out after she’d arrived.

First order of business was to find the closest 24-hour gym and become a member. Another benefit to the holidays: year-long memberships were stupidly cheap, some just a dollar as a promotional stunt. A Planet Fitness fit the bill, and she brushed her teeth, made her hair presentable, and swallowed her antibiotics and pain pills after washing her face with the provided hand soap. Next, the post office a few blocks down. Another miracle: there was a P.O. box available, and it was $30 for six months. She could make the last $15 she had work somehow, she thought, ignoring her growling stomach. Then, off to the retail stores jammed and crammed into every city block, hoping her clothes still looked clean enough. She filled out the employee forms, fished out her birth certificate and state-issued I.D. from Massachusetts from the folder in her backpack, plugged in her phone and hid it behind a trash can in the break room, and started training a half-hour later.

Her first paycheck wouldn’t come for a week, which meant she had to think about her next steps carefully. Food was obviously top priority. Ryan checked the break room, and it looked like there was food leftover fairly regularly, mostly holiday treats of some sort. She could eat a few of those every once in a while, but she needed healthy sustenance; she definitely couldn’t afford to get too malnourished right then. Her old staple of dumpster diving it was; she could definitely find still-good vegetables behind the better restaurants downtown.

From there, ten of the dollars would go for whole wheat bread, peanut butter, soap, and toothpaste,
and the last five could get a spare of clothes and a laundry cycle, if she was lucky at the local Salvation Army. Even though Salvos were disgusting bigots, the type who vocally fought against the rights of the unrepresented and trios of mates, citing conservative, traditional “religious” values that nauseated her. They were the cheapest, though, and oversized men’s flannels were still considered hipster instead of homeless on people her age.

She managed to keep her bruised hands busy, but her mind and heart were a different matter. At least half the time, she could just focus on how hungry she was, and that helped a little. The other half, she either forced back tears or swallowed down rage and pain and regret. Every book and online article and testimonial she’d ever read told her to not dwell on the traumatic event, but to still let herself feel her emotions to process them.

*Bullshit,* Ryan thought as she stacked pink boxes of Barbie dolls. She couldn’t afford the luxury of grieving. Where would it get her, anyway? Her past was already black before. It was time to forget and move on, again. When a twisting unease in her stomach told her she was only making things worse, she ignored it.

She just hoped the weather stayed warm and clear enough, her backpack and sneakers didn’t fall apart, the police didn’t notice and arrest her, the store didn’t find her worldly belongings in the employee locker, she didn’t have any more health issues for the next week at least, no one would try to attack or steal from her, the incessant Christmas music wouldn’t stay stuck in her head, and the nightmares she awoke from screaming every hour of the night would go away soon.

* * *   * * *   * * *

December 23rd

“Bruce, you gotta pull some Frankenstein kind of shit in your lab, or else the quiet is going to drive me insane,” Sam said. The two of them were sitting in the common room together, watching some mindless holiday special while eating Chinese takeout.

Bruce half-smiled. “Sam, you really should take a vacation, too. Your mother’s been begging for you to visit.”

“And leave you alone with Tony? Not a chance in hell, we really would get Frankenstein’s monster,” Sam joked. Thor and Jane had decided to visit Dr. Selvig in New Mexico for a research brainstorm session and holiday break when Darcy had told them her plans, and with Steve and Bucky also gone, the Tower was eerily empty.

“Sam. You don’t have to stay for my sake,” Bruce said kindly. “The drug we synthesized is showing better promise, now that I have time for proper investigation protocols. And I don’t officially celebrate Christmas.”

“Yeah, I know. Buddhism, right?”

“In principle,” Bruce affirmed as he stood up, taking Sam’s empty plate as well. “I’m going to do the dishes, and when I’m done, you can give me my Christmas present. Then please, use the credit card I stole from Tony last year and buy a private plane ticket.”
“And where’s my present, then?” Sam remarked, raising an eyebrow and smiling.

“It’s already under the tree,” Bruce replied, and Sam grinned widely as he spied a red-and-green package beneath the Douglas fir he’d erected earlier in a fit of forced holiday cheer.

“Oh lord,” he exclaimed, examining the gift tag. “Should I be worried it’s from you and Tony?”

“It’s mostly from him,” Bruce called out from the kitchen. “But I came up with the original idea, so I claimed it as well.”

“Oh, my god!” Sam squealed in glee, tearing open the package. “You got me a drone?!”

“Designed,” Bruce smiled, reentering the common room as he dried his hands on a dishtowel. “It interfaces with your Falcon tech, so you control it the same way Tony controls the Iron Man suit.”

Sam let out an involuntary excited shriek, almost dropping the half-airplane, half-bird shaped machinery. Then he cleared his throat. “It’s very important to me that Steve never finds out I made that sound.”

“Not a chance,” Bruce replied, rolling his eyes good-naturedly.

“Thank you man, though, really,” Sam said, crinkling up the wrapping paper to throw it away. “I’m calling it... Redwing!”

“You’re welcome. We need all the good cheer we can get right now,” Bruce reflected, a hint of melancholy in his tone.

Sam looked down and away, smile drooping as he felt the weight of the Tower’s silence again. “I’d already gotten her gift,” he murmured, glancing over to the Christmas tree. “Won a radio call-in contest, of all things, and snagged an early pair of Red Sox/Yankees tickets for next season. Got her a David Ortiz t-shirt online to wear to it.”

“She would’ve loved that,” Bruce smiled. “She never missed a game when it was on the radio.”

“Wait,” Sam said, confused. “Tony’s got every TV station known to intelligent life hooked up here, did she not watch the games? She could’ve seen all of them, in ridiculous HD.”

Bruce’s smile slid off his face, a glum expression replacing it. “She didn’t advertise it,” he noted, “but I picked it up on it after a while. She never used anything in the Tower that wasn’t hers, if she could help it. Only ever if something was being used by someone else simultaneously, like coming to watch TV if it was already on. She almost never cooked anything, and she even bought her own food, kept it in an empty cabinet. Never ate anything from the communal kitchen, and barely picked at most of our family dinners.” He chuckled for a moment. “She brought this tiny black radio from the '80s down into the lab when the Sox had a day game.”

Sam stared at him, a horrible sinking in his stomach. “I didn’t even notice,” he breathed, sifting through all his memories of the past few months. “How did I not notice? It’s my job to notice,” he continued, shame and disbelief warring inside.

“Sam, she seemed to be doing fine regardless, it’s why I never mentioned anything. You’re trained to work with veterans, I’m sure it’s very different circumstances,” Bruce offered reassuringly. “And you’re not looking to be a counselor when you’re here at home.”

Sam shook his head, thinking hard. “I knew she lost her parents, but I never asked if she was in the system,” he said, ignoring Bruce’s comfort. “Kids... they adapt, always do, but not always in good
ways. Fuck, that… actually explains a lot.” He sighed, dropping back down onto the couch and staring out the glass wall to the city alight beyond.

Bruce sat as well, looking contemplative. “She was trying to be the perfect guest,” he surmised, glancing at Sam for confirmation.

“No,” he countered. “She was trying to be perfect, full stop. Overcompensating for perceived faults, not even for praise or attention. Trying to stay under the radar as much as she could so she wouldn’t ever attract negative attention instead. Not invade anyone’s space, never be in the way. Makes perfect sense, with her history.”

“For what is she blaming herself, then? None of her circumstances have ever been her fault.”

“The mind doesn’t work that way,” Sam replied sadly. “It’s possible her parents were overly strict, given how she had to hide her powers. That would explain trying so hard to be perfect, never showing any faults. Or, her bio parents could’ve been great, but her foster families overly strict, especially if there were other kids in the house already; that would’ve bred competition for emotional resources like love and affection, and she would have to work twice as hard to ‘earn it’, in her mind if not in actuality. It could’ve been something else, too. Combine any of those with being alone and homeless off and on for seven years…”

“Eight,” Bruce said absently, seeming lost in thought.

“She’s 26?” Sam questioned. “When’s her birthday?”

“October 24th. Fitz and Simmons mentioned something back at SHIELD, and I checked in her med files,” Bruce answered sadly. “I didn’t even know, didn’t think to ask.”

Sam dropped his head back atop the couch, staring upwards. “JARVIS. Please tell me someone wished her a happy birthday.”

“I’m sorry, sir. The only people who knew of her birthday, to my knowledge, were Mr. Barton, Ms. Romanoff, and Mr. Stark,” JARVIS replied. “They were not at the time so inclined to celebrate.”

Sam sighed, scrubbing his hands down his face. “Well. Combine that with being alone and homeless off and on for eight years,” he corrected, trying to shove down the surge of guilt in his stomach, “and she sounds like the most emotionally lonely person I’ve ever come across.”

“Emotionally lonely?”

“It’s when someone lacks satisfactory emotional attachment, as opposed to social loneliness, which is being physically alone. With the emotional kind, children – or anyone, but children especially – they try ridiculously hard to make some kind of connection with a parent, or in Ryan’s case, whoever she could identify with as surrogate family,” Sam explained. He tried to ignore the voice in his head saying that her surrogate family of late had been far worse than any foster family could’ve been. “They put other people’s needs first every time, to sort of justify their way into being worthy of the relationship. Not that they’re not naturally caring or selfless, they pretty much have to be to react this particular way. But it’s taken to extremes, where their own emotional and physical needs get thrown aside.”

Bruce groaned a sigh. “Like how she gave all her savings to Tony?”

“Nailed it,” Sam agreed. “She saw herself as owing him a debt – the rent – and she was trying to pay it back so she could move on, but feel worthy of doing so.”
Bruce shook his head. “That’s awful,” he murmured sympathetically. “How is she still even standing?”

“She’s been keeping her secrets for over a decade,” Sam shrugged. “She’s got practice. And it’s a positive feedback loop, really. Throw away your own feelings to try to be perfect for others, you’re not in a place to make any kind of meaningful connections where you’re getting the support you need, so you keep trying to be more perfect – however you seen that being defined – to gain favor, and it just keeps going.”

“So, to recap, she was socially stigmatized for being unpresented, and then suffered from further isolation because of her superpowers in various ways, leading to situational perfectionism, extreme self-regulation, emotional isolation, and very good acting skills to cover it all up. Not to mention the extreme stress of homelessness, the tragedy of losing her parents, and the traumas of her sexual assaults, personal betrayals, kidnappings, witnessed violence, torture, illegal medical experimentation, and the fact that she has now committed an act of violence herself,” Bruce listed. He met Sam’s gaze, scent and expression heartbroken. “And we didn’t even wish her a happy birthday.”

“She could be trying to ‘make up’ overall for any number of things,” Sam noted, head swirling with the deeply depressing revelations. “Being unpresented, not going to college, being homeless, having superpowers. She also… might even blame herself for her parent’s deaths,” he sighed. “If it ever even got into her head that she might’ve done something to stop it… people without superpowers can feel that way. Ryan might think it’s her fault she didn’t somehow save them.”

“Good god,” Bruce groaned. “She seemed so… normal.”

“She’s not abnormal,” Sam countered. “Just in need of some help, and probably a goddamn hug.”

* * * * * * *

December 25th

“Happy Feast of Lights and Victory,” Jane murmured, pressing her nose into Thor’s golden locks as they lay in their bed.

“And a very merry Christmas to you, my lady,” Thor smiled, tightening his arms around her. “It is an incredible turn of fate that both our cultures’ most cherished celebrations occur on the same celestial date.”

“You say that every year, babe,” Jane giggled, leaning back to smile at him.

“Every year it is true,” Thor replied teasingly. He kissed her gently on the lips, pulling back a moment later.

Jane immediately sensed something was wrong; Thor was normally much more exuberant on Feast days, especially this one. “What’s up, sweetie?”

Thor sighed, stroking her hair absently. “This is supposed to be a day of celebration with family, friends, countrymen. Even warriors and foes together,” he said softly. “I do not wish to say you are
not my dearest friend and most beloved family, but…”

“I know,” Jane promised. “And I know you were looking forward to a big party this year.”

“It is more than that,” Thor said. “Today is not a day for harboring anger, but… I cannot seem to deny it.”

Jane paused for a moment, thinking. “Who are you angry with?” she asked, although she thought she knew the answer already. They both needed to work out their thoughts, though. She’d been avoiding it, burying herself in work with Erik, but she recognized she wasn’t being fair to her mate. It was just easier to try to forget instead.

Thor hesitated. “I… am a prince of Asgard. It is my duty to preside justly over my people, once my father Odin has passed on to glory in Valhalla. And in just the past few Earth years – a minuscule era, for my race – I have learned more about the perils of that responsibility than all the time I was taught by schoolmasters, sages, dignitaries. My queen mother,” he whispered, scent becoming despondent with grief for her still. Jane held him a little tighter, the silk of her pajamas rustling softly against the sheets.

“None of them were able to impart upon me the discernment I lacked,” Thor continued. “None ever predicted the betrayal of my brother Loki, his fall into depravity. I thought I had learned by now how to understand the hearts of the people I must someday govern, and those who I love and cherish more personally. To discover that I have not… I am angry at myself.”

“You can’t hold yourself responsible,” Jane replied, surprised. “You had no reason to be suspicious of Clint, Natasha, Tony, or anyone else.”

“There is a difference between suspicion and discernment,” Thor countered. “Is it not the honor of kings to set an example, wherever they may be? And because I still am lacking, the hurt inflicted spread to everyone. We were all lied to, made complicit in their actions for a time, and it is not unreasonable to be angry at the mistreatment of a friend.

“But I do not begrudge them still; they are truly sorry and repentant, it is plain. And furthermore, they did not mean to harm anyone, I believe. Their actions stemmed from a place of distrust, but more deeply, a place of love. Love for the people we protect. And even more deeply, love for the family we have all found in each other.”

Jane closed her eyes, understanding better now. “You’re worried you have the same blind spots they do.”

“I know I do,” Thor replied quietly. “None of us are without faults. But those in positions of power, responsibility… the consequences of those faults are magnified a hundredfold.”

“Well,” Jane murmured, “far be it from me to disagree with a prince of Asgard, but it sounds like you’ve got more discernment than you think. You can’t fix your blind spots without knowing where they are.”

“I do not wish to reduce the suffering we inflicted upon Ryan to a lesson I can say I learned,” Thor said.

“No, no, of course not,” Jane agreed quickly.

“And the matter twists even deeper,” Thor continued. “Their distrust was proven to be misguided in Ryan’s case, but not unfounded. Not in regards to the aspect of her presentation; that was sheer prejudice. But Kilgrave truly proved to be both Ryan’s antithesis, and in some ways… her mirror
Jane paused, the implications sinking in. “I... I don’t know what we could’ve done differently,” she admitted. “They’re family, we have to trust them, if we...”

“I was glad you suggested this journey,” Thor said. “I felt I needed the time to reflect. But so far, I have not found any peace.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Jane repeated, not knowing what else to say. “Asking ‘what if’ won’t change what happened.”

“But I am still unsure of what comes next,” Thor replied. “Ryan has gone, likely to never return. Natasha, Clint and Darcy are far away, seeking to understand their own fates. Steven and James are particularly affected, to the extent that I do not know if they wish to ever return.”

“Things won’t be the same.” Jane sat up, brushing her hair behind her ears. “But worrying won’t solve anything. I learned that from all of this, too.”

“I wish I had not caused you so much anxiety, my dearest,” Thor murmured, leaning up to kiss her shoulder.

“It’s over, now,” Jane said. “Come on, it’s the Feast of Christmas Lights and Victory today. Erik’s deep-frying a turkey, and I still have to wrap your presents after I make the salad.”

Thor smiled wide, his usual jubilance shining through again. “And I will smash the potatoes!” he declared enthusiastically, and Jane smiled back as he bounded out of bed.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Still December 25th

The shop was closed today. She’d probably get fired after New Year’s, if not sooner, so Ryan walked the streets, seeking potential places of employment. She had worked nonstop almost two weeks, though, signing up for every shift possible, and she now had just over fifty dollars to spare after cashing her checks at the local Wal-Mart. She wasn’t hungry, for the first time in what felt like forever, her socks didn’t smell horrible, and the only time it had rained she’d managed to stay overnight in the store’s break room, hiding in the bathroom until the lights were off and claiming a corner. She still couldn’t sleep more than two hours, and she was pretty sure she was supposed to get her bandages changed a while back, but she’d been fine so far. Things were going good. So why was she still downright miserable?

You know why, she thought, rolling her eyes at herself as she ignored her aching, throbbing ribs to keep trudging past the fake Christmas trees in every window. She paused at the entrance to a park, as neatly kept as the rest of the capitol city, trying to seem impressive to the rest of the world. She’d used to love to visit parks, running around and playing Frisbee, tumbling down hills and splashing in fountains. Never thought she’d have to live in one, though. This one was empty, as far as she could see. Everyone else was home with their families celebrating. She’d used to do that, too.

Happy anniversary, Mom and Dad. 30 years today.
December 31st, near midnight

It was still warm out, though the sun had set hours ago as they sat near the edge together. “Penny for your thoughts,” Bucky whispered, pressing closer into Steve’s side.

Steve half-smiled against him, remembering. “Pennies still don’t buy much.”

“It’s enough for what goes on up there,” Bucky teased. The air was heavy and still, but a million stars twinkled above, and it was the most beautiful place he’d ever seen. He closed his eyes, listening to the silence. No fireworks or celebrations over the Grand Canyon. Just the dust, the quiet, and them.

“You don’t want to know,” Steve murmured, softly nuzzling his cheek against Bucky’s hair as he rested his head on Steve’s shoulder.

Bucky sighed. “Stubborn punk.”

“I’m thinking about stuff we’re supposed to be tryin’ to forget,” Steve muttered. “Thought this trip would work better as a distraction.”

A shooting star suddenly flew through Bucky’s line of sight, dazzlingly luminous. He tried not to be reminded of shining blue eyes that similarly illuminated the dark, the glimmering, powerful hands that reached out to save him. He failed. “Me, too.”

Steve shifted a little, and Bucky lifted his head again, meeting Steve’s gaze. He could make out lines of worry etched into his mate’s forehead, and Bucky reached out to smooth them down. Steve leaned into the touch, reaching up to caress the side of Bucky’s face, the back of his neck. Bucky shuddered a little, his arms falling to his sides, as Steve stroked softly. “You’re enough for me,” he promised, but Bucky heard the break in his voice.

“You’re all I’ve got,” Bucky whispered back, knowing those words at least were true. Steve’s touch stilled a moment, then he yanked Bucky in even closer, kissing him fiercely, possessively. They hadn’t done more than kiss and touch and hold each other yet, it hadn’t felt right, but in that instant, Bucky felt a desperate need exploding deep inside. He needed, longed for, craved the reassurance that at least they would be together always, so he threw himself at Steve, knocking him on his back on the hard ground, warring for dominance as he crashed their lips together again.

Steve was suddenly as desperate as he, one hand fisting into Bucky’s hair and the other gripping the back of his neck again, and Bucky’s deep moan was swallowed as Steve thrust his tongue into his mouth. Bucky lightly nipped at Steve’s lower lip, and Steve suddenly rolled them over, grinding down against Bucky as he held himself above on his elbows, claiming his mate with open-mouthed kisses down his jaw, his throat. Steve scented deeply as he bit down on his mating scar, and Bucky’s hips jerked up involuntarily.

“Oh,” Bucky breathed, “god, Stevie, love your mouth so much.”

Steve made a sound like a deep, satisfied purr, skimming one hand beneath Bucky’s shirt to stroke
heated skin. The simple touches were a live wire turning to electric shocks of pleasure as he rubbed and twisted a nipple, causing Bucky to gasp into his Alpha’s mouth, his lips claimed once more.

Bucky dropped back a moment later, trying to catch his breath as Steve ground against him again, the friction almost too much as he clung to his mate. “Missed you so much, Stevie,” he panted, and suddenly, a picture of copper hair and light skin ghosted through his mind. The memory of a heat scent, delicious and tempting and made for them, and he half-swallowed a keening moan. “Wait.”

Steve pulled back immediately, rolling off him to the side, and Bucky grabbed his arm to not lose contact completely. “Let’s go back to the room.”

Steve chuckled a moment. “It is a little dirty out here,” he agreed, and a minute later they were riding side-by-side in the dark night, the rumbling motorcycle engines cutting through the quiet.

As soon as they got inside the hotel room door, Steve gave Bucky a questioning look, to which Bucky rolled his eyes. The next second, he was pushed up against the wall, kissed with raw, passionate fervor as Steve practically growled his pleasure. He grabbed Bucky’s thighs, hitching him up onto his hips, and the press of their hardness together made sparks explode behind Bucky’s closed eyes. It had been weeks, too long without his Alpha’s body claiming his, and Bucky tangled his hands in Steve’s hair, gripping tight. It was getting longer, almost how it had been all those years ago.

“I got you, Buck,” Steve whispered in his mouth, and Bucky took in the exhale for himself, wanting every part of his mate inside him.

“Please,” he begged, heated and breathless, “I need you Steve, please.”

“You have me,” Steve swore, walking them to the bed, “always, you’re mine, mo anamchara – “

“M’fhíorghrá,” Bucky panted reverently, and Steve crowded over him on the bed, grabbing at Bucky’s shirt and ripping it clear off in his haste. Bucky scrambled at Steve’s clothes as Steve did his, and a few seconds later, he felt his arms pushed and pinned above his head. For just a moment, Steve paused, pressing their foreheads together, and they breathed each other in, scenting deeply. Bucky leaned up, brushing their lips together, and Steve sighed into the kiss.

“Is breá liom tú,” he whispered raggedly.

“Is leatsa mé.” Bucky canted his hips upward, gasping at the friction.

“Mianach.” Bucky closed his eyes as hands raked across his chest, Steve’s mouth trailing lower as he mouthed at his skin, a bruising mark sucked into his neck making him gasp.

The same image from earlier flashed in Bucky’s mind, unbidden, and words tumbled out before he could stop them. “I bet she’d love your mouth, too.”

Steve gasped and groaned, scent overpoweringly aroused for a moment. “Buck, don’t. You shouldn’t – shouldn’t say stuff like that.”

“Her skin’s so light,” Bucky panted, reaching down to stroke himself, achingly hard. “Be covered in marks, all yours, Stevie, if she wanted ’em.”

“’S not right, you shouldn’t – nngh,” Steve cut off with a groan, slapping Bucky’s hand away and replacing it with his own.

“God, yeah, just like that.” Bucky arched his back, biting his lip. “Fuck, she’s so much smaller than
us, fit perfect right between, ‘n you holdin’ on to her tiny little waist.”

Steve growled, his movements becoming rougher as he held himself above with one arm. Bucky reached up, dragging his teeth across the sinew of his neck, tugging at his earlobe. “You’d have me playin’ with her tits,” he whispered in Steve’s ear, “kiss her steady, ‘n you’re in her legs, eating her out. God, she’d taste so sweet, be screaming for y – oh, fuck!”

Steve darted back and swallowed him down in one swift motion, hollowing out his cheeks and swirling his tongue, and Bucky’s vision almost whited out. “Jesus God, more, Stevie, please,” he begged, mouth running off without conscious thought. Steve swallowed around him, bobbing his head, and Bucky gritted his teeth, trying not to come. “Takin’ your time, we’d take care of her, treat her right like she wants – god – ‘n after you’ve got her nice and wet, oh –!” He threw his head back into the pillows, grip splintering the headboard, Steve’s strong hands keeping his hips from jutting upwards. “So hot and slick, you can just slide right in, can’tcha Stevie? So open ‘n ready for you, Christ.”

Steve groaned sinfully, the vibrations a delicious torture, then suddenly took him deep into his throat, making Bucky gasp. “Fuck, Stevie, I’m so close.”

Abruptly, Steve pulled off, and Bucky whined involuntarily at the loss, wriggling in his grasp. Steve surged up and attacked his mouth, teeth clicking and tongue thrusting inside. “You come on my knot,” he growled into his lips, rough and deep, “or not at all.”

“God,” Bucky keened, almost frantic, “please, please, Alpha, missed you so much – “

“I’ve got you, tá tú mianach, mo Béite.”” Steve opened the bedside drawer, took out the bottle he’d put there when they’d arrived. Then, one finger slowly teasing, he rumbled, “Keep talking.”

When Bucky awoke, it was late the next morning. Steve was still unconscious, huddled all the way across the bed, almost two feet of space between them despite falling asleep enveloped in each other. It had happened five times in the past week, and Bucky hadn’t been able to figure out why. Now, though, he knew who was supposed to be there.

He got up, planning to shower away the lingering dust and sweat and guilt, automatically checking his phone. There was a new text, and his heart skipped a beat.

From: Ryan Green.

Happy New Year.

Chapter End Notes

Oh god. So, that was the first time I’ve ever tried to write anything that could be remotely categorized as smut, and I’m freaking out. 0/10 do not recommend for myself, because I am an ace who apparently enjoys reading it 1000000x more than writing it. That being said, the only way to improve is to do, right? If you wanna leave feedback
on how I did with that section, that'd be cool. It's not the *absolute worst* you've ever read, right?? (If it is, please be gentle, I beg of you, I am crunchy on the outside and a marshmallow of sadness inside.)

Mo anamchara - my soulmate, Steve's special term for Bucky
M'fhiorghra - my true love, Bucky's special term for Steve
Is breá liom tú - I love you
Is leatsa mé - I'm yours
Mianach - Mine
tá tú mianach, mo Béite - You're mine, my Beta
Steve exhaled heavily, the scratchy motel blanket sliding down as he sat up. “Yeah, I got it, too.”

Bucky crossed the short distance to the window, staring blankly at the scrub brush and prickly-pears littering the scenery outside. “Why do you think she sent it?” he asked, tamping down the nervous thrill atop his thudding heart.

Steve didn’t reply for a few moments. “We can’t read too much into this,” he hesitated. “It’s just one text.”

Bucky leaned against the wall, metal arm bouncing spots of sunlight into the room as he gazed unseeingly. “It’s been weeks. It means something.”

“It means ‘Happy New Year,’” Steve sighed, putting his phone back down.

Suddenly, Bucky was livid, anger exploding like a powder keg meeting a spark, and he whipped back around to face his mate. “What the fuck, Steve!”

“What?!” Steve replied, looking entirely taken aback.

Bucky stormed over, crowding Steve back, practically baring his teeth. “You’re just giving up? When have you ever run away from a fight?!”

Steve’s expression morphed from confused to angry in half a second. “When I threw my shield into the Potomac for you,” he growled fiercely. “I won’t fight you, Buck. And I won’t fight her!”

“You mean you won’t fight for her,” Bucky hissed back, metal hand clenching into a fist.

“There’s no difference!” Steve pushed past him, scenting like a matchbook lit aflame. “She doesn’t want us, we can’t keep fucking pretending – “

“We don’t know what she wants!” Bucky interrupted. “She left, yeah, and I don’t blame her. But you’re telling me that this – “ he held up his phone, the text still displayed, “ – means absolutely nothing?”

Steve slumped suddenly, the fight draining out of his stance and scent. “It can’t,” he whispered. “I can’t let it, it – Jesus, Buck, it’s tearing me in half, I can barely stand it.”

Bucky’s shoulders drooped a little, guilt and sorrow extinguishing his anger. “I miss her so much.”

“Me, too.” Bucky looked up, apology in his eyes, and Steve nodded, holding out a hand. Bucky took it, and Steve drew him into his arms. “I keep telling myself it’s not what happened to you, she’s not gone. But… we lost her anyways.”
Bucky scented at Steve’s neck, calming himself with the warm, homey scent of his Alpha. “It can’t be a coincidence,” he murmured, pulling back a little. “Last night… and now this?”

Steve looked away, eyes downcast. “It’s just a text.” He shook his head, eyes misty. “We’re supposed to be moving on, not acting like a couple of lovesick saps.”

Suddenly, Bucky stepped back. “You know what? No.”

“No?” Steve repeated, looking worried.

“Fuck the self-sacrificing martyr bullshit for one second, Stevie. What do you want?”

“What I want doesn’t matter!” Steve shot at him. “I love her, I want what she wants for her, and you should, too!”

“I love you, too!” Bucky yelled. “You think this is any easier for me? God, Steve, it’s like the sun ain’t even shining – and I see you miserable too, and I can’t do fuck all, for either of us!” He sighed in frustration, running a hand through his hair. “Are we just supposed to sit here feeling awful forever?”

“We’re supposed to heal,” Steve replied, sitting on the bed again. “How would going after her fix anything?”

“It wouldn’t, I know.” Bucky sighed as he sat beside Steve. “I just… I never thought I’d get to have even this much again. But… you know I’m the selfish one of us.”

“And I’m the stubborn, reckless, impatient one,” Steve murmured, leaning in to kiss his cheek. “But the one thing I won’t risk is hurting her, or you. If going after her were the right thing to do, I’d have you trace back the text right now. But she wanted to leave. What we want doesn’t matter more than her freedom.”

“I know, and I swear, all I want is what’s best for her,” Bucky replied, voice thickening a little. “But fuck, Steve. She’s all alone, she left with just the clothes on her back – would we really be making things worse?”

“She doesn’t feel the same way about us,” Steve said. “We’d have to keep it secret, we can’t put that pressure on her. And what would we even do when we found her?”

Bucky shifted a little, taking Steve’s hand atop the bedsheets.

“She’ll never go back to New York – I don’t blame her, I wouldn’t either – and we’ve got other responsibilities, too,” Steve continued.

Bucky nodded silently. “What’re we going to do about the team, Steve?”

Steve shook his head. “Part of me wants to say fuck it all, I’ve had enough. I’ve got you, I don’t need more. But… I don’t think I can lose them, too.”

“It’s okay, Stevie,” Bucky said quickly, scenting a hint of guilt. “The year and a half I’ve been here… they’re my family, too. Much as I hate ‘em half the time. But, that’s how I know they are.”

“You don’t hate everyone. Just Tony, and Sam, sometimes,” Steve replied with a smile.

“More than sometimes, that lunatic,” Bucky grumbled, and Steve kissed his cheek again.

“You did nearly kill him three or four times when you first met,” he noted.
“I apologized!” Bucky insisted. “He knows it wasn’t me! You know what he did right before all this shit happened? His mother sent Christmas cookies, the good old-fashioned kind, ‘n he walks around handing them out and then says ‘Sorry, all out,’ right in front of me. The tin was completely full, Steve.”

Steve snickered, shaking his head. “You two get your petty revenge rocks off without me, I know better than to join that fight.”

“Jesus, Rogers,” Bucky teased, “this century’s turned you soft. Where’s the guy that punched the lights out of Davey Johnson for stealing Abe Cohen’s sandwiches in the fifth grade?”

“It was you that punched out Davey’s lights. I could only reach the top of his chest.”

“Scrawny little punk,” Bucky reminisced. Then he stood up, stretching out his neck and sighing. “I don’t know if I can trust them anymore.”

“It’ll take time, rebuilding,” Steve said. “And… I think you should talk with Pamela, and me with John. She needs to know about the relapse, and I think he could give some perspective.”

“Still don’t know what my pop would say, telling strangers about our problems ‘stead of handling them ourselves,” Bucky noted, but he pulled out his phone anyway.

“Medicine’s a million times better than it was,” Steve shrugged again. “If doctors and our friends say talking to a therapist’s the best thing to do, I’ll take it. Better than my asthma cigarettes used to be.”

Bucky smiled nostalgically, then looked back down to his phone, the text still displayed. He hesitated, then typed, Happy New Year, Ryan. He glanced back up, and saw Steve had done the same. They met each other’s eyes once more.

“Buck?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s go to California.”

Bucky shrugged. “Disneyland sounds fun. The redwoods, too.” He stepped into the bathroom, keeping the door open. “You think my hair’s too long?”

Steve met his eyes in the mirror. “Thought you liked the new style.”

“Been thinking about cutting it.” He frowned at his reflection, trying to imagine. “Short on the sides, a little longer on the top. More modern, I don’t wanna have to slick it all the time like back then.”

Steve smiled. “I was thinking about growing a beard.”

** January 7th, 10 PM Eastern Time **
Ryan had been fired, as she’d predicted. It was getting cold, too, the nights around freezing. She still had some savings, but it was reaching dangerously low. All in all, not the best circumstances, but she’d survived worse, she thought. She couldn’t remember when, but she was sure she had.

Most stores were closing for the evening by now, so she would have to continue the job hunt tomorrow, it seemed. It had long since gone dark, and her hands were cold as she walked alone to the overpass she’d found to sleep under that night.

Suddenly, a male voice called out, “Hey, baby, what’s your name?” Ryan ignored him. With all the time she’d spent on city streets, cat-calling was background noise, as horrible as it was. Besides, it was never directed at her; she’d never been pretty or interesting enough, it seemed, for sleazy construction workers and hoodie-clad thugs.

“Hey, Omega, I’m talking to you!” the man shouted, closer now, and a chill like ice water went down Ryan’s spine. Oh god. He was talking to her. She was an Omega now. Apparently, that was the second half of the equation she’d been missing before. She walked a little faster, a better-lit section of the city close ahead.

The man – of the thuggish, hoodie-clad variety – caught up with her, walking directly alongside, crowding her to the side of the road. He scented like spicy ginger; an Alpha, she realized. She was getting better at determining presentations; it seemed Karen was right, it was becoming instinct over time. “Whatever, bitch, I’m just trying to make conversation. You know I’m a nice guy,” he spat at her.

Ryan almost wanted to laugh. She was scared, for some reason; stomach churning, instinct telling her to run. Why, though? The man was in more danger from her than she could ever be from him. The dichotomy of her feelings confused her, so she just kept walking.

“Jesus, you could at least smile, you ugly slut,” he yelled in her ear, and Ryan gasped, heart racing and pounding. Two of the street lamps above them suddenly burst, raining sparks down, and a car parked down the street started blaring its alarm. The man jumped, but Ryan was frozen in panic. “Smile, Ryan, you’re much prettier when you smile…”

“Hey, get back here!” Ryan gave into instinct, breaking into a sprint, but he quickly caught up, grabbing her arm and pressing himself against her. His breath smelled like cigarettes, and up close, his face was contorted with ugliness as he leered at her. “Come on, I’ll show you a good ti – what the FUCK?!”

Ryan shoved away from him, and she saw her hands were glowing bright blue, illuminating her attacker’s face in the dark. No, no, no!

“What kind of freaky shit are you on?!” he shouted, pointing at her eyes. Ryan turned tail and ran, backpack bouncing and breath panting, but this time, she wasn’t followed. A half-mile later, she collapsed in an alleyway, her hands still shining through the black, casting shadows on the brick walls surrounding her. She gasped for breath, her side hurting from the exertion as she tried to calm herself back down. But it wasn’t working, her hands wouldn’t stop trembling and shining, and the garbage cans nearby were quaking and rattling loudly.

Calm down, someone will see, calm down, calm down… What felt like hours later, the light finally began to recede, her panting breaths starting to slow despite the adrenaline still coursing. She had only lost control three times that she could remember, and she held back the nausea that threatened to return her meager dinner at the memories. The first, when her principal had brought her to the office in 2001. The second, when she discovered she could control minds. The third, that night in the Tower, which she hadn’t fully realized until after. And now.
She exhaled shakily, the stench of garbage and the cold of the night grounding her a little. She couldn’t lose control again, she could’ve killed him. Just like Kilgrave.

Suddenly, a visceral hatred coursed through her, burning like acid. She hated her murdering hands, her disgusting body, her monstrous, freakish self. No wonder people always left, wanted to hurt her. She deserved it.

Just then, her phone buzzed, startling her. The last she’d texted anyone was Steve and Bucky a week ago while watching fireworks on TV, crowded into a coffee shop open late with hipsters drinking mason jar cocktails and smoking weed in the back. She missed them, a lot. Steve’s laugh, Bucky’s smile, the way they’d only left her side when she asked. She didn’t know why, but…

Then all they’d done was text back the next morning, and that was that. It was fine. She hadn’t expected more. This probably wasn’t even from them, she thought, pulling the phone out of her back pocket. More likely she was over her usage from her last prepaid data card.

From: Roger Grant.

Ryan, I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t, but – Bucky and I just had a weird feeling. Could you just tell me if you’re okay?

Ryan stared at the message. How the hell – no, they couldn’t know, there was no way even if they were watching her. That was a poor neighborhood, there weren’t any cameras there, and the nearest stoplight had been too far to catch anything. Then – how?

She shook her head, then put it all aside, shoved down everything. She was good at that, by now. Then, standing up again, she texted Steve back. I’m fine.

*** *** *** ***

January 7th, 7 PM Pacific Time

Steve had been in the bathroom, washing his hands, when it hit him. A sudden surge of heart-stopping, sickening dread in his stomach, and he tore out to the floor of the little family restaurant they’d stopped at outside Anaheim for dinner, rushing back to their table around the corner. Suddenly, he collided head-on with someone as solid as he, and he instinctively grabbed Bucky’s flesh arm, keeping them both from falling over.

“Are you – “

“Yeah,” Bucky breathed, wide-eyed, “are you?”

“Yeah,” Steve nodded, and they stared at each other for a few moments. Steve noticed a few servers and patrons looking curiously at them, and he let go of Bucky, motioning back to their table.
“What the hell was that?” Bucky muttered as they sat again.

Steve shook his head. “I have to call Natasha,” he muttered back. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“I’m coming with –“

“No, Buck, just – I’ll explain in a few minutes, just give me a sec,” Steve said, standing up. “I’ll stand where you can see me through that window, okay?” He didn’t want to leave Bucky, unease still twisting inside, but he had a suspicion of what was happening, and he only trusted Nat to confirm it.

“Be quick,” Bucky ordered, and Steve nodded. He quickly walked outside, meeting Bucky’s eyes through the window for a second, then held up his phone to his ear.

“What’s happening?” Nat’s voice answered urgently.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Nat, I know you’re on vacation, but – “

“You called the red number, Rogers,” she interrupted in a growl. “Emergencies only. What’s wrong?”

“I didn’t know if your regular number would – sorry, no, we’re alright,” Steve said. “Something weird just happened though, I – I need to ask you something.”

“Spit it out, Steve,” Natasha replied, although sounding relieved.

Steve hesitated for a moment. “Alpha intuition. Is it real?”

She was quiet for a few seconds, but Steve could hear her walking away from wherever she had been, chatter in the background increasing as she entered a crowded room. “There’s no conclusive medical evidence, just anecdotal. Most people think it’s romantic fantasizing.” Another pause. “It’s happened to me, though. Right before Clint and Loki.”

“What about Betas or Omegas? Can it happen to them, too?”

“There’s stories. A lot fewer, but yes,” Natasha answered. “Clint told me… after we first met, I got shot, through-and-through in the shoulder. Barely left a scar, but he said he couldn’t sleep all that week, he knew something was wrong. We’d only seen each other once, we were continents away, but…”

“It’s more common for Alphas, though.”

“Biologically, we’re protective. Makes sense.” The line was silent for a few moments. “She’s in trouble?”

“I don’t know,” Steve sighed. “Thanks, Nat.”

“Be careful, Steve.” The call ended a second later, and Steve went back inside.

“It’s Alpha intuition, isn’t it,” Bucky muttered quietly as Steve sat back down, fiddling with the glove over his metal hand. “But that’s only said to be with mates, and their families. And only Alphas.”

“Nat said it happened to Clint before, too, after they’d just met,” Steve said, voice low. “No one knows how or when it works. It’s more common for Alphas, but still a misnomer, apparently.”
Bucky met his eyes, and Steve nodded. “If she doesn’t text back in two hours… we’ll look into it, okay?”

Bucky frowned, but acquiesced. Steve pulled out his phone again, typing. Just a minute later, though, his screen lit up.

From: Ryan Green.

I’m fine.

*** *** *** ***

January 23rd

The red shirt clashed horribly with her hair, but Ryan was grateful that Target had hired her anyway. The middle-aged interviewer had scented something like blueberry maple syrup, and she’d proudly touted the company line about diversity on their staff and how they were proud to employ disabled people, especially Omegas.

Ryan had smiled as best she could, guilt squirming in her stomach, but accepted the job anyway. She definitely didn’t count as disabled, but she did need the money, and she got an employee discount on some of the necessities now. And she had read about Target’s promotion for equality for the unpresented, and their gender-neutral kid’s lines. At least she approved of her income’s source.

Today was her day off, though, and it was too cold to stay outside, winter having caught up with her again. Ryan blew on her hands, thrift store gloves too thin as she sat atop the roof where she’d fitfully slept, on the bed of cardboard from the garbage. Two things on her plate today: a trip to the pharmacy for next month’s combination birth control and heat suppressant pills, a prescription for which she’d thankfully been able to get hassle-free at the local Planned Parenthood, and...something fun, goddammit. Anything to shake off the vision of purple eyes and men shooting themselves through the temple at her command that had haunted her last night.

Two hours later, her daily routine and errands taken care of, she found herself counting bills from her back pocket, contemplating the Metro prices to the Smithsonian. She liked museums, they were free. Why not play tourist for a day?

She found herself increasingly wary of the ordinary people milling about on the train, though. Stop it, you’re the dangerous one, not them. A man in a tan jacket sat reading his newspaper, several women with head scarves murmured in a language she didn’t understand, and a few people her age sat with oversized headphones, their music so loud she could hear it over the rumbling from the tracks. If anyone’s going to hurt anyone, it’d be you hurting them.

Ryan took a deep breath, then regretted it immediately; she still wasn’t entirely used to the messy onslaught that the scents of a huge group of people were. She surreptitiously scented at her own wrist, pretending she was wiping her nose. It was beyond strange, realizing she smelled a little like lilacs at all times, but she didn’t notice it unless she looked for it. People were just used to their own scents, she figured. She did like lilacs, though. She could have a worse scent.

A waterfall in a misty forest of pine, and warm cinnamon coffee on a cold morning. Ryan shook off
the memory, the tightness in her chest. It was her stop next.

She put her cell phone through the x-ray machine, and the security guard pawed through the notebooks in her backpack before returning it to her. Ryan grabbed a map of the museum, and her stomach twisted and skin tingled with some emotion she couldn’t identify.

Steve’s face, serious and commanding, stared off into the unknown, his helmet decorated with the letter A. Beside him, smaller, was the group of men she knew from elementary school as the Howling Commandos. Bucky’s hair was short, his left arm skin instead of silver on the handle of his gun. Ryan swallowed heavily, then found herself entering the exhibit.

Steve’s face was everywhere, and it was disconcerting, surreal. Had he seen this? Little kids sported stars and stripes all around her, and most of the adults wore the same awe-filled expressions as their children, milling about in the excited, chattering hum. All around, there were blocks of text and glass cases of artifacts describing Steve’s early life, his time in World War II, and missions against HYDRA. She liked the motorcycle displayed, seemingly old-fashioned but shiny new; it said it was a replica of the one he’d used.

Ryan paused at the wall of the Howling Commandos, in a V-formation standing behind Steve, looking dramatic and serious with mannequins displaying their uniforms below. Bucky was on Steve’s left, but he didn’t look like himself, to her eyes. Did no one ever catch a picture of them smiling? God, they smile all the time.

Well, they had been deeply entrenched in probably the most horrible war in human history. Not much to be happy about, she supposed. There was a black-and-white film reel playing close by, and Ryan stood on her toes to peer through the crowd. There it was: Steve and Bucky, silently laughing together at something lost to the annals of time. Steve had his hand on Bucky’s shoulder, and Ryan wondered how they’d ever kept it secret, how much they loved each other. The look in both of their eyes said everything.

She turned around, scoping out the area about Steve’s childhood. There was a tall glass display next to it, Bucky’s face etched larger-than-life beside its text. “When Bucky Barnes first met Steve Rogers on the playgrounds of Brooklyn, little did he know that he was forging a bond that would take him to the battlefields of Europe and beyond.”

Ryan rolled her eyes. Just ‘forging a bond’? Good to see the government was still prejudiced, even though you could mate whoever you wanted nowadays, thanks to the SCOTUS ruling. And that other part was wrong, too – they hadn’t met on a playground, Bucky had saved Steve from being beaten up in an alleyway. Bucky had told her one night when she’d asked, waiting for Steve to make popcorn for movie night. Maybe the museum’s words were just metaphorical.

There was another glass display next to it, updating about Bucky’s return. It was small, though, half the height of other one. People just wanted to remember them as war heroes instead of people, it seemed. At least this one said they were mates. But the date was wrong – Steve had said they’d mated right after Bucky presented, but this listed it as just before Bucky left for training. Did anyone bother to fact-check?

Or maybe Bucky just wasn’t as important as Captain America was to them. Ryan scoffed at it, heart panging. These people didn’t care about Steve or Bucky. They cared about the titles Captain and Sergeant, and the colors red, white, and blue.

Ryan’s mind and feet wandered, slowly making her way through the crowded hall, and she remembered the huge stir a while back at Bucky’s reappearance from the dead. His and Steve’s faces had been plastered everywhere, from gossip rags to CNN, until the story was suddenly
hushed. Media quiet around the Avengers seemed the norm, except for the bigger incidents like the robots all those months ago. Then Pepper and Tony would give a few interviews, and everyone would move on. Maybe there was just a shred of respect left in the media world, and that’s why they left everyone in peace.

Or maybe Tony had bought everyone off. That seemed just as likely. Ryan half-smiled to herself. The media was right about millennials being cynical and disillusioned, at least.

It was only after she left the exhibit that she realized she’d been thinking of Steve, Bucky, and the rest of the Avengers the whole time, and she wasn’t heated with anger or forcing back tears. She continued on into the rest of the museum, supposing it would just come later. It always did.

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February 14th

“Fucking hell,” Bucky sighed, rolling his eyes. “You sap.”

“Shut up,” Steve quipped, lighting the last of the candles. “Sit down before the food gets cold.”

Bucky lowered himself atop the blanket and pulled a spare atop his lap, careful not to knock over any open flames. “Only you would have a Valentine’s Day picnic outside at night in the cold, you dimwit.”

Stars twinkled above them, glimmering through the firs and pines, and a cool breeze whispered through the surrounding forest. Steve grinned at him in the flickering candlelight, opening the basket to reveal –

“And you brought fucking tacos?” Bucky said, staring incredulously at him.

“You love tacos,” Steve shrugged, taking out a spicy-smelling, plastic-wrapped package and handing it to him. “Seattle’s better known for the coffee, but hey, they’re organic and free-range.”

“But you don’t like them,” Bucky countered, even as his mouth watered at the avocado, onions, and peppers littering his plate.

“Which is why you get them tonight,” Steve replied with alacrity. He took a huge bite, almost the entire taco at once, and wrinkled his nose a little. “You’ve gotta eat most of these, you know.”

Bucky rolled his eyes, then reached for his bag behind him. “Least I know how to do Valentine’s Day right.”

Steve laughed as Bucky pulled out several bottles of vodka. “Maybe for single people.”

“Strongest the liquor store guy had. Still won’t get us drunk, but –” Bucky shrugged. “Sounded good to me.”

They met each other’s eyes, and Bucky saw the same pain in Steve’s he still couldn’t hide in his own. He uncapped the vodka, holding it up across the way, and Steve put his hand over Bucky’s,
the other brushing through his newly trimmed hair. “Sláinte,” he whispered, leaning close to kiss his cheek. His beard felt scratchy, but Bucky didn’t mind too much.

“Sláinte.” Bottle and a half later, and he almost felt a buzz.

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March 10th

Ryan had slept the entire night, and she could barely believe it. She felt better than she had in forever. But, product inventory was still the most boring job imaginable.

“Hey, Ryan,” a voice called out, and she turned to see her coworker Bryan coming towards her through the maze of gray metal shelves in the warehouse-like store back. “Abby wants you out on the floor now.”

She nodded once, smiling, and Bryan took the clipboard from her. “Jesus, it’s a million degrees back here,” he complained, “is the thermostat broken again?”

Ryan nodded again, pinning on her name tag. “How are you not dying in that flannel? At least roll up the sleeves, you’re making me sweat,” Bryan continued as she walked away.

Ryan tugged the sleeves down a little further, then wiped at her forehead. At least her arms didn’t hurt anymore, and her side seemed healed as well when she took out the stitches back in mid-January. Well, as healed as they could be. The horrifying scars would probably never fade, though, red and twisting and puckered across her ribcage and down both her arms. Bikinis were out, forever. And short-sleeved shirts. Sweat was a small price to pay, though.

Her phone chirped quietly, a calendar alert she didn’t remember setting as she re-folded junior girls’ clothes, despite knowing they’d just be messed up again in a few minutes. She glanced around, then quickly pulled it out. Jimmy Buchanan’s birthday. She closed her eyes. What was he doing right now? Wherever he was, Steve probably wasn’t far. Maybe they’d be out for the day, visiting old haunts and new attractions in Brooklyn, Steve secretly hoarding 99 birthday candles for a cake later, the kind that re-lit themselves when you blew them out. She hoped that’s what they were doing, at least. They should be happy.

She pressed send before she talked herself out of it, then quickly moved on to the boy’s section. The display was still lit when she put the phone in her back pocket.

To: Jimmy Buchanan.

Happy birthday, Bucky.

Seconds later, a new message popped up.
“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” Bucky exclaimed, staring up at Washington’s face in the rock. “The alphabet soup do this?”

“I don’t think so,” Steve replied, just as awestruck. “WPA jobs were in cities, mostly. CCC might’ve done maintenance, though.” He tore his gaze away reluctantly to look down at the informational display. “No, it wasn’t FDR. Finished just before the Harbor, though.”

“I don’t remember even hearing about this,” Bucky mused. Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw a woman give them a strange look, and he walked a few steps away, Bucky following automatically. Like he’d told Sam, he hadn’t been recognized often in the past, but when Bucky returned, the media frenzy around their “star-crossed love” had increased their personal notoriety somewhat. He didn’t feel like being outed today, though.

Beside him, Bucky chuckled. “M glad this didn’t get around to us. I can just imagine you trying to kill yourself on it.”

“It’s the project of a lifetime, of course I would’ve done it,” Steve replied. It had only been 75 years since Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln had been carved into Mount Rushmore in the South Dakotan hills, but it looked like it’d been there forever. “Hey, Buck,” he laughed under his breath, “we’re older than thing.”

Bucky shook his head. “Yeah, yeah. Your next birthday cake’ll burn down the Tower.”

Steve took Bucky’s gloved metal hand, squeezing lightly, and Bucky looked over to him. “I’ve been thinking… I want to go back soon.”

Bucky turned back to the faces sculpted into the rock, his own expression pensive as the wind tousled his carefully-styled hair. “I… fuck.”

“It’s okay if you’re not ready,” Steve said quickly. “There’s still more out there to see.”

“It’s not that,” Bucky replied, his scent sobered. “I miss everything, too. Just – it was the whole point of this, and I’ve been trying and trying, I swear. But I can’t even look at this thing without wondering what she’d think of it.”

Steve sighed, the fresh air of the national park almost too clean for his liking. He missed the smog, the noise, the unceasing bustle of people all around. New York City would always be his home base, for better or worse. But his home? Half of it was here with him, and the other half… “I had a dream about her last night.”
“I know,” Bucky said softly. “You called for her in your sleep.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispered.

“Don’t be. I had one last week.”

Steve chuckled darkly under his breath. “What the hell else are we supposed to do, Buck?”

Bucky squeezed his hand, stroking his thumb across the back. “We’ve never been to Chicago.”

“This isn’t working!” Steve growled, frustration growing. “Maybe… it’s the wrong kind of distraction.”

“You want to go back in the field?” Bucky asked quietly.

“I – yes,” Steve admitted, staring unseeingly away towards the monument. “Eventually. We can do good, Buck. We tell Coulson our conditions, and nothing like that ever happens again.”

Bucky was quiet for a minute or so, the chatter of other tourists filling the silence. “I need more time,” he said at last, voice low and rough. “To… get ready. Can we give it a few more weeks?”

“Of course, Buck,” Steve murmured back. He could stand to wait a little longer. They had a long time ahead of them. “Chicago, then? Maybe skip over New York and try further north?”

Bucky smiled at him, corners of his eyes crinkling. “Heard New England clam chowder’s amazing.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

May 15th

The nightmares were back. Worse, even. Last night, Ryan had woken to screams ringing in her ears and Steve and Bucky on their knees, covered in blood and glowing blue. Her hands had been matching the picture in her mind, and she’d grabbed at her backpack and run before she’d figured out what damage she’d done. Her powers were getting more out of control, and she just tried not to panic. From there, she’d been alternatingly exhausted and wired at work that day, and by the end, she was desperate for something to make the gory images stop appearing unbidden in her mind. That was how she found herself inside the seedy dive bar, a few dollars poorer and an untouched tumbler of scotch in front of her.

Ryan had no clue how much alcohol was in whiskey, or what people that had never drunk before would like. Probably why the bartender had given her more than one strange look, especially as she sat there and stared at it instead of drinking. Half her mind was screaming no, it was a horrible idea, she could do something horrible, she was already losing control, it would make things worse. The other half really didn’t care anymore.

“Hey,” a soft voice came from her right. A warm, spicy scent reminiscent of nutmeg reached her, and Ryan looked over to the Alpha woman sitting down on the stool beside her. “You’re nicer to look at than that drink, you know,” she said, and Ryan couldn’t help but stare at her. Her long, dark hair fell in perfect ringlets, covering the low back of her black, silky top. Perfectly fitting skinny
jeans and a simple necklace completed the ensemble, but it was nothing compared to her face. She was stunningly gorgeous, with smooth, sculpted features and perfect teeth in a friendly smile, warm brown eyes soft and open.

The woman giggled, and her laugh was light and airy. “I’m sorry, that was terrible,” she continued confidently. “I’m a little rusty, you know how it is.”

Ryan didn’t really know how it was, but she nodded anyway, managing a half-smile. “I’m Anika,” the woman introduced herself, holding out a hand.

Ryan shook it, grabbing her phone with the other. Ryan.

The woman’s smile faltered for a moment, but she recovered herself quickly. “So, Ryan. Haven’t seen you here before, are you new in town?”

New enough, Ryan typed. Are you from here?

“Born and raised. You managed to avoid the tourist trap bars, though, I’m impressed,” she murmured, leaning a little closer to Ryan. “This is my favorite place.”

It’s nice, Ryan typed, thinking the exact opposite.

“No, it’s not,” Anika laughed, raising a teasing eyebrow. “The company is what makes it. And looks particularly good tonight.”

Ryan felt her cheeks flush, smiling despite herself, and Anika laughed a little more, tossing her hair behind one shoulder. A burst of spicy scent was overpowering for a second, almost making her sneeze. “Hey, why don’t we get out here?” Anika offered, lightly touching Ryan’s hand on the bar. “My place isn’t far.” She leaned in, whispering in Ryan’s ear. “And I’m loud enough for the both of us.”

Ryan blinked again, realization suddenly hitting her. She knew what someone approaching someone else in a bar meant, in theory, but hadn’t put the pieces together until just then – oh god, what should she say?

Wait. She wasn’t unpresented, anymore. Anika was an Alpha, a gorgeous Alpha, and she was an Omega. She… should want this, shouldn’t she? Karen’s explanation from all those months ago filtered through her mind: the way they look, the way they make you feel, she should just know. But… Ryan didn’t feel any different. Anika could’ve been any Alpha she’d worked with at the store, passed on the street, saw on any given day. She appreciated Anika’s beauty, aesthetically, but more than that? Nothing. Guilt made her squirm in her seat a little; she hadn’t meant to lead anyone on.

Anika met her eyes again, looking hopeful, then her face fell a little. “Or, maybe not,” she shrugged, and Ryan could tell she was trying not to sound hurt.

You’re really, really beautiful, Ryan typed quickly, but I can’t. I’m so sorry.

“Don’t apologize,” Anika murmured, giving her a half-smile as she stood again. “It’s fine to say no.” Then, Ryan was alone again.

She sighed, rubbing her temples, until the TV across the room caught her eye. She waved to the bartender, then pointed at the TV and motioned for him to turn it up. A female reporter was standing with another bar in the background, but she recognized this one, despite it being on fire. She’d seen the Dogs of Hell logo more than once last year.
“...in the past week over a dozen shootings in the part of New York City locally known as Hell’s Kitchen, suspected to be gang related. Death counts are still rising, already in the dozens, but so far no suspects have been named despite what looks like extremely dangerous new players in the area. Police are keeping a tight lid on any suspects’ identities, but a leaked report suggests the presence of active vigilantes, including this exclusive footage obtained just a few blocks from here. Warning, some of the footage you are about to see is graphic and could be disturbing.”

Ryan’s eyes widened as the screen suddenly showed two men fighting hand-to-hand on a dirty rooftop, one wearing what looked like military tac gear, and the other in a deep, blood-red mask, small horns poking up. Suddenly, there were gunshots firing, and they both scrambled away, landing blows whenever they could.

“Many of the locals refused to give details in order to protect the man in red, who they consider a local hero. However, one man did provide us with a single cryptic name: Daredevil.”

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Ryan abandoned her drink, exiting the bar as quickly as she could. Phone in hand, she looked up the times for the bus station she’d arrived from. The earliest was at 7 AM tomorrow.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a second to steel herself. She’d sworn she’d never use her abilities again, much less ever go back to New York. But she owed Matt and Foggy and Karen everything. The right choice was obvious.

Chapter End Notes

Steve and Bucky and their heartbreak hairdos. Those nerds. Also if it seems like I’m being randomly political at times here, I am. Donald Trump’s got me up in arms, and I needed a healthier outlet than shouting at my TV.
In Which Ryan Returns to New York

Chapter Notes

Sorry to flood you guys with updates, but I'd been looking forward to this chapter for a long time and got it written fast :)

Spoilers for Daredevil season 2, if you haven't watched it yet – I'm not sure how much I'll be including, but probably not much more than what I’ve got here, and all peripheral rather than central. Even though season two was awful compared to the first, imho.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ryan wasn’t sure why the name Hell’s Kitchen had stuck to the ten-by-ten block square of Manhattan, but if whoever had named it had arrived on a day like she did, she could make a fair guess. The heat was frankly oppressive, sun beating down and thick, humid air drenching her in sweat within minutes of exiting the bus. And some people still think climate change’s a hoax, she thought wryly, practically baking in her perpetual jeans, t-shirt and flannel.

She pulled out her phone to check the time as she walked, almost back to the neighborhood she’d left half a year ago. 5 PM in May; the sun would be up another three hours or so. Enough time to try to figure out exactly what was going on, before anything planned for tonight would happen, hopefully.

She turned the corner, and 39th Street marked the entry to the Kitchen. Garbage littered the corners, people of all colors and styles populated the sidewalks, and the nice apartments gentrification had tried to bring in were covered in spray-painted tags and lewd graffiti. Nothing had changed, except her.

Continuing down the crowded block, amidst children shouting and adults smoking on stoops, she pondered the dozen newspaper articles she’d read as her phone charged on the bus. It was gangs that were being attacked, blown away in seconds. Ryan had learned the territory lines when she’d first come back to the city, for common sense’s sake, but the rules had changed since Matt had first started. Gone were the Chinese and the Japanese Yakuza, their heroin empire along with it; she’d been offered more than once by probably the lowest-level dealers, but thankfully, they’d accepted her decline with a shrug and moved on.

The Russians and the human trafficking ring had been dissembled first, thankfully. Ryan remembered when she’d met Matt, those bastards down near the docks, and was perversely glad he’d broken a few of their wrists before she’d arrived. And ashamed of feeling so.

The kingpin of it all had been Wilson Fisk, and he was long gone. But she’d seen some new players quietly step up to the plate afterwards – drugs were hawked by Latinos in the same haunts as before, and she’d heard whispers of the Mexican cartel gaining territory. They’d been massacred, though, left to die in a gruesome fashion that’d had visions of Kilgrave resurfacing, ones Ryan was desperately trying to forget. The Kitchen Irish had tried to regain power as well, she’d read, but the local bosses were all dead now.
The Dogs of Hell used to line up their motorcycles outside their bar in one of the worst neighborhoods, bouncers standing guard in front of their proudly brandished logo. Ryan didn’t know what their skin in the game was, but they’d gone underground, it seemed, as she turned the corner and saw the place empty. The whole area was deserted, eerily quiet compared to just the street behind her, and her skin crawled beneath her sweat.

A slight breeze blew back her sun-lightened copper hair, feeling heavenly despite the lingering scent of garbage and worse ever-present in neighborhoods like this. She should probably buy some good scissors and cut her hair soon, she thought; it was several inches past her shoulders now, and the ends were dry and brittle as sticks. The bags under her eyes were particularly dark, and she blinked away the permanent exhaustion they signified as she sighed. Well, she was back. Time to be brave.

She kept walking, a few blocks more, and the streets became a little nicer, boxes of flowers planted on windowsills here and there and the graffiti lessening in intensity. A Catholic church’s sign advertised midnight mass, and she tucked the idea away for later. Cathedrals were good places to sleep for a little bit, as long as the priests were nice. Another block and a half, and she recognized Matt, Foggy, and Karen’s building.

The door was locked, and there wasn’t an intercom system, as though she could even use one. Well, she’d come back knowing what she’d have to do. Ryan glanced around quickly, anxiety and nausea churning in her gut, but no one was close enough to see. She took a deep breath, then focused for a moment, flicking two shaky, dimly lit fingers to the right in a slight twisting motion, crowding herself against the door to hide it. The lock clicked, and she slipped inside, ducking her head and pulling out her phone to turn on the camera. Her eyes were normal, and she breathed a sigh of relief. A few flights of stairs later, and she heard the sound of muffled yelling.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“He plead not guilty, Matt!”

Matt’s mouth dropped open a little. “What?”

“Yeah, while you were off getting fancy with whoever that Alpha is I smell on you!” Foggy growled, and Karen grabbed his arm, inserting herself between them. Yellow-tinted evening light streamed in through the windows, but their corner apartment was always dark regardless.

“Hey, enough! Look, I’m sure there’s a perfectly good explanation,” she said, hackles raised and tensions high in the room as they faced off.

“Yeah, it’s that he’s keeping secrets, again,” Foggy shouted. “Hope your mysterious new client and their huge checks make you happier than we can, Matt. You’ve been gone the entire case so far, but at least the pay’s great!” He stalked away, grabbing his jacket and briefcase. “You’d better clear your schedule, though, cause the shitshow that is the People vs. Frank Castle is starting next week, and I’m sleeping at the office so we might actually have a defense!” He stormed off down the hallway, fuming, and wrenched open the door before suddenly freezing in place. “Ryan?”

She was standing there, one hand raised to knock and mouth open in surprise, looking as startled as he. Behind him, running footsteps came, and Karen and Matt crowded by the entrance as well as Ryan took a step back. “No, wait! Don’t leave!” Foggy said quickly, reaching out for her.
“Jesus, where have you been?” Karen added, pushing her way out the door. “Claire wouldn’t even say, some bullshit about patient confidentiality – “

Ryan backed away, grabbing her cell phone, and Foggy’s heart sank. *She’s still not talking?* “Here, come inside,” he offered, stepping out of the doorframe to let her past.

She held out her phone, and Foggy read it aloud automatically for Matt’s sake. “*I don’t mean to interrupt, if this isn’t a good time I’ll come back – no, no, god – “

“Ryan, please,” Matt interrupted. “Come in, just for a minute, at least.”

A moment’s pause, and Ryan nodded. Foggy and the others led her back into the apartment, Karen ushering her to sit on the couch and Matt grabbing a glass to fill with water. “Here, you’re dehydrated,” he said, and Ryan downed it in seconds.

“It’s a hundred degrees outside, why are you dressed that?” Foggy questioned concernedly, sitting on the edge of the armchair. Ryan paused a moment, then unbuttoned one cuff of her flannel and pushed it halfway up her arm. The top of a deep red scar just peeked out, and she shoved it back down again. Foggy swallowed heavily. “Right. Gotcha.”

“Ryan, god, we’ve been worried about you,” Karen said. “What happened?”

Ryan just shook her head. *It doesn’t matter. I’m fine.*

“No, you’re not,” Matt countered. “You’re even more underweight than before, you’re exhausted, and you’re back in New York, the last place you’d ever want to come. Why did you?”

*I saw the news reports. You were in trouble. I’m here to help.*

“To help – Jesus,” Foggy muttered, standing up and turning around for a second.

“Ryan, you *cannot* get involved in anything here, it’s too dangerous,” Matt insisted, low and quick.

“What’s there to get involved in, anyway? Frank’s in jail, all that’s over,” Karen asked him, looking confused, then turning back to Ryan. “No, everything you saw, it’s okay, now. Matt found the man responsible, and we’re representing him in court.”

“Two of us are, anyway,” Foggy muttered under his breath.

“Foggy, don’t start,” Karen snapped at him. “Not right now.”

“No, you know what? Get it out, Foggy, tell me *exactly* what I’m doing wrong,” Matt shot at him, scent suddenly bursting with anger again. “Cause I’m done apologizing to you for who I am!”

“That’s *not* who you – okay, you know what, never mind that bullshit for now. But for starters, maybe you could show up to work every once in a while, help us try to win the case that *you* insisted we take on!” Foggy shouted. “DA Reyes is out for our blood, and you’ve spent exactly five seconds with Castle outside of beating the shit out of him to stop him mowing down every gang member in the city!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, is that a bad thing?! Should I have let him keep massacring the rest of the Kitchen Irish, the Mexican – “

“Guys, just stop it!” Karen cut in, but they both ignored her, Foggy standing on one side of the couch and Matt the opposite as Ryan sat below them, looking up with a shocked expression.
“This isn’t even about the vigilantism, though we're continuing that discussion again soon - how about the Alpha you’re seeing on the side?! What, is she better-looking, maybe scents better than me, the mate you swore you loved less than a year ago?!”

“I’m not cheating, Foggy, I would never!” Matt barked, hands clenched in fists. “I told you, she’s just a private client – “

“That can call you away, any time, day or night, take you away from your mates, your job, all the good we’re trying to do in the law?!”

“There’s more danger than you know, Foggy! Jesus, Karen almost got gunned down by a maniac, you had to stop a knife fight and got attacked by the Dogs of Hell, I’m not letting you two get involved again!”

“I wasn’t in any danger, Frank wasn’t going after me!” Karen interjected.

“Oh, yeah, no danger at all!” Foggy shouted at her. “He just shot his way through a hospital after straight-up executing thirty-seven people, which is obviously a great precedent for taking on his case, as Matt insisted we – “

“He needs help, Foggy, it was the right thing to do! You saying we should just let him get screwed by the system, we shouldn’t work to fix the law?!”

“No, no, of course not,” Karen interjected, “but come on, neither side is right or wrong, here! Frank only shot down bad guys, they deserved it, that’s why we’re helping him!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Matt yelled at her. “Yeah, Castle shouldn’t have to die, we needed to take his case, but he’s a murderer, Karen!”

“Does it even matter? At least it worked!” The words rang out into air heavy with the scents of their anger, and Karen clapped her hands to her mouth. Suddenly, Foggy heard a broken sobbing from beneath him, and all three of them looked down to see Ryan, face buried in her hands and shuddering.

“Shit,” Karen breathed, then swiftly knelt beside her, laying a hand on her shoulder. Ryan jerked away, jumping to her feet and grabbing her backpack.

“Ryan, wait, we’re so sorry – “ Foggy started, but the next moment, she’d run out the door.

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Ryan barely made it two blocks before she was too blinded by tears to keep going. She grabbed onto the back of a small bench, breath heaving and panting as she tried not to hyperventilate. People passed by, barely sparing her a glance as she fell apart.

“Pardon me,” a soft voice called out, and Ryan looked up to see a man, lines aging his face, salt-and-pepper hair left only on the sides of his head above a white collar in his all-black suit. “But, you look like you could stand to sit down for a few moments. Would you care to come inside?” Ryan blinked again, and realized she was in front of the cathedral she’d passed by earlier. The dimly almond-scenting man must be a priest. He smiled at her, gesturing a hand, and she found herself going inside, her body feeling numb and disconnected from the rest of her.
The sanctuary was rather dark, the tall-but-thin stained glass windows depicting people she didn’t recognize letting in little light. The ceiling was high and vaulted, and at the front, a table covered in white cloth, a cross and other religious items sitting atop. She recognized the dark wooden structure off to the left; Catholics took confession to absolve their sins, her dad had told her…

She sniffed back the last of her tears as he led her into the back, a small kitchen and sitting area seeming incongruously casual compared to the rest of the place. The priest pulled out a chair for her, and she sat down as he went into the kitchen. “Would you care for coffee?” he asked, fiddling with an espresso maker. “Or there’s tea, if you’d like.”

Ryan shook her head when he turned back around, twisting her hands together in her lap. She was starting to get embarrassed about her ridiculous breakdown and having to be rescued from a panic attack by an old man. And she’d thought she could come and help Matt save Hell’s Kitchen.

He sat down across the small table from her, setting down his own cup and saucer and a bottle of water in front of her. “My name is Father Lantom,” he introduced. “You don’t have to tell me yours, if you don’t wish to.”

Ryan sighed wearily, then pulled out her cell phone, wiping her streaming nose on her sleeve as surreptitiously as she could. *I’m Ryan. And I’m sorry about that, I’m being ridiculous.*

“Don’t apologize. It’s lonely to have coffee without company,” he said with a shrug, taking her odd form of communication in stride. “But… if something happened to you, we should consider getting some help.”

Ryan almost laughed. But it seemed especially rude to scoff at a priest. *I’ve had a lot worse happen. Don’t worry about it.*

“I believe you,” the Father replied lightly, taking a sip of coffee. “I’ve been here… oh, decades, now. Something about people’s eyes. You can see the harm this city has done them.”

*I hate this place*, Ryan typed, a small voice in the back of her head wondering why she was telling him. Maybe because he saw her crying, and she felt she owed him for the kindness. Or, she was finally just losing it.

“Have you been here long?”

“Off and on. I just got back today.”

“And already, unfortunate circumstances have reached you. I wish I could be surprised, but. It is called Hell’s Kitchen,” Father Lantom replied.

*No, it wasn’t something bad, just – some friends were fighting, and it hit close to home.*

Father Lantom nodded sagely, and they were silent for a few minutes, just sitting. An air conditioner blew a nice breeze on her neck where she pushed aside her hair, and the water was refreshing, too. Ryan felt herself calming down, slumping into her chair a little bit with the adrenaline crash.

“Ryan, may I ask you something?” Father Lantom spoke up. She met his eyes, and he was just sitting, relaxed and open. She nodded warily all the same. At her prompting, he asked, “Is your last name, perchance, Green?”

Ryan’s eyes widened to huge saucers, and she stared at him in shock. *How do you know that?*

He gave her a small smile. “Most of our discussions end up under the seal of confession, but…”
Matthew freely described you enough to figure it out.”

Ryan looked away, running a hand through her hair. Matt was Catholic, she knew that, had seen it in his head that first night as a picture of the man in front of her – though dressed in black robes and a purple cloth, along with his collar – had flashed through his mind at one point. It had been so quick, his mind racing as she held him back with a single hand, that she hadn’t recognized Father Lantom. What did he tell you about me?

“Most importantly, that you were someone he failed.” She looked back at him in surprise, and saw his expression calm and neutral. “Matthew has the tendency to take on guilt needlessly, however. A trait you two seem to share, from what I’ve been told.”

Ryan felt her jaw clench a little, and she picked up her phone again. He didn’t. He saved my life. It was all me.

Father Lantom half-smiled. “It is that guilt that brought you here, then?”

Ryan didn’t answer, but thought that was answer enough. They were silent again for a minute before Father Lantom began, his tone a bit more serious.

“Anything you say is under the seal of confession, if you wish. I can’t tell a soul, ever. This isn’t my business, if you don’t care for it to be. But, if you would indulge an old man…”

Ryan nodded slowly, half curious and half ready to bolt out the door. He seemed to sense that as he leaned back in his chair, placing his cup to the side and assuming a nonthreatening posture. “It can often be… difficult, after a life-changing event, to reconcile who we were then, with who we are now. Or, at least, who we thought we were, before our eyes were opened.”

Ryan huffed the tiniest unamused laugh, dropping her gaze from the Father’s. Especially when what you actually are is a monster.

Father Lantom was silent after he read her condemnation. After a time, he cleared his throat. “Has there ever been anyone,” he began, “anyone at all who has loved you, my child?”

Ryan gave him a strange look. She didn’t type a response.

“Perhaps your parents? A friend? Even… a stranger that has shown you kindness?”

Ryan nodded ever-so-slightly, eyes crinkled in confusion.

“Would any of them show kindness to a monster?” Lantom voiced quietly. Ryan was taken aback for a moment, then firmly nodded. “That’s good,” the Father affirmed, smiling gently. “You have known good people. But were some of these not also the people who wronged you?”

Ryan’s jaw tightened. It doesn’t change the fact that I’m a murderer, she typed firmly, slamming down the phone when she finished. Part of her really hoped the seal of confession stretched as far as he’d promised, but mostly she just didn’t care anymore. As she saw him read, a weight lifted from her chest. The truth, finally out there. At last, someone would see.

Father Lantom put the phone back down, but his expression didn’t change. “I must confess, I have discussed that particular…incident, with Matthew, at some length,” he admitted. “He explained that within the law, your actions were justified purely as self-defense. But he didn’t know if they could be forgiven by the Church.”

Ryan shook her head vehemently, taking up her phone. I killed a man in anger. I could’ve just
“Wrongful actions taken in anger are indeed sinful, more so because of their motivation,” Lantom allowed. “But, we must consider... did you kill this man because you wanted him dead in revenge, to satisfy bloodlust? Or... was it to stop him from harming others, with righteous anger at the injustice? There is quite a difference between hateful vengeance and fearful desperation.”

Ryan picked up the phone. She fumbled a moment, then shook her head again, looking pointedly away from the priest. Her heart was racing, pumping madly in her ears.

“I told Matthew a story once,” Lantom reflected, “about a time I saw the Devil, here on Earth, when I was serving in Rwanda during the genocide. There was a military leader who murdered hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. He was ruthless, without remorse, hesitation, and he ordered others to be the same. No true compassion for his fellow man, no moral conscience weighing him down. He was much like Matthew’s Wilson Fisk, like your Kilgrave. Matthew stopped Fisk without killing him, but... Fisk was nowhere near as powerful as Kilgrave was. Nor were his ultimate intentions so deadly, and immediate.”

Ryan was rooted in place at his words, her whole body quivering now, skin hot and stomach twisting.

“In the Bible, there are many stories of men and women spurred to action,” he murmured, putting a hand ever-so-gently on Ryan’s across the table. “The judges of the Old Testament, the first kings of Israel, even the original priests of the Hebrews. So many divine callings ending in war, bloodshed, death. Kings and heroes... venerated so because they rid the world of their and God’s enemies. Not all of these heroes were righteous. But some... some were anointed by God Himself to save His people, to save the righteous from destruction.”

Ryan choked back a sob, the sound echoing slightly off the cavernous ceiling of the sanctuary. She shook her head fervently, dropping her face into her hands once more as she curled into herself.

“Ryan,” Father Lantom admonished. “Healing can only come with forgiveness, cleaning and binding the wound so you’re no longer in such pain. And forgiveness – for yourself and to give to others – can only come with understanding. In your case... that means understanding that while you killed a man, you did it to save others and yourself, as a last resort. Your anger and pain were a part of it, yes. But it was not senseless violence, nor an act of evil. You might bear some superficial similarities... but you are not Kilgrave.”

The dam burst, and Ryan wept helplessly once more, her heart somehow both heavier and lighter all at once. She felt Father Lantom squeeze her hand, comforting her, and her sobs redoubled.

A moment later, Matt’s voice softly called out, “Ryan?” Father Lantom released her, but she couldn’t stop crying, putting her head atop her arms on the table. Dimly, past the tumult of emotions in her head and heart, she recognized he must’ve tracked her scent here, now that she had a scent to track. The chair to Ryan’s right pulled out, and the scent of gingersnaps helped distract her a little as she tried to get herself under control. “Ryan, we’re so sorry. Just – we’re in a rough patch right now, there’s a lot going on. But we shouldn’t have done that in front of you.”

Ryan sniffled, wiping her puffy eyes on her sleeve. Lantom held out a tissue box, and she blew her nose as quietly as she could. It’s not your fault. It just hit close to home. She held out the phone to Father Lantom, who read it to Matt.

“Yes, it is,” Matt murmured, a sharp scent she recognized now as guilt spiking for a moment. “Nothing we said applies to you, you’re – what’s going on now, it’s completely different.” He
paused for a moment, looking exhausted. “There have been… horrible things happening, these past few weeks. We’re all stressed and tired, and… well. It’s no excuse. But we are glad you’re back.”

I owe you a lot. I want to pay some of it back.

“Ryan, look, God’s honest truth – I’m glad I haven’t been able to see what others have been seeing,” Matt muttered, twisting in his chair for a moment. “The man on the news, his name’s Frank Castle. He massacred over thirty people in cold blood, and he’s the least dangerous thing in the Kitchen right now.”

You need me, Ryan typed quickly. I'll deal with it, I'll be fine. You guys risked everything for me. Let me return the favor.

“You’re not trained, Ryan. I am,” he insisted. “You’re the most powerful person I know of, but you won’t use your strongest weapon, and I’m glad. I don’t think you should. I… have other help right now, though. This city is my responsibility, not yours, and it’s far too dangerous.”

“Ryan,” Father Lantom chimed in. “You cannot help anyone effectively until you have settled your own turmoil. Fighting a war on two sides only causes further rifts,” he continued, looking pointedly at Matt. Matt glared for a moment, then stood back up.

“Foggy’s back at the office, and I’m… going out. But Karen is at the apartment, and she wants to see you. No yelling this time,” he promised. “Please. Stay there tonight.”

Ryan closed her eyes a moment, then nodded again, turning to Father Lantom. She didn’t know what to do, didn’t even entirely understand what she was feeling. The Father simply smiled at her, taking her left hand in both of his. “When you feel you can, you’re welcome to take formal confession, if you’d like. You have done nothing that cannot be forgiven, and little that needs to be.”

Ryan exhaled shakily, then ducked around the table and threw her arms around him before quickly straightening up and walking away, her cell phone tucked back into her pocket.

“Thank you, Father,” Matt murmured behind her, and he caught up with her a moment later. Silently, they exited the church back to the sweltering heat, sun finally setting behind them.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Ryan, hey,” Karen greeted softly as she reentered. “I, uh, I’m making some iced tea.”

Ryan smiled weakly, exhaustion rolling over her in waves as she sat at the kitchen table. A moment later, Karen sat as well, setting down tall glasses. “Look, I – we’re all so sorry you had to see that, things have been – “

Ryan held up a hand to stop her. I’m a mess, too. It’s okay. She took a sip of her drink, raspberry and mint sparkling in her mouth, and gave Karen a small smile. Look, if I can’t help Matt, maybe I can help you instead? You sound like you need someone to talk to.

Karen let out a small noise, half-laughter and half-sobbing. “I think I need a stiff drink, more. But thank you.” She downed half her glass in one, and they sat quietly for a minute. “You, um. You really came back here, after everything, just to help us?”
Of course I did. And I’m sorry I took off, now and before.

“You’re not the only person who’s needed to get away from their past. I get it,” Karen offered with a shrug. “But, you’ve got friends here, whenever you need us.” She cleared away their empty glasses, rinsing them in the sink. “So. Where were you? How have you been?”

Washington D.C. And fine enough. The winter wasn’t bad, compared to some. Ryan paused before showing it to her, then added, Do you know Father Lantom? Matt’s priest?

“Um, yeah. Why?” Karen asked, sitting back down.

I just met him, by accident. That’s where Matt found me, in the cathedral. I hadn’t been in one since I was a baby, but... he was really nice.

“Were your parents Catholic, then? You were christened?”

My dad used to be. What I know of his life is a long story. But if it’s okay with you, I think I just need some time to think.

“No, no, of course,” Karen said. “I’ve got some stuff to do, anyway. I made up the couch, it’s yours for as long as you want it.”

Ryan smiled at her, and she smiled back, tucking her long hair behind her ears before slipping on her heels and heading out the door. The lock clicked behind her, and Ryan collapsed onto the couch, wondering vaguely if the stains from her blood had come out alright.

She stared up at the ceiling, and took a deep breath. It didn’t hurt, anymore. Physically, or emotionally, somehow. All the pain, all the fear, the sorrow and regret and grief and hatred that had been wrapped up in a tight knot inside felt, for the moment, undone. A small sense of peace, leftover from Father Lantom’s pronouncement, had replaced it. Ryan chuckled to herself for a moment. She knew better than to assume it would last, but that meant she had to take advantage of it.

Karen had been right. She was running away. But she’d come back, and within an hour, things had gone upside down and over and under and sideways, completely different from how she’d anticipated. But it struck her that it would be a hell of coincidence, if none of that happened for a reason. Reaching blindly down to her backpack, she unzipped the largest pouch, pulling out the least beat-up notebook and the pencil in its wire binding, and began to write.

Father Lantom said, “Healing can only come with forgiveness, cleaning and binding the wound so you’re no longer in such pain. And forgiveness – for yourself and to give to others – can only come with understanding.”

Forgiveness is letting yourself heal. Letting go of hate and anger, because they poison the wound. And forgiveness comes with understanding.

Why did Clint lie to me?

Hours later, her left hand was sore from writing, and the pages were covered in pencil smudges and dried splotches from tears. Jesus, you’re a crybaby, she thought exhaustedly to herself, turning to a fresh page one last time. These words flowed easily, her eyes a lot more tired but her heart a little lighter than when she’d started.
Matt –

I don’t know everything that’s happening – mostly because you won’t tell me – but from what I heard, you’re going through another huge, Fisk-esque mess right now. I just want to say, I get what you’re feeling, at least a little. Foggy and Karen don’t have superpowers – they’re lucky – but I do. And, I’ve been alone my whole life. Please, don’t push them away. If they don’t understand you, tell them a different way. Don’t be a drama queen, just make them understand. You can make things work, I believe in you. I lost the first people who understood me a long time ago, and I don’t think I can lose any more.

And, hey. Right after Fisk got put away is when you guys mated. Good things can still come after, I guess.

Thanks for letting me crash here. I’ll come by again soon, but I’ll text first, next time.

- Ryan

She left the letter on the table the next morning, and laced up her sneakers with trembling hands. A minute later, and she turned right on the sidewalk, heading for the part of the city with the tallest towers and a shining letter A.

Chapter End Notes

They like, changed Matt’s speech patterns and style in season 2 of Daredevil, so that’s being reflected here, in case the way he was speaking seemed weird to anyone. Character development, I guess???
In Which, For Once, Nothing Goes To Hell, and the Second Interlude Comes to a Close

Chapter Notes

I looked through the bookmarks on this work out of curiosity a few days ago, and someone had tagged it “promising but not likely to be completed.” I would like to take this moment to inform you that I am a horrible person, as my reaction to that was “FIGHT ME BITCH THIS WORK WILL BE COMPLETED AND IT WILL KICK ASS THANK YOU VERY MUCH.” And then I looked again yesterday, and someone else had said “Love it, a little nervous about what the next chapter will bring though.” And now I’m TERRIFIED about continuing because oh my god what if everyone just HATES what I have in mind for the rest of it?!?!?!?

Don’t read your bookmarks, kids.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her hands were sweaty, clammy, and Ryan kept wiping them on her jeans as she walked. It was only a mile to Avengers Tower; another ten minutes, and… god. What was she doing? They didn’t know she was back, Matt and Foggy and Karen didn’t want her help, she could just leave again, she –

No, she told herself firmly. You’re doing the right thing, don’t be such a little bitch. Regardless, her heart thumped almost painfully as she thought of seeing the Avengers again. Clint, Natasha, Tony… Darcy, Sam, Bruce. Thor and Jane and Pepper. And… god. Her heart pounded further at the thought of Steve and Bucky. It’ll be fine, she thought unconvincingly. So long as they don’t rightly hate you for running away like a coward, and for being a murd – well. Killing someone.

The streets got busier as the sun climbed higher, pedestrians commuting with their morning coffee, a few parents walking children to school, dog-walkers pushing through with a dozen leashes in their grip. No one paid any attention to anyone else. It was easy to be invisible, except for when your destination was the most famous structure in the city besides the Empire State Building.

Ryan paused at the lobby entrance for a moment, watching the attendants and Stark Industry employees going about their daily business. She took a deep breath, then ducked over to the side, to the same exit through the spare garage from which she’d left. There was a private entrance she and the others had used, connecting right to their elevators, but the symmetry was appealing. More so, it was a longer walk, and she was scared of what was at the end.

Suddenly, though, it struck her that she might not even be able to get in. She’d never asked JARVIS to do anything for her before, she didn’t want to be a bother, and she didn’t know if she was allowed to. Before, she’d just been recognized somehow and allowed inside, but –

“Hello, Miss Green. Welcome back,” the AI’s voice greeted, and Ryan jumped about a foot in the air. “Shall I inform the others of your return?”

Ryan searched the door, but there weren’t any cameras she could see. She just looked towards it and
shook her head, hoping it was enough. She couldn’t face a huge group, all just waiting for her…

“Very well. If I can be of any assistance, please don’t hesitate to ask.” The door opened when she tried it, and she crossed the garage, still full of spare tools and the odd box or two, to reach the stairwell. Heart hammering wildly, she started climbing, and five flights up, she was outside the common room.

Her hands were shaking and sweating, her skin heated all over, and she’d never wanted to open a door less. She reached for it anyway, and it opened silently.

Everything inside had been repaired, naturally. There was a new armchair; the leather on the old one must’ve been damaged. The glass wall facing north to her left, the full bar along the side wall, and the open arch to the kitchen on the far side, all the same. And, it was empty.

Ryan almost laughed, hysteria bubbling up in her chest. That was anticlimactic, she thought wildly, readjusting her backpack and considering trying Tony’s workshop. But just then, she heard the sink in the kitchen turn on, and she jumped again. But, hey. No turning back now.

A few steps later, and she spied a shock of messy, sand-blond hair, filling a glass at the sink. Clint looked to the side, grabbing a banana from the fruit bowl, and then turned around towards the entrance. He saw her, and his eyes widened almost comically large as his grip slackened, glass shattering on the floor.

“Shit – Ryan?!” he breathed, white as salt. Ryan was rooted where she stood, and they stared at each other for a few seconds, Ryan recognizing a scent wave as pure shock. “U–um, hi,” Clint continued weakly, stepping awkwardly over the broken glass a few steps closer to her.

Ryan blinked, heart pounding in her ears, then remembered what she was supposed to be doing. She quickly swung her backpack down to the floor, kneeling to open it up, and grabbed the notebook pages folded letter-style tucked inside. She straightened up again, and Clint hadn’t moved a muscle, the same disbelieving look on his face. She held out the papers to him, and he took them, both of their hands shaking a little.

He unfolded the letter, and exhaled sharply a second later, somehow paler. He tore his gaze away to meet hers, mouth open but no sound coming out.

Quiet footsteps suddenly halted behind Ryan, not loud enough to have been heard should there have been any sound over her pounding heart. Ryan turned around and was met with Natasha, whose wide-eyed expression almost perfectly matched her mate’s before it suddenly blinked back to neutral.

“Nat,” Clint whispered brokenly, and she turned sharply towards him, alert and wary. He held out the papers, trembling in earnest now, and Natasha glanced back over at Ryan before snatching them from his grasp. Her face flushed as she examined the first page, and her eyes were disbelieving as she met Ryan’s again.

Ryan felt the situation was getting a little out of control, so she pulled out her phone. Hi, guys. I’m sorry to barge in, but I wanted to give this to you. Um, Tony should read it, too. I’ll go now.

“No!” Clint almost shouted when he read the text, shaking his head almost violently. “No, I’ll go get– JARVIS? JARVIS, get Tony up here, now!”

Natasha was reading the rest of the letter, eyes darting rapidly back and forth, and she only looked up when the elevator dinged, running footsteps following. Tony and Pepper entered simultaneously, stopping short when they saw Ryan. “Ryan, hi,” Pepper greeted breathlessly, Tony
uncharacteristically speechless beside her. Wordlessly, Natasha handed over the letter to Tony. A second later, with a stricken expression, he shoved the papers at Pepper and bolted out of the kitchen.

“Tony!” Pepper shouted after him, but he was already gone. Ryan shuffled her feet uncomfortably, holding her arms tightly across her chest. They were upset, she was just making things worse – she probably should’ve thought this through better, she thought miserably.

Pepper inhaled sharply, then looked back up at Ryan from the letter. “Ryan, no, he didn’t mean – he’s got the emotional maturity of a five-year-old, you know that,” she insisted pleadingly. “He didn’t mean anything by running out, just – I’ll go get him,” she finished, handing the papers back to Natasha and disappearing.

“Do you mean it?” Clint’s voice wavered from behind her, and Ryan turned back to see him choking back tears. Ryan nodded, trying her best to smile at him. Suddenly, she was engulfed in a close embrace, lithe arms and the scent of warm vanilla and cloves surrounding her. A second later, Natasha pulled back, and Ryan was further startled to see wetness in her eyes, too.

“Sorry, I’m not – I don’t normally do that,” she muttered, stepping away. Ryan had never seen her look so flustered, it was disconcerting.

“Do you mean it?” Clint’s voice wavered from behind her, and Ryan turned back to see him choking back tears. Ryan nodded, trying her best to smile at him. Suddenly, she was engulfed in a close embrace, lithe arms and the scent of warm vanilla and cloves surrounding her. A second later, Natasha pulled back, and Ryan was further startled to see wetness in her eyes, too.

“Sorry, I’m not – I don’t normally do that,” she muttered, stepping away. Ryan had never seen her look so flustered, it was disconcerting.

No, please, it’s okay. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to barge in and upset you guys.

Clint laughed, the sound verging on hysteria. “Jesus Christ,” he swore under his breath. “For god’s sakes, Ryan. Just – fuck. You mean it?”

She nodded again, half-smiling for real now, and he wiped his hands over his face, streams of tears wetting his cheeks. “God,” he breathed again. “She’s – Steve isn’t even this good, Natasha, what the fuck,” he expressed vehemently towards her.

Natasha chuckled in response, shaking her head to herself, then pushed the rest of the letter, now a little crinkled, back towards him. “Read the rest.”

“Ryan?! a new voice shouted in surprise from the doorway, startling her, and Ryan clapped a hand over her heart as Sam and Bruce stared incredulously. Bruce seemed to pull himself together faster, blinking once and then smiling fondly.

“It’s great to see you again,” he greeted softly. “How have you been?”

I’ve been fine, she typed. I’m sorry to surprise everyone, I don’t think I thought this through very well.

“Ryan, I swear to god, if you’re apologizing again, I will – “ Clint cut himself off, leaning heavily against the kitchen island and shaking his head. “Can the others read this?”

Ryan nodded, and he passed the papers down to Sam and Bruce, who stood shoulder-to-shoulder to read them. Ryan watched them as Natasha went beside Clint, taking his hand. The room was entirely silent again but for the crinkling paper when pages turned. Ryan couldn’t help but be reminded of the first time she was in this kitchen, though, when everyone had arrived all at once for that first crazy breakfast. At this rate, Jane and Thor would probably be ne –

“Ryan! You have returned!” Thor’s voice suddenly boomed out, and Ryan felt a small smile slide across her face for a moment. There it was. Darcy, Jane, and Thor all entered at once, and in half a second Ryan was swept off the ground into a huge, Thor-sized hug, practically squeezed to death. “This is a most joyous occasion! We thought to never again see your face, but here you are!” he
shouted joyfully, releasing her back down. He grinned ecstatically down at her, expression alight with joy, and Ryan couldn’t help but smile back, a real one.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” Jane exclaimed, sweeping her into another hug, albeit much more gentle than Thor’s. “We’ve missed you.”

Ryan’s heart thudded, a tight, foreign feeling in her chest. It was like they actually cared. Swallowing heavily, she turned to Darcy, who had tears streaming down her face.

*Please don’t cry, or I’ll probably cry,* Ryan typed, showing her the phone.

Darcy laughed wetly, then pulled Ryan into her own hug, burying her face in her hair. Ryan hugged her back, practically reveling in the touch.

When Darcy pulled away, Ryan took a deep breath, blinking back all the emotion bubbling in her chest. Everyone was looking at her, and she squirmed a little under the attention, wanting to escape the scrutiny. There were two people she still wanted – no, needed – to see, though. *Are Steve and Bucky here?*

Darcy’s face fell. “Um, they’ve been away, on a – a road trip. They haven’t said when they’re coming back yet.”

“They’ll come back ASAP, though, once they find out you’re here,” Sam inserted, and Ryan half-smiled, warm but bittersweet. *No, no, don’t be silly, they should enjoy themselves.* She was happy for them; they deserved as long a break as they wanted, after the horrors they’d been through at her expense. She looked around again, not sure of what to do next, so she gathered up her backpack and put on a happy face. *Well, I just got back yesterday, and I haven’t really settled in yet, so. I’ll stop by again sometime, if it’s cool with all of you.*

“Your room’s still the same,” Bruce said after he read it aloud. “Please, you’re more than welcome – “

Ryan shook her head. *It’s probably not a great idea.* She shrugged, smiling sadly.

“Well, at least let us help you – “

Ryan shook her head again, cutting him off. *I’m all set. Maybe I’ll come around next week?*

Sam and a few others looked ready to argue, but Bruce shot them a stern look. “Of course. You’re always welcome, whenever.” He smiled gently, then stood aside, letting her back out of the kitchen.

Just as Ryan passed him, however, the elevator dinged.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“You ready?” Steve asked, looking to Bucky before pushing the button for the fifth floor. They’d only returned from spending one last night away, wandering around Brooklyn and the few old haunts still left. It had seemed an appropriate finale.

Bucky rolled his eyes and looked away, which meant he was ready, but nervous. Steve pressed the
button, then leaned against the wall of the elevator as they ascended. “It’ll be nice to knot you in our own bed again.”

Bucky’s eyes widened just slightly in surprise, and he half-smirked at Steve. “Floor’s been empty for five months, now. If you think you’re doing anything except cleaning and unpacking, you’ve got another thing coming.”

Steve laughed, a fond smile spreading across his face. “I’m glad to be home, too.” There was a sharp pang of sadness and longing in his heart as he said it, but it was almost manageable, now.

The elevator stopped, and he readjusted his grip on his bags, facing the opening doors. He opened his mouth to call out, see if anyone was around, then felt his jaw drop completely. Beside him, Bucky gasped sharply, scenting like astonishment.

Ryan stood there, staring back at them with matching wide eyes and open mouth. Skin deathly pale, dark circles ringing her eyes, clothes loose on her frame, and goddamn beautiful.

*** *** ***

Ryan was frozen in place, entranced in their gazes, the world narrowing to the three of them. Steve and Bucky, they looked – well, flabbergasted at her presence, and her heart plummeted. They didn’t want to see her, she wasn’t supposed to be there in the first place, and guilt and shame threatened to swallow her whole.

She broke away from their eyes to bring up her phone, but paused. No, they deserved better. She had to show them she was trying to be better, to be good. She… wasn’t like him, she could speak without each word causing terror. Couldn’t she? She cleared her throat, heart thumping wildly, and opened her mouth.

“H-hey, guys,” she managed to get out, her voice small and quiet, weak and hoarse from disuse. “I like your new haircut, Bucky, really modern,” she rasped, “and wow, Steve. The lumberjack vibe works great for you.”

Steve had inhaled raggedly when she began speaking, but they still didn’t move a muscle. Her heart sank even further. “I’m sorry, I was just leaving,” she murmured, dropping her head and turning towards the stairs.

A strangled noise came from behind her, and in the space of a heartbeat, she was buried in two pairs of strong arms, her backpack squashed against her as they completely engulfed her in their embrace. She gasped, then inhaled deeply, her face pressed sideways against Steve’s chest, Bucky tight against her back. Her head swam a little as she panted deeply – god, their scents were amazing, how had she not noticed before?

Her skin was buzzing, alive and electric where their bodies touched, and Ryan extricated her arms to throw them around Steve in front of her. She held him as tight as she could, shuddering as sheer relief coursed through her, her anxiety melting away. Above her, Steve whispered something she couldn’t understand, lilting syllables soothing as his grip tightened, and she’d never felt more safe than wrapped up in his and Bucky’s warm, solid presence, something deep inside settling down, becoming whole. Fuck if she knew why. But right then, there was no place she’d rather be.

A few seconds later, she felt Bucky pull away behind her, and she involuntarily loosed a small,
desperate sound as she twisted in Steve’s strong grasp, instincts screaming no, please don’t leave, I’m sorry –

“Shh, doll, it’s okay,” Bucky murmured close, sounding wrecked as he quickly smoothed a hand over her hair, touch gentle and reverent. “’M just taking off your backpack, ‘m right here.”

Ryan felt her cheeks flame, realizing how embarrassing and inappropriate her unprovoked reaction was, and she pulled back from Steve. He didn’t fully release her, though, touching oh-so-gently up and down her arms, as though making sure she was really there. She looked up, and there were tears in his eyes. “Hey,” he breathed, half-smiling. “God, Ryan, it’s – we’ve missed you.”

Ryan looked to Bucky, now just beside Steve, and he nodded fervently, metal hand reaching to brush back her hair again. She felt herself lean into the touch without meaning to, and a ghost of a smile passed over his face as her cheeks heated with embarrassment again. “W-where’ve you been?” he whispered, quickly wiping away a stray tear.

“Um, Washington D.C.,” she answered automatically, voice strained. It was hard to talk, and the effort tickled her throat. She turned her head and coughed into her shoulder, and Steve immediately pulled her towards the couch.

“Here, sit,” he insisted, grasping her backpack straps and easing it off gently. “Buck?” he called out, and Bucky sat right next to her, their knees touching as he mirrored her sideways stance and faced her. Steve disappeared for a moment, and Ryan quickly turned her head to see him go into the kitchen. The others were nowhere in sight, and she was fleetingly surprised; she hadn’t even noticed them leave.

Bucky’s metal hand lightly touched one of her knees, and she almost shivered. She knew on some level she was a tactile person, that she was a little touch-deprived, but this? Each soft caress of his fingertips was like an oasis in the desert, a breath of air when she’d been drowning, a balm to her fragile skin. And even in just the few seconds he’d been gone, she felt Steve’s absence acutely, a dull ache in her chest.

“We missed you,” Bucky repeated softly, his thumb gently roving back and forth as his touch settled more firmly. “When you disappeared, we – we were worried.”

“I’m sorry,” Ryan whispered hoarsely. “I – I wasn’t in a good place.”

“It’s okay,” he whispered back. “You’re here now, that’s all that matters.”

Steve reappeared with a glass of water, and Ryan took a sip automatically, the coolness soothing her scratchy throat. Steve sat behind her on the couch from where she was facing Bucky, and his hands gently settled on her shoulders, smoothing slowly back and forth. Ryan closed her eyes for a second, basking in it, then cast around for something to say.

“I, uh, saw the Smithsonian exhibit about both of you,” she murmured, taking another sip of water afterwards. “It was… kinda trippy.”

Steve laughed, his hands pausing as Ryan turned in her seat, now facing outwards to see both of them on each side. “We’ve both seen it, too. It, um…”

“It got a lot wrong, from what I could tell,” Ryan inserted. “Your motorcycle was cool, though.”

“You like bikes?” Bucky asked, shifting even closer, smiling softly. “You should’ve said something, we’d have taken you out on ours.”
Ryan shrugged. “They… um, with my parents, I wanted to ride, like them. It was a long time ago.” She blinked away the tears suddenly threatening to surface, and took a deep breath, fiddling with her hands in her lap. She had lost track of what she was supposed to be doing with the surprise of their return. “So, uh. I wrote a letter for Clint and Natasha and Tony, but you guys can read it, if you want, it’s in the kitchen. And… I should probably get going.”

“What? No, don’t leave!” Bucky said quickly, his hand tightening over her knee.

“Stay here, I’m sure your room is still – “ Steve started.

“Guys,” Ryan interrupted. “It’s probably not a good idea. You know, considering what happened last time…”

Steve laid a warm, firm hand across her cheek, gently turning her to face him as her skin tingled at his touch. “Ryan, you’re safe here. I promise you,” he swore, stunning blue eyes boring intensely into hers. She felt a swooping sensation in her stomach, and she held the gaze just a little too long before smiling sadly.

“I’m the dangerous one, in case you forgot,” she muttered, pushing herself off the couch. Bucky suddenly snatched up her hand, and she turned back to him.

“You’re not, you’d never – please, don’t say that,” he pleaded, brown eyes shining.

“Do you even have a place to stay?” Steve pointed out, standing up quickly beside her and taking her other hand. “When was the last time you ate or – Ryan, please. You don’t have to do this. Stay here. With us.”

God, but she wanted to. “I’m fine, really,” she whispered. She pulled away from them, and the loss left her cold, bare and empty inside. “I’ve got some old stand-bys, and I’ll find a job, get settled again – “

“We can help you, please. Let us help,” Steve pleaded, reaching for her again.

“No,” she insisted as she stepped away. She wanted to say yes, but she just couldn’t. She wouldn’t ruin her last chance before it even started. “I’m fine. But thank you.”

Bucky swallowed heavily, drawing Ryan’s attention back to his face. He schooled his features smooth, a charming smile on his face. “You’re staying in town, though, right?”

Ryan nodded. “Yeah, I guess. I… don’t really know what’s next. But, um, there’s some stuff going down in Hell’s Kitchen, with Matt and the others right now. That’s why I came back, to help them.”

A crestfallen expression crossed Steve’s face, just the slightest flinch. “But I’m really glad to see you both again too!” Ryan insisted quickly. “Really, I… missed you both, too. And everyone.”

Steve smiled at her, before concern diminished it. “Ryan, just – please. If you need anything, if you’re in any trouble at all – “

“Right, yeah, of course,” she nodded. She swung on her backpack and took a step back towards the stairs, the ache inside her chest intensifying. “I’ll, uh, text you soon, okay?”

“Come back over tonight,” Bucky said quickly, standing up as well. “Or tomorrow, or whenever – we’ll catch up more.”
Ryan’s breath caught in her throat, and she nodded. “Yeah, um, sounds good,” she managed. “Text me, and, uh, we’ll figure it out.” With a last look at them both, she forced herself to turn around. Every step away was like a lance through her heart, but still, for the first time in forever, she let herself feel just the tiniest sliver of hope. It seemed she could never know what to expect when it came to the Avengers.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Steve watched her go, his heart cracking like ice. Every ounce of his instincts was screaming not to let her go, to hold her tight and keep her safe, to gather up his mates and be the shield between them and the world. Mate, he reminded himself unhelpfully. You’ve only got one.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ,” Bucky swore vehemently, standing dazed beside him. “God fucking dammit!”

Steve just shook his head, words failing him. He suddenly remembered what Ryan had said, and walked numbly back to the kitchen. There, on the countertop of the island, sat a few crinkled pages of notebook paper. He grabbed them, Bucky coming up to his side, and they read together.

Dear Clint, Natasha, and Tony:

I don’t really know how to start this. I guess it should be with the most important part: I forgive you.

You were all lying to me, for months. You assumed I was lying, that I was going to hurt all of you, that I had nothing but bad intentions. And, at least in part, you thought so because I was unpresented. I think that hurt most of all.

But I’m not a child. I can’t afford to be. I know nothing is black and white, and I’ve had a while to think about the time I spent with you. Clint, we played video games together a lot. There was no reason for you to do that, it’s not like that was helping you figure out my supposed plans or anything. Natasha, we worked out in the gym every morning, and you always smiled hello and came to eat breakfast afterwards. Was all of that an act, every time? I’m choosing to believe it wasn’t, you’d have to be a pretty amazing actress for that to be true. Tony, you taught me about special relativity and let me see your lab. Was that just because you were keeping up a cover? I hope not. I liked learning from you, and Metallica was one of my dad’s favorite bands.

People only assume the worst for two reasons, in my experience: because the world made them cynical, pessimistic, and afraid; or, because they’ve been hurt before, and don’t want to be again. It might’ve been some cynicism or pessimism or fear, but I don’t think that was all of it. Way back when SHIELD’s files were leaked, I read everything on the Avengers and HYDRA that I could. The Boston librarians kept kicking me out for using the computers too long. But I had to know if I was the only person like me, and to get an idea of what would happen if I was discovered. What I found was a lot of reports on people forced into impossible situations, and fixing them the best they could. There were a lot of things done wrong, but… you’re all human. (Except for Thor, but Asgardians are close enough.) And I’m human. (As far as I know.) It’s not fair for me to hold grudges and be angry when my mistakes have had devastating consequences too. I’ve made enough of them, I don’t
want to make another.

And what’s more, I was a threat not just to the world you guys swore to protect, but to your family. Everything that happened, I think, was ultimately because you love each other. It might have been tainted with cynicism and prejudice, but god knows I get that. I’ve been the same way. But I’ve seen hell now, too, and I know what it does to you. That all of the Avengers have been through even worse – I know you have, I read the files, remember? – and came out still able to feel anything good again is nothing short of a miracle.

The parallels between me and Kilgrave aren’t lost on me. They make me sick, but I’d be an idiot to deny them. It took me a while to calm down enough to understand, but your fears weren’t unfounded or unjustified. It could just as easily have been me that did what he did. Add to that the fact that... well, you know everything else I can do, too. I don’t know if I can say I would’ve reacted any differently in your situation. Steve and Bucky trusted me because I saved Bucky’s life. If I hadn’t, they could’ve agreed with all of you. But it’s pointless to worry about what-ifs.

What you did to me was wrong. But you believed it was right, and it was for the right reasons, so that makes it an honest mistake. It does me no good to hold a grudge, and I think that, with all the good you guys have done, I can do forgiveness. Father Lantom – Matt’s priest, he’s really nice – says that forgiveness doesn’t get rid of the hurt, but it binds the wound and lets you heal.

I’m sorry, I’m being selfish, but – I want more than that, too. I want a fresh start with everyone, because I refuse to let all this shit destroy the fact that I still care. I know, I’m such a fucking sap. But all of you were the first people I actually let in, even a little, since my parents died. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I saw how close all of you were, and I was secretly hoping I could have that someday, too.

Maybe that’s impossible now. But I still want to try, cause I’m an idiot. You guys did come to rescue me, after all. And Clint apologized for all of you back at SHIELD. Could those have just been motivated by guilt? Maybe. But I’m not going to see just the worst in you. I’ve done that before, and I think we all know that’s a mistake. And even if that fresh start is just saying good-bye on better terms this time, that’s good enough. Better than before, anyway.

I’m still so hurt by the prejudice against me because I was unpresented, though. There’s nothing about being unpresented that warranted your reaction. I was a person before I was an Omega. I was just trying to live my life, the same as anyone else. That part of it all was honestly just inexcusable. But inexcusable doesn’t mean unforgivable. Clint said he feels awful about that, and that he and everyone were so sorry for being that way. I believe you. And I’m trying to forgive you.

I’m still angry. I’m only human. (You know, probably.) But I’m working on it. I forgive you, Clint, Nat, Tony. I don’t want to be a source of discord or division anymore. I’m still here, you’re still here. It’s not like I wasn’t already broken.

Our actions have bigger consequences than most people’s just because of who we are, and I guess our understanding has to match. Most people nowadays choose to throw away everyone that ever hurt them, because it’s easier than trying to fix things. We’re both sorry for everything. But even if you weren’t, I’d still forgive you. Because I’m not going to poison myself with hate. If I did, I’d be Kilgrave.

And, lastly. I don’t deserve to ask this, because I did some horrible things, but I am anyway. Can you guys forgive me? I wasn’t honest with all of you from the start, and perhaps if I had been, this all could have been avoided. A lie of omission is still a lie; I let all of you believe I was a regular Beta. I also lost my temper and used my powers to hurt all of you, and I won’t lie to you and say it was purely self-defense. I was angry, and I wanted to hurt you. I still feel sick when I think of it.
You reacted to protect yourselves, your mates, your family. No wonder all this went to shit. I’m so sorry.

- Ryan

And at the bottom of the last page, following, she’d written more.

Clint –

What I said – wrote? – to you in the hospital that day was cruel. I’m so sorry. I was angry, but that’s no excuse, I shouldn’t have done that. It was as true as I could make it, but I threw it all on you like that because I was so upset. And it doesn’t matter if you deserved it or whatever, because being awful to someone who was awful to you isn’t justice, it’s revenge. I don’t want to ever do that. Kilgrave killed his parents in revenge. I won’t be like him ever again, I swear, I’m so sorry.

- Ryan

Bruce –

I don’t blame you for what the other guy tried to do. It’s not your fault. If I ever see him again, we’ll be having words.

- Ryan

Bucky’s breaths were low, ragged pants by the end, and Steve gritted his teeth to keep from completely breaking down. Putting the pages back down, he yanked Bucky into a fierce embrace, scenting deeply to calm himself. Bucky held on for dear life.

“How?” Bucky eventually said, clinging to Steve even tighter. “She can’t just – she – “

“I know,” Steve breathed, head whirling with what he’d just read. “I – god, maybe… maybe it’s her powers, or something. The good inside gets better, like Erskine said, like with me and you.”

Bucky pulled back a little, wiping his streaming eyes. “No,” he countered simply. “Being – being good, caring, it’s not an advantage. Not in evolution, or survival.” He chuckled under his breath. “It’s just her.”

Steve huffed a disbelieving laugh, leaning heavily against the counter and shaking his head before exhaling a deep breath. “Buck?”

“Yeah?” he replied, meeting Steve’s gaze. His breath caught in his chest for a moment. He recognized that look, would know the brightness in his mate’s eyes anywhere. It was sheer determination, reckless passion, the kind he proudly wore when there was no fucking way he was backing down from a challenge.

A wildfire grin spread across Steve’s face, and Bucky matched it, a thrilling crescendo growing
inside. Steve grabbed him by the collar, kissing him breathless, then pulled back to growl, “She’s gonna be ours.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay kids, I don’t know when this turned into a fucking rom-com, but everybody buckle up cause we’re on our way to Happy Town!! :) With stops at Angst Junction, Hurt/Comfort Station, Miscommunication Lane, and Ridiculous-Amounts-Of-Pining Road!!

Update: I'm terrible at Photoshop, but I did manage to make a picture of close to what I imagine Ryan's powers to look like - when she's got them fully turned on, not like for just moving something small :)

□
Hey everyone, I'm so sorry it took a while to update! I'm having a hard time connecting all the dots of what I want in my head and getting it out to paper right now, which is why this chapter's a bit shorter than some of the other recent ones. I'm working on it!

Hover over or go to the end for translations.

When Bucky had said she should come back that night, Ryan hadn’t thought he’d actually meant it; she’d assumed it was just a quick, unthinking offer. The text she’d received about ten minutes after she’d exited the building, asking her *Hey, why don’t you come watch a movie with us tonight? :)*, had proved her wrong. So she ended up on Steve and Bucky’s floor mere hours after she’d left, rather sweaty from a long day out in the city trying to set up her life as best she could yet again.

“Wow. That’s gorgeous,” she proclaimed, looking a little closer at the phone in her hand. “You’re a great photographer, Steve.” She coughed suddenly, voice overtaxed from disuse, and she grabbed the glass of water Bucky had shoved in her hand the second she’d arrived.

“It’s easy with a great subject,” Steve shrugged humbly. “The Grand Canyon’s nothing original, though.”

“Doesn’t mean there can’t be one picture that’s better than most anyway,” she croaked, her voice sounding like gravel. She cleared her throat, shifting a little in the armchair. They’d settled in the living room, Steve and Bucky on the couch just adjacent. Steve’s fingers brushed hers as she handed the phone back, and she felt her stomach jump.

Jesus, calm down, she told herself. She must not have been over the nerves from coming back, she surmised. “Were you guys there the whole time?”

“No, no,” Bucky answered, “we kinda took the grand tour. Went to California afterwards, then Seattle, and then along the border in the middle of nowhere for a while – it was gorgeous, but not much there – until we hit Mount Rushmore. Then Chicago for a bit, and New England.”

Ryan smiled at the mention of her old home, tinged a bit with melancholy. “You must’ve gone to Boston then, right? What did you think?”

“No, actually, we didn’t,” Steve replied softly. “We, uh…”

“Didn’t know if… you’d be there,” Bucky finished. “It, um, seemed wrong to intrude.”

“Oh,” Ryan managed, feeling her cheeks flush. They were so… well, thoughtful, and considerate. “It’s a big enough place,” she joked lightly. “And it’s the best city in the world, so.”

“Oh no, no way in hell,” Bucky countered, laughing. “Forget about it, it’s Brooklyn or nothing.”

“Brooklyn’s just part of the bigger – “

“Don’t even finish that sentence,” Steve interrupted, grinning widely. “Nowhere beats Brooklyn, ‘s no contest.”
Ryan laughed at them both, shaking her head. “This whole city is *obsessed* with itself, it’s ridiculous.”

“Yeah, well,” Steve shrugged, “if you’ve got it…”

Ryan was suddenly distracted, intrigued by the odd tenor in Steve’s voice she’d never heard before. “You have a little bit of an accent, don’t you? I never caught it, do you cover it up on purpose?”

Steve blushed, just the lightest shading of pink on his cheeks. “Yeah, it’s a weird Irish and Brooklyn thing, and the big brass didn’t want me to sound like that when I was being ordering troops around 70 years ago. Only comes out when I’m really relaxed now. Or angry, funnily enough.”

“He got it from his Ma,” Bucky explained, smiling fondly. “She was an immigrant – we’ve told you about that, haven’t we?”

Ryan thought back, then shook her head. “I know how you two met and got together, but not much else.” She smiled to herself for just a moment. “I figured I wouldn’t ask, you’d just tell me if you wanted to. I’m sure enough people have bombarded you with stupid questions based on stupider assumptions.”


“Jesus, I’m sorry,” Ryan said with a frown, taking another drink of water to help her voice. “I’ve seen that happen with other homeless people so much, no one bothers to *listen*. They don’t even want to see the poor, the unrepresented, immigrants in bad situations, or anyone else ‘lower’ than them, much less help them feel like human beings again.” She stared off at nothing for a moment longer, then blinked suddenly, shocked at herself. “I’m so sorry, that was rude and unfair of me, I didn’t mean to – ”

“Don’t apologize,” Bucky inserted. “You’re right.” He cleared his throat, shifting a little in his seat. “Stevie, could you grab the popcorn?”

“Right, yeah,” Steve answered, finally tearing his unreadable gaze away from Ryan. He got up and went around the corner to the kitchen, and Bucky waited until he was gone to scoot over to the edge of the couch, right near her chair.

“I’m so sorry, Bucky, I – I’m a little tired, I don’t know where that came from,” Ryan insisted.

“Don’t be,” Bucky repeated firmly. “Ryan, you – you’re allowed to be upset. You know that, right?”

She smiled at him, ignoring the way his fingertips were mere inches from hers. “I’m fine, really. Don’t worry about me, it’s all good.” She looked up when Steve returned, missing the stricken expression cross Bucky’s face. “What’re we watching?” she asked cheerfully, hoping to smooth over her faux pas.

“Well, Buck still hasn’t seen any of the Star Wars movies, so we thought we’d start with *A New Hope*, if that’s alright with you?” Steve replied, passing the frankly humongous bowl over to Bucky, who immediately pressed it towards Ryan.

“I actually haven’t seen them either,” Ryan said with a laugh, taking a small handful of popcorn. God, she was hungry; she didn’t have much left over after her typical moving expenses, and had opted to wait until breakfast tomorrow to eat. “Never got around to it, I guess.”
“Perfect,” Steve declared, and a minute later, Ryan almost jumped out of her seat at the blasting horns of the opening title sequence. But somewhere around when the two funny droids were wandering the desert, the stresses and emotions of the day caught up with her, and she fell fast asleep.

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Bucky’s heart practically melted when he heard a small snuffling sound to his right, glancing over to see Ryan curled up into a tight ball, head pillowed on the arm of the recliner and hands buried for warmth. She was wrapped up so tight, knees pressed against her chest, she practically looked like a contortionist.

Suddenly, realization dawned, and the warmth was replaced with cold misery. He recognized the instinct; he’d done it himself, when the only hope for survival was his own body heat. He quickly rose to his feet, reaching down to touch her shoulder.

“Wait,” Steve whispered, grabbing his other arm. “If she wakes up, she’ll make herself leave.”

“Not a chance,” Bucky shot back. “She’s sleeping in a bed tonight, whether she likes it or not.” He laid a hand on her shoulder, but she didn’t even stir. Screw it, Bucky decided, and he carefully lifted her into his arms.

She awoke with a gasp, squirming a little and looking startled. “It’s just me, a ghrá,” Bucky reassured her, her legs over one arm and his other supporting her back. “You’re alright. Go on back to sleep.”

Amazingly, she obeyed; she pressed herself against him, throwing her arms around his neck and tucking her head into the crook of his neck. Bucky closed his eyes for a moment, overwhelmed. God, he loved her so much in that moment, his heart might burst with it. “That’s it, sweetheart,” he murmured, stroking the back of her neck as he walked them to the bedroom. She went completely limp against him, and was so light in his arms he thought she could just float away.

Steve went in ahead to pull back the covers, sheets smelling fresh of fabric softener. Leaning down, Bucky tried to let Ryan go, but her grip tightened, clinging to him in her sleep. So he sat down on the bed and carefully laid them down together. She still didn’t let go, and his heart thumped wildly in his chest. “You coming?” he whispered over his shoulder to Steve.

Steve looked wrecked, torn between what Bucky knew he desperately wanted and the sense of propriety that said, “Mates don’t cuddle and sleep in their beds with just friends, no matter how desperately those mates want to.” Bucky chuckled to himself. Steve was the best man he knew; but he himself was a man with priorities, and right now the top of the list was holding the girl he loved and being held by his mate for the next eight hours at least. “Self-denial is very last century, Stevie. C’mon.”

“This isn’t what I had planned,” Steve muttered, but he climbed onto the other side anyway. It was a little tight with three, but Ryan was so small compared to them, she fit like a puzzle piece right in between. Steve put an arm across them both, settling Ryan’s back to his chest, Bucky inhaled deeply, some instinct deep inside immensely satisfied at both of their scents mixing together. “Just this once,” Steve whispered as Bucky pulled the blankets up.
“Just this once,” Bucky replied, his nose brushing Steve’s on the pillows up above Ryan. Steve’s eyes were sparkling, and he leaned in and kissed him, brief but passionate.

“All that time away, and it didn’t do a damn thing,” he murmured against Bucky’s lips.

“Shut up and go to sleep, Stevie.”

Steve pulled them both in closer, then whispered, “JARVIS, turn out the lights, please.” With his Alpha embracing him and the Omega he loved in his arms, Bucky fell asleep in seconds.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Ryan was so comfortable, she never wanted to get out of bed again. Her body was telling her it was her normal wake-up time, though. But it was so warm… Ten more minutes, she told herself, settling back in.

Wait. I don’t have a bed.

She shot up straight, throwing back the covers instinctively as she blinked through the early-morning brightness. To her right, a groaning sound, and she turned to see Bucky blindly reach down and yank the covers back over himself before flopping onto his stomach. His arm settled across her waist, and his breathing deepened back into sleep.

Ryan stared at him, something funny fluttering in her stomach. To her left, there was an indent in the bed, and she could recognize Steve’s homey scent easily. He was nowhere to be found, though.

The memories from last night suddenly came flooding back, and Ryan’s cheeks flamed red. Oh god, she hadn’t meant to fall asleep or cling to Bucky like an octopus. She’d just been so tired, so emotionally exhausted, and he’d felt so safe, smelled so good…

Friends shared beds; that wasn’t weird, right? Okay, maybe mates didn’t… but hey, maybe they did, she reasoned. What did she know? She didn’t even have a bed. Bucky’s just a cuddly sleeper, she thought, and the fluttery feeling returned as she smiled. They were being great friends, like always. They felt bad about kicking her out, so… they felt bad about kicking her out. Oh, fuck.

They were trying to make up for everything that’d happened. They were good people, the best she knew, of course they were. She covered her mouth with a hand, feeling sick to her stomach. Oh god. They didn’t actually want her there – why would they?

Well, she wasn’t going to let it continue. They deserved so much better. Moving carefully so as not to wake him up, Ryan slid out from under Bucky’s arm and got out of the bed. She caught a glance at her reflection in the mirror and grimaced at her bedhead, the dark circles still under her eyes. Yeah, they definitely want someone like you around, she thought sardonically as she finger-combed her hair and smoothed down her jeans.

She padded out to the living room and grabbed her shoes from by the couch, sitting to slip them on. Suddenly, Steve’s voice rang out from the kitchen, and she paused in surprise. He was… singing.

She didn’t understand the words, but they sounded like French, as best she could tell. His voice was beautiful, rich and clear and smooth, and the melody of the tune sounded like a love song. The jittery feeling in her stomach was suddenly more like a swooping sensation, something warm settling
in her chest as she listened. She hadn’t even known he could sing. Maybe he and Bucky sang duets around the house while they cleaned, or went out for karaoke dates. Maybe Bucky could sing even better than he. Maybe Bucky couldn’t sing at all.

It didn’t matter, she told herself sternly. She wouldn’t force herself on them any longer to find out. Just then, something clanged on the floor, and Steve cut off to exclaim, “Merde!” Ryan shook herself out of her reverie and tied off her sneakers before standing up. She went a little too quickly, and the world spun for a moment; she really did need to eat something soon.

“Ryan! Good morning,” Steve called out cheerfully as she went around the corner. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No, no, I – ” Her voice cracked, still hoarse from disuse, and she coughed into her elbow. Instantly, Steve was at her side with a glass of water. “Here, sit down, breakfast’s almost ready,” he instructed, going to pull out a frankly enormous pile of pancakes from the oven where they were warming.

Ryan hesitated. She’d said she’d forgiven the others, and she’d meant it. Steve and Bucky obviously still felt bad, but they shouldn’t! She couldn’t let this go on. But… he’d already made breakfast, and it’d be rude and a waste to refuse. Plus, she was really, really hungry. So she sat down at the kitchen table’s end just as Bucky wandered in, stifling a yawn. Ryan almost giggled; he’d changed into sweatpants and t-shirt that matched Steve’s.

“Morning, Buck,” Steve chirped, and Bucky growled at him as he grabbed the coffee pot, guzzling half of it down in one. “Made your favorite.”

“Cause it’s the only thing you can cook without burnin’ it,” Bucky grumbled. Steve kissed his cheek, and Bucky pulled him in for a real one. The swooping sensation returned, and Ryan quickly turned away, cheeks turning pink.

“Where’s Ryan?” Bucky asked before pouring the rest of the coffee down his throat.

Steve snickered at him, putting the food on a tray. “Sitting six feet away, oh world-renowned assassin and spy.”

Bucky noticed her for the first time, surprised, then grunted, “Shut up, Stevie.”


A beat passed, and Steve burst out laughing. Bucky chuckling appreciatively as they sat down on either side of her. “I’m so sorry, that was terrible even for me,” Ryan laughed, shaking her head.

“Please, it’s way better than the garbage Barton calls humor,” Bucky replied, looking and sounding a lot more alive with an entire pot of coffee in him. He grabbed a plate from the tray, loading it up with pancakes, strawberries, whipped cream and syrup before setting it down in front of her.

“Oh, thanks,” Ryan said, surprised not for the first time this morning. Bucky smiled crookedly at her, eyes soft, and her heart sped up for a moment before she shook herself mentally, tucking into her pancakes.

They were all fast eaters, Steve and Bucky wolfing down seven or eight pancakes each in the time it took for her to eat two. She leaned back in her chair, almost overstuffed; she hadn’t eaten a full meal for a while now. She reached for her empty plate, but before she could grab it, Steve whisked it away and took everyone’s dishes to the sink.
“Steve, please, you made breakfast, let me – ” she began, standing up quickly, but Steve silenced her with a soapy hand.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’re the guest,” he said with a smile, and Ryan felt a sudden burst of frustration. Goddamnit, they were so nice, and she didn’t deserve it! They shouldn’t feel bad, they shouldn’t feel obligated!

But she shook it off as best she could; it was horrible repayment to be upset in response to their being so kind. “Alright, well, thank you so much for breakfast,” she said. “And uh… well, everything. I’ve got to go, though, I’m pretty gross and need a shower,” she joked lightly.

“Use ours,” Bucky offered immediately, grabbing a dish towel to dry. “Just cleaned it yesterday, and there’s brand-new stuff in the cabinets – “

“No, really, I have to get going,” Ryan interrupted, both frustration and fluttering crowding her full stomach. She grabbed her backpack from next to the shoes by the door, swinging it on quickly. “Thanks for breakfast, again.”

“Wait!” Steve called out. “Come over again tonight. We, uh, didn’t finish the movie.”

“Yeah maybe, we’ll see what happens,” Ryan hedged, then practically ran out the door.

* * *   * * *   * * *

The door half-slammed behind her, and Steve’s heart plummeted.

“A little too strong?” Bucky asked from beside him.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. He sighed, leaning up against the counter. “Jesus, I didn’t even have any luck with the dames 75 years ago, how’re we supposed to do it now?”

“Shouldn’t we… just tell her how we feel?” Bucky shrugged. “Cut out the middleman?”

“Tell her what? That we’re in love with her, and pined over her for months? That she’s our perfect mate, inside and out? That I don’t ever want to sleep without her in my arms again?” Steve shook his head. “We spooked her just by making breakfast.”

Bucky groaned in frustration. “Yeah, you’re right,” he admitted. “What’re we supposed to do, then?”

“First things first,” Steve replied. “She’s killing herself, living on the streets, not eating – god, she’s skinnier than I was!”

“And the long sleeves, in this weather?” Bucky noted. “She’s hiding her scars.”

“Oh god, I didn’t even notice,” Steve groaned, wiping a hand over his face. “Did you see them at all? Is it bad?”

“She kept them covered, I didn’t get a look.” Bucky ran a hand through his hair, exhaling loudly as he stared out a window to the city beyond. “Why does she do this to herself?” he muttered, sounding heartbroken.
“Takes people like us a while to learn not to punish themselves for stuff they can’t control, it seems,”
Steve replied softly, taking his hand. “Y’know, it’s funny. Right before D.C., when I saw you the
first time here… Natasha was bugging me about going out with – well, anyone. I said it was hard to
find someone with shared life experience.”

Bucky chuckled a little. “Well, I fixed that for you, and you for me. Guess it makes sense we’d love
something new, after.”

“Well, yeah,” Steve acquiesced, “but I meant that it’s kinda surprising just how much all three of us
have in common.”

Bucky considered his words for a moment, and his eyebrows furrowed a little. “Superpowers,
orphans, stigmatized for mating or presentation at some point…”

“She works anything and everything to get by, like us in the old days,” Steve contemplated. “Lived
in cities all her life, same as us.”

“Sacrifices herself and saves everyone’s lives, just like you,” Bucky added, eyes softening.

“Survived horrible traumas and came back stronger, just like you,” Steve added as well. They met
each other’s eyes, and Steve shook his head again. “I miss her already.”

“Steve, the thought of her out there, struggling and suffering alone – it’s killing me, I can’t take it
anymore,” Bucky breathed. “What do we do?”

“She came back,” Steve replied, jaw set with determination. “Now we convince her to stay.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

Ryan’s phone buzzed as she passed with the sidewalk crowd onto 3rd Street, and she sighed as she
took it out. She’d say no, this time. Her heart sank to her shoes at the thought, but she steeled
herself; it was wrong to let them keep feeling like they owed her. Even if it felt like her scars were
opening up again at the thought of not seeing them anymore.

Her phone buzzed again, and she realized it was a call. Well, time to face the music.

Darcy’s face, eyes crossed and face comically grimacing, showed on the screen. Ryan blinked in
surprise, then pressed the green button and said, “Hey, Darcy, what’s up?”

“Hey, girl! Your timing is PERFECT, we’re going to the spa this weekend and you can’t say no
because Pepper’s paying because Tony’s super rich and is everyone’s sugar daddy whether he likes
it or not,” Darcy said in a single breath.


“Good timing, spa, sugar daddy. Omega weekend supreme! We haven’t had one since before you
first showed up, and now you can actually come!” Darcy half-shrieked with excitement. “Oh my
god,” her voice suddenly dropped to a low, horrified turn. “Ryan. You poor, deprived, feral street
child. Have you ever been to a spa?”

Ryan was reeling with the strangeness of the conversation, but managed to answer, “Um, no?”
“Oh, hon. Your world is about to be rocked,” Darcy proclaimed. “Alright, we’re leaving in like three hours, so get your ass in gear and get pumped!”

“I – Darcy, I’m sorry, but I have to find a jo –“

“Okay, great! See you soon, can’t wait!” The phone call ended, and Ryan stood frozen on the sidewalk, a million questions running through her mind.

*** *** ***

“Was that a little too loud?” Darcy asked, frowning at her phone before looking to Jane. “It felt a little loud.”

Jane had her face in her hands, but peered through her fingers to glare at Darcy. “Sugar daddy? Feral street child? Yes, Darcy, it was too loud, in multiple ways.”

“I’m a nervous talker!” Darcy shot back. “And a nervous planner! You know this!”

“And you thought an impromptu spa trip would fix our problems!?”

“Well, they weren’t gonna get fixed sitting around here!” Darcy exclaimed. “’Mon, we’ve gotta go tell the others!”

“Darce, wait,” Jane interrupted, catching her arm as she dashed by. “Look, we’re all thrilled at how things have gone, but we don’t want to overwhelm Ryan, either.” She rolled her eyes at Darcy’s huff, and cut her off before she opened her mouth. “Of course we want to – to welcome her back in, but this whole thing’s been a huge mess. It’s gonna take time, and this makes us look like we’re trying too hard.”

“No such thing!” Darcy rejoined, pulling free. “You tell Bruce, I’ll tell Pepper!” she yelled, zipping out of the lab at top speed.

Jane sighed, then pulled out her phone. “Bruce? Darcy’s gone crazy, again,” she said when he answered.

Bruce chuckled in response. “I’ll be ready in an hour or so,” he replied mildly. “Where are we going this time?”

Chapter End Notes

a ghrá = love (indicative case)

So, how about some accidental bed-sharing and domestic Steve/Bucky/Ryan? ;) (Btw I’m open for suggestions for ship names regarding our beloved trio, comment if you
have ideas!!)

Also, during my writer's block for this work, I got randomly inspired to write something waaaaaay different, and I published that this past weekend. It's Stucky, but a much different style than this one because of who I dedicated it to. If you want to read it, let me know what you think :) <3 Link's below!

http://archiveofourown.org/works/7248178
In Which Omega Weekend Supreme is Cut Short, and Ryan Makes a New Friend

Chapter Notes

I’ve been making a lot of unhealthy comparisons between myself, other writers, and our respective works lately, and it’s made continuing on… arduous. Also, I’ve been apartment-searching and it’s not going well. So if the chapter is a rollercoaster, that’s why. I hope you enjoy it anyway though <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The spa lobby was gorgeous: creamy-white floors and ivory-patterned walls, a marble fountain burbling quietly in the center. Gold accents glinted here and there, and green vines spread tendrils of sweet-smelling crimson flowers high up the Romanesque pillars to the ceiling. Ryan was on edge the second they walked in.

“Welcome back, Miss Potts,” a soft voice greeted with a smile. “Everything is prepared, per your requests.” The receptionist scented of fresh cherry blossoms, not a hair out of place. Her immaculate French manicure complemented a baby-blue shift, simple and clean. Ryan’s unease only increased. What’s wrong with me? she chided herself, taking a deep breath.

“Thank you, Veronica,” Pepper replied warmly, then leaned in to whisper something so no one else could hear. “Ryan?” she called back, and Ryan turned away from Darcy’s constant chatter, Jane’s growing excitement, and Bruce’s mild amusement. “Veronica is going to be taking care of you for a while now. Don’t worry, everything’s all set already.”

Ryan tried to smile back at both of them, but it came out more like a grimace. “Right this way, miss,” Veronica indicated anyway, gesturing through a shimmery-curtained archway. “We have the full package ready for you.”

“Oh, well, that was thoughtful of Pepper, even if Ryan was freaking out for no reason. It would definitely be rude and unappreciative to point out her palms were sweating even more now.

You’re in a freaking spa that Tony Stark’s money bought out, she scolded herself. You’re the danger. You’re not allowed to be scared of nothing.

It had been an eventful few days, was all. She was fine.
She was led into a spacious, floral-smelling hair salon, shampoo bottles and stylish models lining the walls. It was eerily silent devoid of people, but Veronica chatted idly to fill the quiet, guiding her to a hair-washing station and switching on a sound system. The sound of classical violins floated out, and Ryan fidgeted in the chair. Was the heat on in there? She was boiling.

“Here, Miss Green, if you’d just lie back,” Veronica said, laying down a folded towel for her neck. “Let me know if the water temperature’s good, alright?”

Ryan leaned back slowly, an odd ringing in her ears. *You’re fine, stop being crazy, you’re fine…* 

Water rushed from the faucet behind her, and Ryan startled. “Here, we’ll start off with our specially formulated rosewater clarifying rinse,” Veronica informed her, uncapping a bottle next to Ryan’s face. “Doesn’t it smell amazing?”

Rosewater. Greenery, marble stairs, hair washed and dressed and white-red-gold -*my dear, a vision, simply radiant* –

Someone was screaming, yelling, but Ryan couldn’t hear over the pounding in her ears. Everything was too bright, too close, she had to get out now or he’d kill everyone –

He grabbed her arm, and Ryan’s hands flashed blue, burning on her retinas. The screaming disappeared under cracks and smashes and gunshots, and they were shooting at her, but Bucky was going to kill Steve and she had to escape, but she couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t breathe, the world was spinning in a whirl of color and sound but she was suffocating, choking. This was it. He’d won. He’d finally won, they were all going to die, and she couldn’t get air in her lungs –

"Ryan!"

*** *** *** ***

The Bruce from eight years ago would’ve scoffed at today-Bruce, enjoying a steam before a mud mask and massage. Today-Bruce thought Bruce from eight years ago was an idiot, for more reasons than one. “Thank you, Darcy,” he sighed, rolling out the kinks in his neck. “I needed this.”

Darcy smiled, eyes shut and head dropped back. “What can I say? I’m the genius of the group.”

“If you’re such a genius, then figure out why the optical fibers in the lab’s helium cryo-cooler won’t let the FTIR spectrophotometer actually *do* matrix-isolation spectroscopy,” Jane grumbled beside her.

“What?” Pepper laughed, her strawberry-blond hair frizzing up spectacularly in the steam.

“Right there with you, Pepper,” Darcy chuckled. “And it’s my goddamn job.”

“Not for long, if you don’t help me solve this,” Jane inserted, but she smiled after. Yeah, Bruce had missed this; a day off, easy camaraderie, and comfortable silence with friends. He settled back, content to let the heat melt everything else away.

Suddenly, a piercing scream broke through the quiet, crashes and bangs splitting the air, followed by shaking floors and rumbling groans. Bruce shot up to his feet, slamming the door open. “Find someplace safe!” he ordered, dashing outside.

“Whatever’s happening will stop as soon as they see me,” Bruce countered, sound muffled as he threw on his shirt. “Get outside if you can, now go!”

“Emergency exit’s this way,” Pepper directed, and Bruce took off at a run as the others hurried down the opposite hall. More screams and crashes followed, and he had a sinking feeling he could guess what was happening.

“Help! Somebody!” a voice was howling, and Bruce rounded the corner to see the receptionist from earlier clinging to a doorframe, a small scratch bleeding on her forehead. Round, terrified eyes met his, and Bruce shouted, “Get outside!” before dashing through the door.

Ryan stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by a circle of cracked floorboards and shattered mirrors and broken sinks, water spraying everywhere. Her back was turned to him, but the brightness of her trembling hands told him enough. The rumbling had calmed, though, so he took a careful step forward. “Ryan? It’s me, Bruce.”

Her choking sobs continued, the scent of panic permeating the scene. “Can you hear me?”

Still no response. He pushed in front of her, and her eyes were open but unfocused, glowing a hazy blue over the red rims. “Ryan!” he called, laying a hand on her shoulder.

She gasped, and he grunted as she shoved him back with a glowing hand. Across the room, a shelf of hair products crashed down, and she screamed, whipping around wildly in search of the threat. “Ryan! It’s me, Bruce,” he insisted, holding up both hands for her to see. “You’re safe, it’s just us.”

Streaming eyes met his, seeming to recognize him this time. “I – I can’t stop,” Ryan quavered, her shining hands convulsing at her sides, “I can’t, he’ll kill them, I have to – to – “

“It’s okay,” Bruce promised, “just take your time, alright?” He paused, casting about for some solution before he grabbed his phone from his pocket. “I’m going to call Steve, okay?”

Ryan didn’t respond, her eyes panicked and unfocused again. Bruce held the phone to his ear, praying.

* * * * * * *

The afternoon sun was perfect for a study on the cityscape, but Steve found himself drawing other subjects in the open air of the rooftop terrace. A few half-hearted sketches of straight lines and glass windows had morphed into curved figures and smiles instead, but it was fine. He preferred portraits anyway.

The usual depictions of Bucky’s eyes, his crooked smile, his metal arm were on the third page, past his careless warm-ups. The fourth captured a half-finished study of a hand, fingers slender and palms rough with fading callouses. Ryan’s eyes were even more formidable; no blue could capture their intense, unique hue, no number of strokes portray their depth of emotion.

He smiled to himself, swaying along to the radio, tuned to his favorite jazz station. He did love a challenge.
“Stevie?” Bucky’s voice called out, elevator doors closing behind. Steve looked up and grinned like a fool. A gray t-shirt and black jeans, shorter hair artfully tousled, and metal arm glinting in the sun; his mate was an artist’s dream. Even after all these years, Steve’s heart still skipped a beat at the sight. How the hell did he get so lucky?

“Hey,” he murmured, tilting his head up to kiss him hello. “Everything good?”

“Arm’s still tip-top,” Bucky replied, leaning against the railing and gazing out at the city. “Stark says he’s got an idea to improve the nerve function.”

“I thought it was already like a normal arm?” Steve asked, glancing up from his work again. “Wait, don’t move, that’s perfect,” he exclaimed, flipping to a new page and quickly starting an outline of Bucky’s pose.

Bucky chuckled, rolling his eyes but stilling anyway. “He wants it so in a fight, I don’t feel any pain unless it’s actually hurting the machinery, so I know to protect it. Not that anything can hurt vibranium, but still. Thought it sounded smart, so he’s going at it now. Might be ready in a few months.”

Steve only hummed in reply, forms beginning to take shape beneath him. The rumbles of the city were distant to his ears, covered up by a bouncing piano solo, the skritching of graphite across paper, and the light breeze rustling the potted plants. An almost perfect afternoon.

A few minutes later, he looked back up, evaluating. “Alright, I’ve got it now.”

Bucky chuckled again, walking over and dropping a kiss to Steve’s hair. “Missed having you like this,” he murmured, inspecting his figure on the page.

“Missed feeling like this,” Steve said, catching Bucky’s hand and bringing it to his lips. “’S nice.”

Bucky smiled softly. “I liked that one of Ryan’s hand. You completely fucked up her eyes, though.”

“Shut up,” Steve grinned, tossing his art supplies away and yanking a laughing Bucky onto his lap. Their kisses kept getting interrupted by smiles.

“Besides,” Steve continued, nuzzling Bucky’s jaw, “you’re scruffy all the time.”

Bucky leaned into the touch, eyes sparkling. “But you’re a sweet, innocent soul, and I’m a good-for-nothing scoundrel hell-bent on corrupting you,” he taunted, and Steve threw his head back, howling with laughter.

“Oh my god,” he wheezed, “I’d forgotten that!”

“Good ol’ Sister Agnes,” Bucky reminisced, snickering. “Boy, did that broad have it backwards. I tell you, Stevie, our kids are never going to Catholic school.” Steve wiped away tears of mirth as
Bucky stood back up, handing Steve his sketchpad again.

“Our kids,” Steve murmured, turning to a blank page. “I like the sound of that.”

Bucky smiled again, then wandered off and leaned against the railing once more, idly pulling out his phone. His eyes widened. “Steve!”

* * * * * * *

Bruce swore under his breath, hanging up again as Steve’s phone rang through for the second time. Ryan was frozen in place, hugging her shaking arms to her chest as she shivered, halfway soaked by the water spraying up from the broken sinks. “I’m trying to get ahold of them, it’ll be fine,” he reassured her, sending off a rapid text. “Just take deep breaths. You’re doing fine.”

Seconds later, his phone chimed, and he sighed in relief. “Steve, I need your help.”

“What’s going on? Is Ryan okay?” Steve sounded uncharacteristically frantic, and Bruce heard running footsteps, Bucky demanding information of JARVIS over the line. “What happened?”

“Steve, listen, please!” Bruce insisted. “Ryan had a dissociative flashback coupled with a panic attack, and her powers aren’t under her control. I need you to talk her down.” He put the phone on speaker, approaching Ryan cautiously. “Ryan? It’s Steve.”

“Ryan?” Steve’s voice breathed, but her sobs didn’t cease. “Hey, hey, it’s alright! It’s Steve, ’n Buck’s here too –”

“Hey, sweetheart,” Bucky quickly chimed in. “Just hang tight, alright? You’re safe with Bruce.”

A few moments passed, then Ryan stammered, “St-Steve?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s me,” he replied. “Ryan, do you know where you are?”

“He had Bucky,” Ryan breathed heavily, tears streaming down, “he made him – is Bucky okay?”

A sharp exhale through the phone. “I’m okay,” Bucky affirmed, voice strained. “He’s gone now, he’s gone forever. He messed me up a little, but I’m okay now, right? And you’re alright, too.”

“But he hurt Steve!”

“No, honey, no,” Steve inserted. “He didn’t, cause you saved all of us. Please, Ryan, can you look around? Tell me where you are, what’s around you.”

Ryan’s eyes seemed to clear a little bit, and their glow started to fade away. “Bruce is here,” she panted, “and I – I broke some things, I’m sorry, I’m sorry –”

“Don’t worry, it’s okay,” Steve insisted. “We’re on our way there, alright? Just stay there, stay with Bruce.”

“Okay.” A few moments passed, then she whispered, “I’m so tired.”

“I know, babydoll,” Bucky answered. “God, I know. Just hang on a little longer, okay?” There was a pause, Ryan’s hitching breaths breaking the silence. “Ryan, sweetheart. What’s your favorite
Bruce furrowed his brows, wondering where the conversation was going. Ryan looked a little confused as well, but answered, “Yellow. Like… sun-yellow, or goldenrod.”

“Yellow,” Bucky repeated back. “Mine’s blue, like a dark sky-blue. And Steve’s is red.”

“Green, actually,” Steve chimed in. “Used to be red, when I couldn’t see green right before. It used to be kinda grayish ‘n awful. But grass green, that’s my favorite now.”

“Hey, that’s perfect, cause yellow and blue make green. Oh, Ryan, I was reading an article online earlier, you’ll never believe it – some scientists just discovered a new blue color.”

“What?” Ryan breathed. She shivered a little again, then seemed to at last notice she was steadily soaking through. “How do you find a new color?” she asked, shuffling out of the cold spray. Bruce followed her, still holding the phone.

“It was an accident – they superheated some chemicals for some experiment, and the color they turned hadn’t been produced before! They’re making the stuff into paint now, I was gonna get some as a surprise for Stevie.”

“Spoiled that one,” Steve deadpanned, and Ryan exhaled a tiny laugh. “You like to paint, or draw, or anything, Ryan? I don’t think I ever asked.”

“I – I can’t really do art stuff,” she answered, her voice a little stronger.

“That’s okay,” Bucky supplied. “I can only draw a little, Steve’s the real master. He used to do commissions, and some newspaper comics, right?”

“Yeah, I actually have one – there’s a newspaper ad I drew in 1938 I managed to get ahold of,” Steve explained. “Just something for a grocer, but it survived all those years. It’s on the wall in the bedroom, did you see there earlier, Ryan?”

“No, I missed it. That’s cool, though.” Her hands and eyes were back to normal, and Bruce thought it safe to lay a hand on her shoulder.

“Let’s get out of here,” he murmured, handing the phone to Ryan. “Come on, there were chairs just outside.” He led her past the debris while the trio continued talking, Steve and Bucky carrying on about nothing and everything. Ryan’s shaking had stilled, and her words started slowing as she collapsed into a cushy chair. Within a few minutes, her infrequent answers dropped off, and she blinked unfocused eyes as she sank down further.

“Okay, we’re just a minute out,” Steve announced as Bruce caught his phone from slipping out of her hand. “Ryan? You with us?”

“She fell asleep,” Bruce whispered, tiptoeing away and switching the speakerphone off. “Panic attacks are exhausting.”

“No kidding,” Bucky muttered. “How bad was it?”

“No one was hurt. Well, one employee got a scratch, but it wasn’t serious. The hair salon’s totaled, though.”

“What the hell happened!?” Steve growled. “She was fine earlier, what did th – “
“No one did anything, Steve,” Bruce cut him off sharply. “Sometimes, things just happen.” He paused, pacing a little. “But… I’d also bet there’s more to that mansion’s security footage than that brunch everyone watched. I remember she was wearing makeup when I treated her, and her hair was done up. This place might’ve subconsciously reminded her of…well.”

“Fuck,” Bucky swore. “Alright, we’re here.”

Bruce rattled off directions, and mere moments later they appeared, footsteps unnervingly quiet given their speed. They stopped as soon as they saw Ryan, though, curled up like a cat in her chair. Steve’s expression was heartbreaking as he gathered her up in his arms, lifting her effortlessly. He murmured something in a lilting tongue, and whatever it was caused Bucky’s eyes to soften, his fist to unclench.

“Thank you, Bruce,” Steve whispered, cradling Ryan’s head in one hand. She didn’t even stir.

Bruce nodded once. “You’re welcome.” He hesitated as they walked away. “You both know what has to happen now, right?”

Bucky’s gaze turned steely, but he nodded. “We’ll take care of it.”

* * * * * * *

Ryan sat up alone in the dark, clothes wet but cocooned in warm blankets, feeling disoriented and confused. The bed felt familiar, though, the smell of the sheets comforting and safe. Just as she realized where she was, however, she also figured out why.

She let herself fall back, staring blankly at the ceiling as nausea churned in her gut. Wallowing sounded nice, but there wasn’t time. Practically speaking, there wasn’t much else to do but consider her options, few though they were. Maybe SHIELD and the Avengers could excuse her murdering her the psychopath that threatened their own lives, but there was no excuse for this.

Option one: wait for her jail sentence. Unappealing, but deserved. And morally upright.

Option two: run. Pretty much impossible, considering they’d found her in two days when Kilgrave – just the name made her heart stutter with fear – had kidnapped her.

Option three: beg for leniency. Steve and Bucky still apparently felt guilty, so they might advocate for her. Not that anything could make much of a difference, considering SHIELD was her first kidnapper to begin with; their job was stopping people like her. They’d changed their tune before, but now she’d actually hurt innocent people. Oh god, Veronica had been so nice, and she’d repaid her by going crazy and hurting her over nothing.

Ryan gritted her teeth, her eyes burning. She didn’t deserve the reprieve. She had to do the right thing; might as well get it over with.

She sat up again, sliding out of bed and feeling for a light switch. Heavy fabric brushed against her hands first, and she opened the curtains to see city lights blurred by streaks of rain. Well, SHIELD cells would most likely be dry.

A frame on the wall caught the corner of her eye by the door, dim light reflecting off the glass. It was made of old, rough wood, clashing with the rest of the room’s sleeker decor, a fading illustration
captured inside. It read Service Dairy in flowing script, promising Fresh Roasted Coffee Daily, Salads, Cheese, Milk, and other items, all exorbitantly cheap by today’s standards.

Ryan’s chest tightened as she read. Steve and Bucky were from another world, but not like she was. At least they could assimilate. They were a benediction to modernity; she was the kind of blight they fought to eliminate.

She straightened up, pushed her shoulders back, and opened the door to the living room.

*** *** *** ***

Bucky heard movement from the bedroom and jumped to his feet. “She’s up.”

“Give us a minute to talk with her,” Steve said, and the woman on the computer screen nodded back at him.

“Take your time, cutie. It’s all on Stark’s dime, anyway,” she replied, disappearing as she left her camera’s view.

Steve looked to Bucky, crossing his arms. “Is Pamela really our best option?”

“She and John are the only therapists in the world we know of who’ve worked with powered people,” Bucky replied. “John was great for your depression, but he doesn’t specialize in PTSD. I don’t have a better idea.”

“I know, just – “ He cut off, frown deepening. “She can be a little… abrasive.”

“We should start with what we know,” Bucky said. “‘Sides, she’s smart. She’ll know how to work with her.”

They waited silently then, and Ryan emerged a few moments later, bleary-eyed and arms hugged to her chest. “Ryan, hey,” Steve called out, and she turned to them. “How’re you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” she intoned. “Could we just get this over with, please?”

Bucky met Steve’s eyes, his concern reflected back at him. “Yeah, of course,” he began, dropping his hands to his sides. “So. When you left SHIELD, Dr. Lawson had said it was against medical advice, but that he hoped you’d be alright.”

“But now… I think we all know that you’re not,” Steve added softly, and Ryan visibly flinched.

“I’m sorry for what I did,” she emitted, not quite meeting their eyes. “And I’m ready to accept the consequences.”

Steve’s eyes widened. “Ryan,” he said cautiously. “What do you think is happening here?”

“I attacked an innocent person and destroyed that whole room,” she answered. “I’m honestly a little surprised you don’t have me in those shock cuffs already.”

“Hoo boy,” a voice from the computer sighed, and Ryan jumped. “We’ve got a lot of work to do. Boys, get out, and Ryan, scoot your boot to the couch over here.”
Ryan gaped at them both, face white as a sheet. “It’s okay, it’s alright!” Bucky insisted quickly, holding up his hands in a gesture of innocence. “This is Pamela,” he introduced, grabbing the laptop off the coffee table and angling it towards her. Pamela waved a hand from the program window, smirking. “She already knew about your powers.”

The look of betrayal in her eyes felt like ice shards piercing his heart. “Oh, hon,” Pamela inserted, shaking her head of curly, dark hair. “I’m his therapist. And yours now, too.”

“My – what?” Ryan breathed, confusion furrowing her brow.

“Alright, that’s enough. Boys, you did a wonderful job starting, now pack it up. Ryan, honey, have a seat. You look like death warmed over.”

Ryan looked to both Steve and Bucky, eyes wide and unsure, but at their encouraging nods, she slowly made her way to the couch. She fidgeted as she sat down, saying, “I’m sorry, I don’t think I und– “

“Alright, time for the rules, sweetheart,” Pamela interrupted. “Rule number one: no apologies to me. You haven’t and will not ever offend me, which means there’s no reason to apologize. Rule number two: everything that’s said is between us only, unless you choose to tell someone or give me explicit permission to tell anyone. No exceptions, no buts, unless you’re a danger to yourself or others, which right now, you’re not. No, you’re not,” she repeated, as Ryan looked ready to say otherwise. “You’re having a hard time right now, there’s a difference. And rule number three: you be fucking honest with me, because I don’t have time for any bullshit.”

Ryan’s shocked expression made Bucky chuckle under his breath. “Sweetheart,” he murmured, tone quite different from Pamela’s use of the endearment, “we’ll be in the common room downstairs, alright? If you need anything, you yell for JARVIS, and we’ll be right there.”

“Here,” Steve offered, grabbing a spare blanket from their basket and laying it beside her. “Have a good session, okay?” With that, he took Bucky’s hand, and they closed the door behind them.

Bucky paused a moment after pressing the elevator call. “I think she might hate us for that.”

“She forgave everyone else,” Steve replied. “And I’ll beg on my knees, if that’s what it takes.”

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“You look pretty frazzled. What’s going on in your head?” the woman asked, a bit more softly now. Ryan still barely held back an indignant laugh.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can do this,” she replied. Pamela frowned, piercing brown eyes fixed on Ryan with an intensity that made her want to duck her head and apologize some more.

“That’s rules one and three broken. Try again.”

Ryan’s eyes widened for a moment, then she flashed her a tight-lipped smile. “I’m sorry, I think there’s been a misunderstanding, and I should really talk to Steve and Bucky. Thank you for your time, though, I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

Pamela furrowed her brows. “Good god, you’re polite. And that’s two apologies in ten seconds of
“Like you said, I’m just being polite,” Ryan replied. “I’m sorry, but I have to go.” She reached for the laptop to slam it shut, but the woman’s voice stopped her short.

“So you’ve been lying to me this whole time?”

“I’m not lying!” Ryan cried out indignantly. Then she clacked her mouth shut, eyes wide. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to yell,” she mumbled, unconsciously worrying the threads of the blanket Steve had left for her.

“Well, you’re not telling me the truth,” Pamela contradicted, shrugging her shoulders.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” Ryan repeated, frustration mounting. “I’m sorry for shouting at you, and for wasting your time. I have to go.”

She stood up, running her hands through her hair as she walked away. Behind her, Pamela called out, “Running away? That the best you got?”

Ryan stopped short whipped back around, hands clenching into fists. Pamela had a single eyebrow raised, a cocky smirk on her face, and Ryan glared at her. “I’m not running away!”

“Well, you’re not staying,” Pamela shrugged again. “If you don’t like the sound of running away, how about you give that a try?”

Ryan threw up her hands, jaw clenched. “What do you want from me!?”

“I asked you a question, buttercup. You think I maybe want the answer?”

“Oh, really?” Ryan yelled. “What the hell makes you think you deserve one?”

“I don’t. But you sure do.”

“What the fuck does that even mean!?”

Suddenly, the clock hanging by the door flew across the room, smashing against the wall with a shattering bang. Ryan clapped a dimly-lit hand to her mouth to cover her scream, pulse thundering in her ears.

“Ryan, sweetie,” Pamela said softly. “Have a seat.”

“No, no, I have to go, I – “

“Ryan. Sit down.”

Ryan sat, hands trembling. “Just listen for a moment, okay? Can you hear me alright?”

At Ryan’s nod, she continued, voice and eyes kinder now. “I just riled you up so bad in two minutes that you launched something across the room without meaning to. And earlier today, you had a panic attack, dissociated, and almost brought a roof down on yourself and someone else.”

“I’m sorry,” Ryan breathed. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to, it won’t happen aga – “

“Yes, it will,” Pamela interrupted. “Ryan, your powers aren’t going away. And your past isn’t either. And right now, they’re affecting not only your quality of life, but your safety, and the safety of others. That means it’s time to stop running and trying to fix it all on your lonesome, because
that’s not working. How about we try something else?”

Ryan inhaled a shuddering breath, picking up the blanket and hugging it to her chest. “Are you going to keep yelling at me?” she murmured, hunching her shoulders.

Pamela cocked her head to the side, eyes firmly fixed on Ryan’s. “Would I be wrong in saying you don’t like confrontation?” she asked, propping up her chin on her hand.

“You saw what happens when I get angry,” Ryan replied, looking somewhere to the side of the computer screen. “It doesn’t matter if I like it or not.”

“I don’t think many people actually do,” Pamela noted, half-smiling. “It’s stressful and tiring and hurts like hell, the way most people do it. And so you avoid it, right?”

Ryan nodded slowly, still not meeting Pamela’s eyes. “Ryan, I’m seeing a lot of pent-up anger and frustration and fear that you’ve been hiding away,” Pamela stated matter-of-factly. “Do you think you do that?”

Ryan swiped a hand over her eyes, lower lip trembling. “Of course I do,” she acknowledged through gritted teeth. “I hurt people when I’m angry, and I hate it. I hate feeling that way.”

Pamela nodded solemnly. “Good girl. Thank you for telling me that.” She paused, looking thoughtful. “Do you feel angry right now?”

“I’ll be fine,” Ryan deflected, and Pamela frowned.

“Yes or no, sweetie. Do you feel angry right now?”

Ryan glared at the ceiling, blinking rapidly. “Yes.”

“Alright, we can work with that,” Pamela smiled. “I can see you’re angry at me for what I did earlier, and that’s just fine. Can you tell me who else you’re angry at?”

“Me,” Ryan replied immediately.

“Mm,” Pamela hummed. “What for?”

“I – I lost control of myself, and I hurt Veronica and destroyed the hair salon,” she exhaled shakily. “She was so nice, and it was supposed to be this great weekend Darcy planned and I fucked everything up for no reason, I – “. She turned away, wiping her eyes furiously.

“Okay, alright,” Pamela inserted softly. “I hear you. Something happened you regret, and you’re angry at yourself for it. That’s perfectly normal. We’ll come back to that later, but we’re not done checking in with you, yet. Are you angry at anyone else?”

Ryan didn’t answer. “Rule number two, honey,” Pamela reminded her. “Nothing you say is going anywhere or to anyone. Steve and Bucky disabled Mr. JARVIS there from recording anything, and we’re both alone. You’re safe, and free to be honest.”

A few moments passed before Ryan choked out, “B-Bucky.”

“Yeah, he’s a bonehead,” Pamela joked. “What’d he do this time?”

“He told you about me,” she whispered back. “He knows I can’t tell anyone about my powers, and he just – “. She took a deep breath, exhaling loudly.
“Well, why’d he do it, do you think?” Pamela questioned, eyes curious.

Ryan hugged the blanket a little closer, considering for a while. “You’re his therapist,” she finally answered. “I – I know therapy’s okay, it’s for anyone that feels they need it. He just needed to talk to someone.” She laughed darkly, a self-deprecating chuckle. “I control minds, it’s a wonder he even sits in the same room as me.”

“Ooh, a hot streak of self-loathing there, too. We’ll come back to that next time,” Pamela said in response.

Ryan felt a stir of anger at her flippancy, and she crossed her arms over the blanket. “Fine. Are we done now?”

Pamela’s smiles were as maddening as her tongue. “Are you angry at anyone besides myself, yourself, and Bucky?”

“No.”

Pamela smirked, but let the matter drop. “Just one last thing, then,” she answered. “I’m coming to town to work with you, and I’ll be there in a few days. Before I get here and we meet up, though, I need you to do something for me.”

“What?”

“I need you to go to Bucky, take him aside, and tell him that what he did made you feel angry.”

Ryan’s stomach dropped to her feet. “No, no, I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can,” Pamela countered. “Ryan, no one’s anger just disappears. And holding it in is what led to that clock taking off like a bat out of hell just now.”

Ryan fidgeted in her seat, and Pamela smiled reassuringly. “Honey, the first step to taking care of your feelings is always acknowledging that they exist. Feeling anger is a normal, human thing.”

“I’m not a normal human!” Ryan burst out, suddenly desperate for her to understand. “I don’t even know if I am human, I can’t – “

“Yes, you can,” Pamela interrupted again. “Yes, you can. You are going to march up to that boy, take him by the ear, and tell him you feel angry. Just ten seconds of bravery, sweetheart. That’s all I’m asking.”

Ryan shook her head furiously. “What if he – he – I don’t know, I can’t just – “

“He’s your friend, right?” Pamela insisted. “You two have been through a hell of a lot already, for knowing each other less than a year. You think your friendship won’t survive you telling him he ticked you off one time?”

Ryan just shook her head again. “Ten seconds of bravery,” Pamela repeated. “That’s all it takes. And I hear you’re capable of a lot more than that. I believe in you, sweetie. I’ll see you on Thursday, alright?”

“O-okay,” Ryan sniffled, and Pamela gave her a real smile this time, no smirk in sight.

“Good girl. And eat a sandwich, for god’s sakes, you’re wasting away.” With that, the video closed out, and Ryan stared blankly at the computer screen. She never knew what to expect when it came
to Steve and Bucky.

Chapter End Notes

Also, I really really REALLY like it when Steve and Bucky carry Ryan, in case you couldn't tell. And I don't say this nearly enough, but thank you SOO much to my loyal readers, and especially the kudos-leavers and commenters. I love you all!
Ryan flopped back against the couch, hugging the blanket to her chest as her puffy, exhausted eyes drooped shut. It was all she could do to keep breathing, wrung out and drained to the core. She could give herself a few more minutes alone; surely Steve and Bucky wouldn’t begrudge her that. They’d taken her back in again, after all.

And then she had kicked them off their floor and smashed their clock in repayment. She wrenched her eyes back open, sighing wearily as she stood, only wavering on her feet a little bit. The rain still pattered and dripped down the windows, and she sighed again. It would be a long, cold night and a long, hard day after.

The clock was in fragments on the floor, but the wall appeared undamaged; she could clean up and leave her laundry and food money for tomorrow in repayment before she left. She crouched on her heels, gathering up the detritus into a pile until a sharp pain jabbed into her left palm.

“Ow!” she gasped, yanking her hand away to see a gash straight across the width, blood welling up and spilling out down her wrist. A shard of glass was stained across its top just next to her.

“Are you kidding me?” she exclaimed, voice raising to a half-shout by the end. She closed the hand to a tight fist, squeezing red out the sides, and closed her eyes as she dropped to the floor with a thud. It was the last straw; she let her head fall back onto the couch cushions, eyes completely dry for once. She didn’t even have tears left to shed.

“Ms. Green? I have alerted Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes that you have sustained a mild injury, and they’re returning now posthaste,” the disembodied Brit spoke up from the ceiling.

“Thank you, Mr. JARVIS,” Ryan replied automatically, opening her eyes and staring blankly upwards.

“If you please, ma’am, just JARVIS will suffice.”

Ryan huffed an approximation of a laugh. “I’m Ryan. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, I'm sure.”

The door to the apartment banged open, and then Bucky was at her side, scenting like a match lit aflame. “Let me see,” he demanded, grabbing her left hand from atop her folded knees and prying the fingers open.

“Ow!” Ryan exclaimed again, jolting back out of his grip as more blood spilled down. “Bucky, that hurt!”
“Well it’s gonna keep hurting, if you let yourself bleed out like that!” Bucky yelled back, rising to his feet and glaring down at her, metal hand clenched to a fist. “What the hell did you do this time?!”

Ryan stared up at him, mouth open, frozen in place. For the first time ever in his presence, she felt a twinge of fear. He reached down towards her again, and she instinctively jerked backwards.

“Bucky!” Steve shouted, a new undertone to his voice Ryan had never heard before. It was strong, stirring, and calmed her instantly as he stormed into the room, grabbing Bucky by the shoulder. “Take a walk,” he growled in the same powerful tone, and the anger disappeared from Bucky’s face in a second. Avoiding both their eyes, he disappeared in three long strides, door slamming behind him.

Steve turned back to Ryan, eyes full of a horror she’d never seen in him before. “Ryan, I’m so sorry,” he breathed, dropping to his knees beside her. “Buck, he – I can explain, just – are you alright?”

“Y-yeah,” she stammered, and Steve helped her climb to her feet, keeping a hand on her back as he led her through the dining room to the kitchen. There was already a first-aid kit out on the counter, and Steve turned the sink on to a trickle, the lights dim and room quiet around them.

“May I?” Steve asked, unrolling paper towels. Ryan put her hand under the water, hissing at the sting while Steve gently brushed away red. He breathed a sigh, sounding relieved. “It’s not deep, you don’t need stitches,” he proclaimed quietly, shutting off the water and patting her hand dry. “You just cut yourself on the glass?”

“Yeah,” she repeated, dropping her eyes from her hand in both of Steve’s. “I’m sorry, I – I broke your clock, I was trying to clean it up.”

“It’s absolutely fine,” Steve murmured, spreading antibacterial ointment across the wound, the bleeding about finished. “Bucky and I have both destroyed a lot more than that.” He laid down some gauze and wrapped her hand, taping it off to finish. He sighed again, and Ryan looked back up to meet sorrowful blue eyes. “I’m so sorry for what he just did.”

“It’s okay,” Ryan mumbled, but Steve shook his head, keeping her hand clasped in both of his.

“No, it’s not,” he replied, smoothing his thumb over the back of her wrist. “But, can I try to explain, why he…?”

“Yeah, of course,” she nodded, leaning back against the counter. A strange, sleepy calm had descended as she stood in the semi-darkness, too drained to feel angry or upset anymore.

Steve paused a few moments, staring out the window over the sink. “You know I used to be… not like this,” he started quietly, gesturing down at his long, superbly muscled frame, obvious through his blue t-shirt and jogging pants. “I was a bit shorter than you, weighed about the same, I’d guess. And I’ve told you how I was sick a lot, ‘n all that.”

At her nod, he looked down and away for a moment. “It wasn’t just catching ill,” he murmured. “I was half-deaf in my right ear, colorblind. Had scoliosis, asthma, anemia, heart palpitations, you name it. Any of those could’ve been a death sentence back then.”

“That sounds terrible,” Ryan whispered, and Steve half-smiled.

“Bucky and my ma are the reasons I’m here today,” he proclaimed. “They sat by my bed every day and night when I had the flu in winter, asthma attacks in the summer, and everything else in between. Bucky never begrudged me my health, not for a damn second.”
His expression deflated then, eyes turning downcast. “But he’d get mad as hell whenever I came home with a black eye, or bloody nose, or whatever it was that was injured after I got into another fight.”

“So Steve,” Ryan exclaimed, eyes wide. “Wh – fighting? You shouldn’t – “. She shook her head, stopping herself. That time was long past, and she had no right to chastise him. “You just said your health was awful, why would you do that?”

“Honestly?” Steve shrugged. “Sometimes, I was just ornery as hell.” He shook his head again, sighing an unamused chuckle. “I’d see all the bad stuff in the world and couldn’t do a damn thing about it. Couldn’t make it a better place for Bucky, or anyone else. So I’d see some John bothering a Jane, and I’d get in over my head.”

“Not hard to do, if you were shorter than me,” Ryan murmured, giving him a small smile.

Her goal was accomplished: Steve grinned, a light in the darkness, and he squeezed her hand ever-so-gently. “Can’t tell you how many times he brought me over to our kitchen sink, washed me down and patched me up. Wouldn’t ever let me do it myself, if he caught me. He…”

“What?”

Steve paused a moment, looking back down at her bandaged hand. “Sometimes, he’d just be resigned, you know? Be real quiet, go out for a bit afterwards, then come back and everything’d be normal. But most of the time, he yelled.”

“He was scared,” Ryan supplied, her heart twisting and aching at his story. “It’s okay, I get it.”

“No, Ryan, it’s still not okay,” Steve countered, closing his eyes a moment. “He had no right to treat you like that, and I’m so sorry. He’s – neither of us is used to it now, you know? We both heal so fast, ‘n I don’t actually lose the fights I get into anymore. He knows it wasn’t your fault, it was an accident, but… he was scared, and he overreacted.”

“Yeah, I know,” Ryan emphasized, giving him a small smile. “And it’s okay, I get it. He scared me there for a sec, but it’s okay. I… appreciate his concern, even if it was overzealous.” She paused for a moment, wondering vaguely why Steve was fighting her on this. She couldn’t even imagine not forgiving Bucky. “I lost control earlier, too, and… and we’re all just tired, I think.”

Steve chuckled quietly, shaking his head. “You’re too good for us,” he muttered under his breath, then stepped forward and wrapped her in his arms.

She shuddered a little, held tight against his warm, broad chest. She just reached the top of his shoulders, a strong arm cradling her back, a hand buried in her hair as he rested his cheek atop her head. She took a deep breath, and his spicy, homey scent rolled over her like the storm clouds above, enveloping her in peacefulness and safety. God, but he smelled so good.

For a while, she just listened, the sound of rain falling outside, of his quiet breaths above. After probably too long, she murmured, “Steve?”

He started to pull back, but she threw her arms around him, trying not to break the tranquil, quiet spell. He gathered her even closer in response.

“What is it, ghrá mo chroí?” he whispered into her hair. She didn’t know what those last few words meant, but they sparked a warmth in her chest, spreading to a blush on her cheeks.

“Would it be okay, if… I stayed in my old room tonight?”
“A mhuírnin, it’s yours,” he replied. “You can stay forever, if you want.”

Ryan closed her eyes, and neither of them let go.

*** *** *** ***

Bucky turned away from magenta and orange streaks painting the sky, reversing his tread westward. The damp, steaming streets were never fully empty, not in New York, but the sparse populace gave him a wide berth. He had long since perfected the dead-eyed, soulless stare that made even the shadows retreat from the emptiness.

He kept a relentless pace, his step and breaths silent as he haunted the night through to morning. He wouldn’t tire for another 24 hours at least, he knew, and he was considering taking advantage. His still-soaked clothes hadn’t caused so much as a shiver, though he would get hungry eventually. Nothing he didn’t deserve.

The scene replayed continuously in his mind, focusing in on the distress on Ryan’s face as he loomed over her, his hands stained with her blood. The hint of fear coming through in her scent. Her sharp recoil from his presence. He walked a little faster so he wouldn’t be sick in an alleyway.

His mate had used his Alpha voice to keep him from harming her. Shock had coursed through him, ice water freezing his heart, and he’d fled so he wouldn’t fall on his knees and beg for forgiveness. He didn’t deserve it.

A niggling voice in the back of his head, sounding a bit like his ma crossed with a Southern dame far from being a lady, was scolding him to quit moping, be the gentleman she’d raised, stop running and start facing his problems like he’d been taught. Hating himself had never been his style, but more than just times had changed.

An even quieter voice, one that sounded a bit more like Steve mixed with sunshine in spring, was whispering that the end of the line wasn’t in some ramshackle neighborhood of boarded-up shops and garbage-filled alleys in Hell’s Kitchen. He wasn’t done ignoring them both, though.

“Sergeant Barnes,” a gruff voice called out, and he whirled around to face the alleyway, catching a whiff of gingersnaps as his right hand flew to the knife strapped to his side. His eyes narrowed, taking in the bloodred devil’s horns and opaque eye sockets over the bare, stubbled chin. “Hell’s Kitchen isn’t the safest place for a morning walk right now.”

“You always this dramatic, Murdock?” he growled, sheathing his weapon. “I’m more dangerous than anything else you’ve got out here.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Matt replied, turning his head a little to listen before pulling back his cowl. His eyes were darker than before, circles rimming atop white-washed skin.

“You look like hell,” Bucky noted, coming a few steps closer. “Ryan said there was shit going down, but Steve and I only got back day before yesterday, we haven’t caught up yet.”

“It’s a long story. I’ve got it handled.”

Bucky snorted. “Sure.” He looked back out to the street, eyeing the graffiti and litter lining the block. “This place got named cause of people hating the Irish, but it was always a slum, even before
my time. Don’t remember it ever looking quite this bad, though.”

“I’ve got it,” Matt repeated sharply. “Keep Ryan away, she was trying to get involved. She’s got no chance up against what’s here.”

Bucky rolled his eyes to cover the pang in his heart. It seemed he had a type, namely those who would sacrifice themselves over and over against every modicum of common sense. “Like anyone could stop her, if she tried.”

“I’m serious, Barnes,” Matt growled back at him, taking a step closer. “Right now, I can’t even hear them coming, much less track them and put an end to all this. They’ve got teams of archers that rival Hawkeye, men as strong as you, and their leader is apparently immortal. Ryan would get herself killed.”

Bucky stared at him, eyes narrowing. “Cut the shit, Murdock. What the hell is going on here?”

Matt’s jaw clenched, staring far away. “The Avengers can’t get involved. It’s too domestic, you’d bring law enforcement down on yourselves.”

“You think I haven’t taken down whole governments and gotten off free?” Bucky shot back, distant screams echoing in his memory. “Steve brought down a multinational Nazi regime practically on his own. And Natasha and Barton?” He shook his head. “Forget the rest of the team, if it’s really that dangerous. We owe you a favor, just call it the fuck in.”


Suddenly, Bucky caught a rustle from behind, a human footstep attempting silence. Instantly, his knife zoomed past Matt into the shadows, clanging against metal and thudding to the ground.

“What a shot!” a voice called out in excitement, a dark-haired, gorgeous woman bounding out a second after. She pulled down a red bandana from around her mouth with the tip of the sai in her hand, grinning a perfect white smile. Her scent was spicy but foreign, and her accent marked her as Greek.

“I’d never walk again if I didn’t have this,” she continued, showing off the three-pronged armament. “It’d be worth it for such a gorgeous weapon, though.” She flipped the handle of Bucky’s knife towards him, blade in her hand as she sidled up against Matt. “Who is this, Matthew? He’s a handsome one, isn’t he?”

Bucky slid off his glove, reaching out for the knife with his left hand. Her eyes widened dramatically, mouth falling open. “I’d shake your hand, ma’am, but I think you’d prefer to keep it,” he said, tucking his weapon away. His mother had raised a gentlemen, after all.

“Murdock,” he growled, ignoring the star-struck look in the woman’s eyes. “Go home to your mates. Get some sleep.”

“Stay away,” Matt ordered again. “We’ve got this handled.”

Bucky paused, then nodded tersely. “Get the job done. If people are dying, I can’t make promises about what Steve will do.” With that, he strode away, the sounds of their retreat disappearing in seconds.

Bucky’s phone buzzed in his pocket, rousing him from his thoughts as the sun continued rising in the sky. He’d received three messages during the night, and now a missed call.
From: Steve

11:35 PM - Ryan's fine, doesn't need stitches.

11:42 PM - Come back whenever you’re ready. I love you.

3:18 AM - Bed’s cold without you both.

The missed call was from Ryan, just a moment ago. He paused, thumb hovering over the screen, then turned back to Avengers Tower, raising the phone to his ear.

“Bucky,” Ryan’s voice murmured in his ear. “Um, hey.”

“Hey, Ryan.” The line was silent for a few moments, and he fiddled with his jacket’s zipper, rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said suddenly.

Bucky was floored. “What the he – Ryan, you have nothing to be sorry about! Jesus Christ, it was me that – “

“Bucky, no, please,” she interrupted, voice thin and stressed. “I – can we maybe talk in person, please?”

“Yeah, of course,” Bucky replied. “Um, I’ll get Steve, he’ll be there too, don’t worry.”

“Bucky,” Ryan sighed. “You don’t have to do that, it’s more than alright. Just – I’m still in the Tower right now, can we meet at the – you know Dinah’s Joe, the coffee place?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll can be there in – “ he quickly checked his watch, “ – a half hour.”

“Perfect, okay. See you then.”

“See you then,” he echoed, but she’d already hung up.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Ryan kept bouncing her leg, searching out the storefront window for Bucky’s arrival. It had been 32 minutes since she’d bit the bullet, and every subsequent second was slower than the last. Dozens had bustled in and out, grabbing coffees and pastries and more to fuel the day ahead, only pausing to enjoy a sniff of fresh-roasted Nigerian blend hanging in the air. It wasn’t nearly as nice as Steve’s cinnamon-and-coffee scent, she’d decided.

“Ryan?” Bucky’s voice called softly, and she whipped her head back to the shop to find him standing a few feet away, arms open at his sides. His clothes looked wrinkled and damp, and her heart dropped; had he been out in the rain all night? "Um. How's your hand?"

He stood there motionless, hair wavy and unkempt, eyes resigned and jaw set, until Ryan couldn’t
stand it anymore. She pushed out of her chair, abandoning her tea, and threw her arms around him.

He stood frozen, completely unmoving. Ryan’s heart pounded in her ears. She started to pull back, sure she’d made a mistake, but then Bucky let out a small sound and crushed her to him. He held her almost the same way Steve did, his hard metal arm across her back, flesh hand over her shoulders as he buried his face in her hair. Ryan laid her cheek across his chest, and he let out a shaking breath.

They stood there for far too long, embracing far too tightly, and Ryan felt curious eyes on them all around. She didn’t care. She breathed in his fresh, woody scent, background noise fading to nothing in his embrace, and the anxiety plaguing her mind melted away in an instant.

After a few seconds, a minute, or a lifetime, Bucky finally pulled back. His hands went to her arms, gently touching up and down, as though checking she was real. “Hey,” Ryan greeted weakly, managing a half-smile.

“Hey,” Bucky replied with a laugh, eyes shining instead of deadened now. His flesh hand cupped her cheek, warm and gentle, and his brown eyes bored into hers. “Ryan, sweetheart. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she promised. “Really. Steve explained what he thought was going on, and it made perfect sense. I’m sorry to have scared you.”

Bucky closed his eyes for a moment, then dropped his hand to her unbandaged one, leading her to sit down again. “It doesn’t matter if I was scared,” he said, still holding her hand across the tabletop. “But you’re right, I was. It – I know nothing was your fault, it was all just an accident. Just, with everything that’s happened… I’m really worried about you, sweetheart.”

Ryan felt tears stinging in her eyes, and she ducked her head so he wouldn’t see. “I’m sorry. I’m… kind of a mess right now.”

“Don’t apologize,” he murmured, squeezing her hand. “None of this is or has ever been your fault. And I swear, I won’t act like that ever again.”

“It was just bad timing,” Ryan said, giving him a small smile. “Pamela kinda yelled at me a lot, and I was tired, and I just freaked out a little.”

“Yeah, Pam does yell,” Bucky acknowledged with a small frown. “If you don’t think she’s a good fit for you, we’ll find someone else. It’s no problem at all.”

“No, I… I want to try with her, I think.” Ryan glanced away out the window, catching part of their reflection in the glass. They looked like a couple, sitting together with hands clasped, and her heart thudded a strange staccato.

“Alright. But you let us know if that changes, okay?” He squeezed her hand again, and she turned back to him. His eyes were soft, and she could see flecks of gold shining in the sunlight.

“Yeah, of course. And, um…”

“What is it?”

She swallowed heavily, her stomach twisting with renewed anxiety. “She asked me to do something for her, before she gets here tomorrow. And, uh, it…”

“Hey,” he murmured, smiling tenderly. “She’s had me do some of the hardest things I’ve ever done in my life. I get it.”
Ryan took a deep breath and held it for a moment. “I’m supposed to tell you I’m angry at you,” she exhaled in a rush.

Bucky’s eyes widened a bit, and Ryan felt a pit of dread open in her chest. She pulled her hand free from his, and he let it go. “Is it because of how we sprung therapy on you?” he asked quietly, as she wrung her hands in her lap.

“No! No, that – I wasn’t expecting it, but it was a lot better than what I was expecting,” Ryan said, still not quite meeting his eyes. “It was – “

She cut off, looking around at the still-bustling café, and pulled out her phone. Because you told Pamela about me, and what I can do.

Bucky nodded after he read it, handing the phone back to her. “I… have some things I want to tell you,” he said, rather hesitantly. “But I can’t do it here, the people – could we go back to the Tower?”

At her nod, they both stood, and Ryan threw out her now-cold chai as they left. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to,” she said, hopping in the crowded sidewalk rush.

“No, sweetheart, it’s stuff I need to tell you,” he replied, running his gloved hand through his hair. It was already heating up, another scorcher, and Ryan grimaced; her flannels, even the few recovered from her old room, were all far too warm for summer. But, it was her only option.

They were both quiet the short walk back, only two blocks away, and Ryan sighed with relief when Bucky opened the private entrance and stepped aside to let her through first. It was a lot cooler in the A/C.

“Ryan?” Bucky asked softly as they rode the elevator up. “Me and Steve, we noticed… well, how you’re wearing long sleeves all the time, even in the heat.”

Ryan’s cheeks flamed, but she steeled herself. “Yeah, my arms got scarred up a bit, that’s all,” she shrugged off-handedly, hoping he’d drop it. He seemed to get the hint, frowning as the elevator stopped, but didn’t pursue the conversation.

They stepped out onto the seventh floor, and Bucky opened the apartment door without hesitation. Steve was sitting at the dining room table, staring unseeingly at a newspaper, but as soon as he saw them, he shot to his feet and bounded forward. Bucky fell into his embrace, tucking his face into the crook of his neck, and Steve whispered something soft in his ear.

A sudden sense of longing, deep and visceral, coursed through her, and she had to turn away from them, busying herself with taking off her sneakers. She ached to be held between them, their massive strength shielding her, letting her be weak just for a moment. It was all she could do in the moment not to throw her arms as far around them as they could go, and she shook it off as best she could. She really did need more sleep.

Steve pulled back, kissing Bucky for a long moment before releasing him. “Did you sleep alright, Ryan?”

“Yeah, thanks,” she chirped, a little too high-pitched. Steve raised an eyebrow a tad, but took it in stride.

“Steve,” Bucky muttered, dragging his gaze up to Steve's. “I need you to get the tapes.”

Steve shot him a sharp look, eyes wide and brows worried. “Buck, I don’t think – “
“I know,” he sighed back. “Please.”

Steve hesitated, then disappeared into the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind him.

“Bucky?” Ryan asked, and he took a deep breath.

“C’mere,” he murmured, leading her to the living room, the laptop from last night still open on the coffee table. He sat on the couch, and she took the armchair to the side. “It’ll be easier if I show you something first. Steve has to get it, it’s in a safe I can’t open.”

Ryan sat nervously, unsure of what was coming next. Bucky wouldn’t look at her, and she felt overheated again, though the room was just as cool as the rest of the Tower.

Steve emerged from the bedroom, holding an old-fashioned VHS. “Stark erased all the digital files as best he could,” Bucky stated, still looking pointedly away from her. “This is the only copy left, far as we know.”

A shiver went down Ryan’s spine at the darkness penetrating his tone. Silently, they watched Steve insert the tape into its player, incongruous with the flat-screen TV and matching surround-sound speakers. “Ryan, if you need to turn it off, just tell JARVIS, alright? He can shut it off in a second.”

She nodded, mouth dry. The screen lit up, and the room filled with the sound of screams.

It looked like just any action movie, a white charter bus exploding into flame as people fled in terror, a man with a machine gun stalking forward like a predator. The footage was shaky, the sound tinny and indistinct; if she had to guess, it could have been shot with an older iPhone. A hipster action movie, then.

She frowned a little, pondering why Steve and Bucky were acting as though the video contained the U.S. nuclear codes. She’d witnessed more horrifying events firsthand, why should this upset her in particular?

Then the footage shifted, a dark room stuffed full of wicked-looking machinery looming in the background. The foreground lit a spotlight on the dentist’s chair from hell, covered neck to ankles in metal restraints and locks. A snarling shout roared off-screen, followed by a sickening thud, and the video cut to static.

Gasping breaths sounded beside her, and she looked in alarm to Bucky, who was white as a sheet, silver hand clenched on the couch cushion so hard it was about to rip. Steve had his arms around him in a vice grip, whispering lilting syllables into his ear. Bucky squeezed his eyes shut. Sickening dread shot through her, and she realized.

She turned back to the TV, heart pounding, and there it was. A silver arm reflected in the fluorescent overhead light of an office hallway, wild chestnut hair loose around a black mask covering his mouth. Bucky on screen held two handguns aloft, dark tac gear strapping on knife after gun after weapon she didn’t recognize. His gait was a strut, strong and confident, and without a second of hesitation, he shot a woman between the eyes.

Ryan clapped a hand to her mouth, transfixed by the gunshot echoing in her ears. The woman collapsed to the ground, blood pooling, and Bucky’s dead eyes faced the CCTV head-on. He shot the camera, and the screen went dark.

The video turned to a long-distance shot of him fighting hand-to-hand, a single brutal thrust sending a man flying out of view. A policeman fired with shaking arms, and Bucky merely held up his metal hand, blocking every bullet as he stalked forward. He twisted the man’s arm away, shrieks of pain
heard even from the far distance, and Ryan bit her tongue to hold back a scream when Bucky snapped his neck with a twist of one hand.

The chair reappeared, and this time Bucky was being shoved into it, gashes ripped across his shoulder and torso as he fought back at least a dozen men at once. Electric blue flashes jabbed into his side, and his agonized screams echoed shockwaves through her bones.

A strangled sound escaped her, and she couldn’t speak, her throat constricted and breaths in airless gasps. She wrenched her eyes from the TV and waved her right arm wildly, desperately hoping Steve would get the message.

“JARVIS, shut it down!” Steve shouted, and the next moment, the screaming ceased, leaving behind pained gulps of air and blood thundering in her ears. “Ryan, are you alright?!”

She managed to hold up a hand, and he halted in place, halfway between them both. A few seconds later, she managed to turn to Bucky, and his expression was naked with fear when he met her eyes.

She gasped raggedly, shoving herself out of the chair and scrambling away, knocking over an end table with a bang as she shoved herself into a corner of the room. Nausea rose in her throat, burning and acrid, and she clapped a hand to her mouth again to keep from vomiting.

“Ryan,” Steve breathed, taking a cautious step forward, eyes wide and frantic. “It’s okay, it was just a video, that was before – “

“I’m so sorry,” she gasped weakly, breaths wheezing in her chest. She held up shaking hands in innocence, vision blurring at the edges. “I’m won’t, I won’t, I swear to God – “

Steve’s face paled deathly white, his mouth dropping open. Behind him, Bucky shot to his feet, eyes wide with horror. “Ryan, no, no – !“

“I’m not them!” she pleaded, voice cracking and breaking. “I won’t, I swear, I’ll never control you – “

Steve surged forward, yanking her almost violently into his arms. One hand firmly grasped the back of her neck, and a powerful shudder rolled through her as she burst into tears.

She was lifted effortlessly, face tucked into the crook of Steve’s neck as he settled them both onto the couch. “It’s alright,” he breathed, that stirring undertone from yesterday present again. “It’s okay, you’re gonna be alright.”

His words reverberated through her, gaining strength and conviction as she surrendered to his embrace. “That’s it, tá mé anseo, tá muid araon anseo. Is breá linn tú an oiread sin, an oiread sin.”

“Ryan,” Bucky whispered, breath hitching with tears. Steve released the arm across her back, and the next moment she was pressed tight between them. Her sobs redoubled, and she clung to Steve with all the strength she had left.

It seemed hours later when she could breathe properly, and she pulled back, wiping her nose on her sleeve. Both Steve and Bucky’s scent were thick with a desolate heaviness that almost set her weeping again.

“Sweetheart,” Bucky choked out, eyes pained as he leaned back, taking her bandaged hand in both of his. “Babydoll, I know you’d never do that. I swear to Christ, I – “. He looked away, blinking back more tears.
A warm thumb brushed away the tear tracks on her cheeks, and Ryan met Steve’s eyes, as red as both of theirs. He kept his arms around her as she sat on his lap, her legs entwined with both his and Bucky’s. He sniffed back a heavy breath, gently stroking the back of her neck, and a small calm finally descended.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered again, rubbing her eyes.

“It wasn’t you,” Bucky whispered back. “It was fucking HYDRA, fucking Kilgrave, every other evil bastard out there. Never you, sweetheart.”

For the second time that day, Ryan threw herself into his embrace, burying her face in his chest. “You’re not them,” he breathed in her ear as he gathered her in his arms, easily transferring her to his lap instead.

Ryan straightened up, pressing back the last of her tears. “And you’re not him.”

Steve exhaled sharply beside them, and Ryan looked up to see him staring in wonder. “Conas a fuair mé beo gan ceachtar agaibh?” he whispered, shaking his head.

“Ní fheicfidh tú a arís,” Bucky responded promptly, full of conviction. Steve leaned in, pressing a kiss into his hair above her. He paused there a moment, then cradled Ryan’s head in one broad hand, kissing her forehead.

At his touch, reverent and gentle, something moved inside her. Deep in her heart, it snapped into place, and the sweetest, most exquisite ache bloomed in her chest. She looked to Bucky, brown eyes mere inches from hers, gaze full of warmth and wonder. The desperate feeling doubled, conviction soaring, a joyful melody singing out to every corner of her being.

She’d never spared much thought to what falling in love would feel like, nor considered that it could happen in an instant. But, she never knew what to expect when it came to Steve and Bucky.

Chapter End Notes

I am gonna be straight with you: I had NO clue this chapter was going in this direction. But hey! Ryan's in love!

Also, yay for laying down more plot setup for the sequel!! :D

Ghra mo chroi - love of my heart, traditional Irish endearment
A mhuirmin - my darling
Tá mé anseo, tá muid ar aoine anseo. Is breá linn tú an oiread sin, an oiread sin - I'm here, we're both here. We love you so much, so much.
Conas a fuair mé beo gan ceachtar agaibh? - How did I ever live without both of you?
Ní fheicfidh tú a arís - You will never have to again.
“Ryan?”

Bucky’s voice permeated through the whirlwind in her brain, snapping her back to reality. Worry furrowed his brow, the corners of his mouth pinched. “You alright?”

Oh, yeah. The video, and the aftermath. It had all disappeared in a blink, replaced with… well, nothing like she’d ever felt before.

“I’m good,” she said, and she was. Better than. Steve’s hand laid to rest on one of her knees, and her heart skipped a beat as his thumb rubbed in a circle. “I – I just misunderstood.”

“No, I – I wasn’t clear, that was awful of me,” Bucky admitted in a rush, his metal hand reaching up to gently stroke her hair. God, how had she ever lived without their touch?

Bucky continued, “I was – I’ve done… unspeakable things. I know it wasn’t my fault,” he added quickly, glancing at Steve. “I know that, now. It – it wasn’t me, it was my body they used without my consent,” he recited, closing his eyes a moment. “And then you were so honest telling us about your powers, babydoll, but I was still scared. And so I told Pamela, because…”

“It’s alright,” Ryan whispered, a smile breaking out across her face. God, she shouldn’t be smiling, but she – she just loved him so much.

Jesus, she loved them. She was – holy shit, she was in love with Steve and Bucky. Both of them! The force of it hit her all over again, and she almost giggled, giddy and bright. “I’m not mad, I – I mean I was, but I’m not now, I get it. It’s okay, it’s fine. Pamela’s fine, everything’s – fine.”

Was she babbling? Good god, a voice in the back of her head noted in alarm.

Steve and Bucky didn’t seem to notice, thankfully. Bucky just threw an arm across her back and pulled her into another hug, her torso sideways against his and her head resting on his shoulder. Wow, was she content to stay there, wrapped up in Bucky’s scent, watched over by Steve’s presence.

Just then, though, a huge yawn surprised her, and she covered her mouth with her hand, realizing she was already exhausted again. “We should all get some rest,” Steve declared immediately, rising to his feet and holding out a hand to help her up. “Have you eaten today yet, Ryan?”

She took his hand, and he pulled her up to her feet, and she held on just a little too long. “I’m good,” she said, ducking her head to hide her blush.

“Ryan, you have to eat – “

“No, really, I’m good, I’m not hungry,” she insisted, an odd undertone to her soaring joy starting to grow in her chest. It was a creeping insistence, something – off. What could possibly be wrong, though? “I have to go job-hunting anyway, I should’ve done it already – “
“Ryan,” Bucky interrupted, crossing his arms. “You have a job already. It’s waiting for you downstairs.”

Ryan sighed, looking away for a moment. She didn’t want to leave, of course not, but… “I don’t know – “

“I do,” Steve added firmly. “You were great with Bruce, and he’ll take you back in a heartbeat. Plus, it makes sense for you to be close to meet with Pamela.”

“Guys,” Ryan argued, not entirely sure why she was arguing. “I don’t think things should just – go back, you know? Maybe if I hadn’t – “

“You did nothing wrong,” Steve interjected, taking a step closer and making her stomach flutter with butterflies. “Absolutely nothing.”

“If you don’t want to, you don’t have to,” Bucky said. “But, you won’t find a better commute.”

“That’s what I said months ago,” Steve laughed, and Ryan wanted to capture the light in his eyes like fireflies in a jar.

“I – I’ll think about it,” she hedged, walking to the door and nudging her shoes back on. “I’ll, um. See you guys later, okay?” Her heart was pounding again, and she unconsciously held her breath as she opened the door.

They looked at each other, almost resignedly. “Yeah, of course. Good luck with the search,” Steve offered, turning back to her with a small smile.

“See you,” Bucky nodded.

A moment later, she pressed the ground floor button in the elevator, leaning against the back wall when suddenly, it hit her. The off feeling, the whisper of uncertainty she’d ignored for the joy of her revelation flooded back, overpowering as she clapped a hand to her mouth. Understanding slammed into her all at once, and she gasped for air, gashes tearing themselves into her heart.

They felt guilty. About everything, she already knew it. She already knew it, then she’d made it worse by getting upset over nothing, that’s why he’d showed her the videos and then she’d gone and misunderstood again and they were just trying to help because they felt guilty –

You idiot, she chastised herself, sinking to the floor. You goddamn idiot. You think you could ever deserve them?

How could they ever love someone like you?

*** *** *** ***

The rest of the day passed in a hazy blur. Miracle of miracles, she actually got her job back at her old library – Ms. Palermo, who scented like sunflowers and orange zest now, gaped at her, sniffed once, and declared she didn’t want to know, just go work the checkout desk in the children’s section, they’re backed up with prep for the summer reading program – and six hours later, she was dead on her feet. It was repetitive work, but required decent attention; a perfect distraction from the empty, screaming ache inside.
She paused on the library steps outside, unsure of where to go as the sun started to set, reflecting off miles of windows and casting the world in an orange tint. She hadn’t eaten all day, but the thought of food nauseated her, even as her head and vision spun a little. Matt had warned her to stay out of Hell’s Kitchen for the time being, so her old overnight standbys were out.

She wasn’t going back to the Tower, though. She just couldn’t.

She needed to wash her clothes sometime soon. She should eat something, eventually. She needed a shower and a place to sleep, one that preferably wasn’t full of garbage and worse…

The headache that had been threatening all day started to throb behind her eyes, echoing in the cavernous hole in her chest. God, she just wanted to sleep.

Well, she couldn’t just stand there. Central Park was two miles or so away, but it was a nice evening. There was an oak tree she used to love, near the middle where you could pretend you couldn’t hear the rest of the city, and leaning against its trunk was nice. She could even munch a dandelion green or two.

Her phone buzzed, and what was left of her heart sank even further. To her surprise, it was Sam calling, not — god, she couldn’t even think their names without claws shredding into her heart. “Hello?”

“Hey, Ryan. Where’re you at right now?”

“I just got out of work at the library. Why?”

“Perfect, I’m right there - I was out and about, so Steve asked me to pick you up because Pamela’s here early. Ah, I see you,” he finished, and a moment later a black sedan signaled out of traffic and pulled up to the curb.

Ryan hesitated, and the tinted window rolled down. “I brought onion rings,” Sam said, holding up a bag stamped Annie’s Diner and smirking.

Her stomach gurgled so loudly she pressed her arms across her, trying to muffle the sound. “C’mon, Ryan. It’ll be alright,” Sam promised, leaning over and pushing open the door.

Ryan sighed, then got in the car. “So, how was work?” Sam asked casually, weaving them back into traffic as she opened her paper bag.

“Fine,” she muttered. There was a salad along with the onion rings, and she picked at spinach greens and cucumbers first.

“The library’s a good place for you to work. They need someone like you,” Sam noted, and Ryan stared in surprise.

She didn’t agree with him, and didn’t even really know why he thought that, but it was nice of him anyway. “Um, thanks. And I’ll get you back for the food.”

“Nah, it’s my treat. I was going there anyway, I was starving. The food there is great, I’m glad you clued me onto it — you know any other hole-in-the-wall places like that?”

She stared out the window at milling pedestrians, stuck at a red light. The Tower loomed in the distance, and her headache was migrating to the base of her skull. She pressed the back of her hand against the cool window, then to her forehead, the relief fleeting. “Not for food, really, but there was this bookstore in Brooklyn just past the bridge I used to like to go to. The owner was this sweet
older lady and her mate, and they baked scones together every day.”

“That does sound nice. I’m always looking for someplace to have a quiet sit with patient files,” Sam noted, turning down the A/C a notch. “I’ll check it out.”

“You don’t have to,” Ryan said, swallowing a bite of tomato.

“I want to,” Sam said simply. They finally pulled into the Tower’s hidden garage, Sam’s car out of place with Tony’s line of matching Ferraris. “Pam’s in the common room, and Steve and Bucky are there too, to introduce you guys. Don’t worry, everyone else knows to be scarce tonight.”

“I don’t mean to kick everyone out – “

“It wasn’t you,” Sam inserted resolutely. “Pamela works with Bucky on their floor, but she insisted on the main floor for you. No one else knows why they have to stay off, just that they do, okay? This is all as quiet as you want it to be.”

“Except you already know,” Ryan muttered unthinkingly, then she clacked her mouth shut, eyes wide.

“No, no, that’s a perfectly legitimate objection,” Sam said, staring her down firmly. “And I know about Pam because I’m the one who recommended her for Bucky way back when. She’s an old VA colleague, and I think she’ll be good for you, too.”

“Oh,” Ryan said, cheeks red. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, but you’re forgiven anyways,” Sam replied, climbing out of the car. “Now eat your damn onion rings before I do. They go straight to my hips.”

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Ryan sat alone in the elevator, staring vacantly at the little number five. She had to go meet with Pamela. She was putting herself and others in danger, and this was the deal.

But she couldn’t see Steve and Bucky. Oh god, she wanted to, though.

Finally standing back up, she punched the button, jaw clenched and determined. She’d survived worse than a stupid broken heart. What kind of freak falls in love with two people at once, anyway?

She pulled her shirt sleeves down a little further, eyes falling shut. Steve and Bucky deserved better than damaged goods.

The doors opened, and three heads turned. “Didn’t I tell you to eat a sandwich, missy? You’re even skinnier than yesterday,” Pamela called over, sitting with her arms stretched across the back of the couch and feet propped up on the coffee table.

“You look pale, are you alright?” Steve said, quickly rising from the loveseat next to Bucky.

“I’m fine,” Ryan muttered, staring down at her feet.

“You did eat today, right?” Bucky said in alarm, already heading towards the kitchen.
“I’m fine!” Ryan insisted, hugging her arms to her chest.

“Boys,” Pamela inserted, raising an authoritative eyebrow. “Get out. It’s girl time now, and we’ve got lots to do.”

Steve and Bucky both hesitated, then at Steve’s nod, they headed towards the elevator, Ryan standing aside to let them on. “Have a good session,” Steve whispered as he passed. Bucky gave a small smile, and Ryan felt her insides twist in their knots.

“C’mon and have a seat,” Pamela said, indicating the armchair set up in front of the couch. “I kicked everybody else out just to watch this huge thing, we’ve got it all to ourselves.”

Ryan sat, curling her legs up under her. The TV was muted on Fox News, and she grimaced at it, schooling her features back to normal before turning back around.

Pamela wasn’t fooled, it seemed. “Know thine enemy,” she quipped, indicating the pundits onscreen bedecked in navy-blue suits and scowling frowns. “Biggest bunch of racist, sexist bigots I’ve ever seen all in one place. Besides a Trump rally, that is.” She clicked the TV off, settling back further into the couch. “Do you know your enemies, Ryan?”

“I’d like to think I don’t have any,” Ryan replied, playing with her fingers in her lap. Pamela was silent, waiting. “Are we talking metaphorically?”

“A little,” Pamela smiled back at her. “Can’t very well start off trying to fix problems when we don’t know what the problems are.”

“I thought I was the problem,” Ryan replied darkly, staring out the glass wall to the city beyond.

“And the fact that you think that is problem number one,” Pamela countered, clicking a pen and picking up the legal pad on the cushion beside her. “The first thing we do in therapy, sweetie, is identify all the bad shit we want to work on together, and maybe even pound out a few goals for where we want to end up. So, name something.”

“I have PTSD, and I almost killed another person cause of it, so… that,” Ryan shrugged.

“Anything from earlier?” Pamela suggested wryly, giving her a pointed look.

“Yeah, I get it. All that stuff,” Ryan snapped, crossing her arms petulantly.

Pamela spent a few moments writing, pen scribbling across the pad, and then gave her another look. “All of this started when your parents died, right?”

Ryan looked up in shock, not knowing whether to be furious or burst into tears. But Pamela’s eyes were incongruously kind as she leaned forward, folding her hands together. “Sweetie. This is going to involve a lot of poking and prodding at old wounds that never got to heal right. And it’s gonna hurt like hell. But we’re gonna get through it together, alright? You and me, and all your friends here to support you.”

“I’m not burdening anyone else with this,” Ryan said, her voice only wavering a little. “The Avengers’ve done more than enough.”

Pamela hummed an assent, leaning back again. “Bucky gave me permission to tell you a little of what he and I discussed before you got here. And he said you’d forgiven everyone.”

“I have!” Ryan insisted, almost shouting. “They shouldn’t feel guilty, I forgave them!”
Pamela raised an eyebrow again. “So, to my understanding, Steve and Bucky and the other Avengers are now helping you again because they feel guilty for everything that happened: the accusations, the arrest, and the kidnapping and rescue.”

“Of course they do,” Ryan snapped. “Why else would they be doing it?”

Both eyebrows raised now, Pamela shrugged. “Is it possible they like you and want you around? That they don’t like to see you struggle?”

“They’re grateful I’m not mad anymore, they’re just – and why would they just help me? Why me and not someone else?” Ryan countered.

“Well, for starters, helping someone with superpowers seems like something the Avengers would want to do. Add that to the fact that you’re a good friend and better person, I think it makes sense that all of you became friends.”

Ryan gaped at her. “You don’t know me,” she finally snapped, feeling more and more like a 5th grader every second.

“Oh, hon,” Pamela said softly. “Just listen for a sec, alright? Someone who almost kills themselves to save a whole group of other people – the ones who got them in danger in the first place – is not a bad person.”

“I could’ve stopped Kilgrave before! I could’ve done more, it was my fault – “

“Ryan,” Pamela interrupted. “I wasn’t finished, darlin’.” She paused for a moment, and Ryan took a deep, shaking breath. She wouldn’t break any more clocks, she told herself.

“I’m going to level with you, alright?” she murmured softly. “Bucky’s given me the basic facts of your story. And to me, from what you just said, it sounds like you’re taking on the blame for all the bad things that’ve happened to you. You think you could have – and should have – done more, either to prevent them or stop them. Because you have superpowers, stronger than anyone else’s we know about right now. And I’m willing to bet this goes all the way back to Mary, and Alexander, and that memorial a few miles away. Am I wrong?”

Ryan shook her head, wiping away a tear. “It’s my fault,” she whispered, curling into herself further.

“How is it your fault, sweetie?”

“They put us in lockdown,” Ryan breathed, head buzzing and ears ringing slightly. “I could’ve gotten out. No one could’ve stopped me, and I could’ve – she worked near the top floor, she brought me to work one day to show me, and the entire fucking building fell down on my dad!” she sobbed brokenly.

Pamela got up, laying a hand on her shoulder as she fell apart. “Let it out, sweetheart. That’s it,” she encouraged, and Ryan buried her face in her arms. A few minutes later, Pamela squeezed her shoulder, then let go.

“What happened to you wasn’t fair,” Pamela whispered, crouching down beside her chair. “But that doesn’t mean it was your fault.”

“I-If I’d – “

“There’s no ‘if’ to be had here, hon. Entire airplanes were hijacked, and everyone in the world tried
their best to stop them. It was just too late,” Pamela said. “You’re strong, I know that. But you were an eleven-year-old kid. There’s no way you could’ve kept an entire skyscraper from collapsing. And if you’d tried, you would’ve outed yourself to the whole world, and all the work your parents did to keep you safe would’ve been for nothing. You think they’d want you anywhere near all that danger?”

Ryan slowly shook her head.

“No, they most certainly would not,” Pamela insisted. “Do you think there’s anything else you could’ve done? You would’ve had to get yourself out of the lockdown, run to the site after the crash had happened, and then what?”

Ryan didn’t answer, but a small knot in her chest began to unwind. “What’s the point?” she murmured, hollow and empty.

“The point of what, hon?”

“If I couldn’t even save them,” she whispered, voice breaking, “why do I even have these powers?”

Pamela stood up again, rolling her neck and going to sit back on the couch. “They’re your abilities, hon. What do you think?”

“I think I deserved to die instead,” she said unthinkingly. The words rang true, though.

Pamela just kept looking at her, kept taking notes. “Why’s that?”

“Things like me aren’t supposed to exist,” she muttered. “It’s why – “.

“Why, what?”

“Why else does all this shit keep happening?” she whispered, finally meeting Pamela’s eyes again. “I have to pay back for just – existing. And it’s never enough.”

Pamela shook her head slowly, frown deepening. “And so you try to be the very best you can be, and it never seems to be enough.”

Ryan nodded. Her hands were shaky, but for once, they weren’t lighting up their cursed blue.

“Those are some harsh condemnations,” Pamela said. “Nothing you do will ever be enough. You’re not supposed to even exist. Your powers have to be paid for by tragedy. Are you sure it’s that black and white?”

“It’s been that way my whole life,” Ryan answered, looking away. “I don’t deserve better.”

“Does Bucky?”

Ryan’s eyes snapped back to Pamela’s. “Nothing that’s happened has ever been his fault!” Ryan exclaimed, anger flaring.

“So you wouldn’t tell him that all the tragedy in his life is deserved? He’s got superpowers too, sweetie, and survived even more than you have, if it’s possible. You could just as easily say he’s not supposed to exist the way he does.”

“All of those things were done to him, he didn’t have a choice! He didn’t deserve any of it, how can you say that?”
“Ryan. Did you ask for your powers?”

Ryan stopped short, drawing back. “Of course you didn’t,” Pamela answered calmly. “You didn’t ask to be born like you were, none of us did. If you didn’t order the dish, you don’t get stuck with the bill, hon. And even then, the things that other people do to you are their choices, not yours.”

“But I – “

“No buts,” Pamela interrupted. “There are very few things in this world that aren’t in shades of gray, Ryan. But one of them is that your powers are part of you, the same way your hands and legs and pretty red hair are. Does the fact that you’ve got superpowers mean you owe God, the universe, humanity, or whatever some cosmic debt, when you’re the one that got saddled with them without permission? Does that sound fair?”

Ryan swallowed heavily, releasing a deep breath. “No.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Pamela echoed. “Unfair things happen, and a lot have happened to you. But that doesn’t make it your fault or your job to balance the scales. It’s your job to be the best you that you can, and to be yourself exactly how you want to be. Does that make sense?”

Ryan nodded slowly, exhaustion rolling over her in waves. She’d never felt so wrung out in her life.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Pamela said softly. “Last things, then. How do you feel?”

“Tired,” she whispered back. Pamela just nodded.

“Did you talk to Bucky like I asked?”

“Yeah. It – went fine.”

“I’m glad,” Pamela smiled. “Ready for your next homework, then?”

“No,” Ryan said honestly, and Pamela chuckled.

“Well, too bad,” she said, putting her pen and notepad full of scribbles away in her bag. “When was the last time you went to see your parents’ graves?”

Ryan froze, adrenaline coursing through her. “No, I can’t – “

“Yes, you can,” Pamela interrupted. “Your friendship with Bucky survived, and you will survive this. Where are they buried?”

Ryan swallowed back more tears threatening to resurface. “They’re not. Their bodies weren’t recovered, they’re – just at the memorial.”

“Have you gone since you came here a year ago?”


“It’s alright,” Pamela interjected. “It’s alright that you couldn’t before. But it’s time, honey. Time for some more bravery. You’ve got it in spades, and you’re not going alone.”

Ryan looked up at her, surprised. “I’ve asked Steve to go with you,” Pamela murmured, “and he said he’d be honored. He literally said that, the fucking Boy Scout.”

A giggle escaped her, a touch of hysteria at the end. “Do I have to?”
“Yep,” Pamela shrugged. “You need to let this wound heal, sweetie. It’s been hurting you too much for far too long. And Steve will help you through it, just like Bucky helped you with your anger.”

Ryan hugged her arms tighter across her chest, ignoring how her heart bled out just at Steve’s name. “Okay.”

“Good girl. I’m so proud of how far you’ve already come, honey,” Pamela praised. “Took Bucky months to even talk to me, the knucklehead.” With that, Pamela gathered her things and pressed the button for the elevator. “I’ll see you day after tomorrow. Same time, same place.”

Chapter End Notes

I think I’ve finally connected the last of the planning-dots for the end of this fic. About time, huh? I won’t promise a chapter number, but we’re in the home stretch!
In Which Steve Talks About the Past and Ryan Is Really Exhausted

Chapter Notes

I am not satisfied with the chapters I've been producing for you guys lately, but I promise I will try harder for the end of the fic <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ryan slowly rose up from the armchair, then flopped face-first onto the couch. One arm hung off the side, and she buried her face into the cool leather cushions. She exhaled heavily, her head pounding and feet aching and heart completely drained.

The door to the stairwell opened, and quiet footsteps followed. She didn’t move.

“Hey,” Steve’s voice breathed, and she heard him sit on the floor in front of the couch. “You awake?”

She nodded, still keeping her face hidden. A moment later, a hand stroked through her hair, smoothing down her scalp. She almost started crying again.

“Bucky’s making you some food,” Steve murmured, his touch migrating to the back of her neck. He grasped ever-so-lightly, massaging with his fingertips, and she let out a tiny whimper, exhausted muscles falling limp. Steve hummed low, deep in his chest, and the sound sent tingles down her spine.

They sat there for a time, Steve’s touches kind and gentle, Ryan unmoving. All her arguments and objections – you’re taking advantage, this is wrong, they don’t want you – had disappeared for the moment.

She knew she was weak and pathetic. But goddammit, she needed them. At least for a little while.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Bucky said softly, and she heard him set a plate on the floor and sit beside Steve. “I made some fruit salad.”

She sighed, but didn’t move yet. “Please, babydoll,” Bucky whispered. “You’re scarin’ me a little.”

“’M sorry,” she mumbled, muffled by the cushion pressing into her face.

“It’s alright.” He took her hand in both of his, metal cool across the back. “Could you try to eat something, though?”

She took a deep breath, then pulled her hand out of his, Steve’s touch dropping away as she pushed herself up. Wordlessly, Bucky handed her a bowl full of berries and melon and pineapple, he and Steve getting up to sit on either side of her. “The beginning is the hardest part,” Steve said as she picked out a raspberry. “It gets easier.”

“If I make it that far,” Ryan muttered tonelessly.
"'Course you will," Bucky said, flesh hand coming to rest on her shoulder. "You made it here. The worst is behind you."

"You sure?" she whispered.

"Positive," he whispered back. "I know for a fact."

Steve suddenly cupped her cheek with a hand, turning her gently to face him. "Do you remember when we found each other in that park? The day you started working for Bruce?"

Ryan nodded. "I told you then, we all know what it's like to hate ourselves," he said, then took a deep breath. "You saw what happened to Buck earlier, but… when I got woken up from the ice, I – I wasn't okay. For years."

He dropped his hand from her face, nodding at her to keep eating. She got almost halfway through the bowl before he continued. "Um, the serum that made me like this… part of it is, I feel things very deeply now. Bucky does too. We don't get sick, and we heal quickly, but – but sometimes, things… fight with themselves, inside."

"I know what you mean," she muttered. Everything felt like a fight these days.

Steve managed a half-smile, and Bucky's hand tightened on her shoulder. "It was almost 70 years I was asleep, unconscious, whatever. And everything had changed. Our tenement was gone, my mother's things were lost or in museums, technology was crazy. The world just felt insane – everything was louder and bigger and… and better, in a lot of ways. Food's better, medicine's better, civil rights're better, equality's better. Quality of life is better. But in a second, just – everything I knew was gone."

"I know what you mean," Ryan repeated in a whisper, tears prickling her eyes again. Bucky's arms wound around her waist, tugging her close.

"I got real low," Steve murmured, ducking his head. "It – it'd been less than a month, for me, since I'd thought I'd lost my mate. I went down not even knowing if the war would ever end. And… I didn't care, anymore. I mean, I cared, in my head, but – I was just so empty."

"And then they told me we won, they said everything was better, that I was famous and could have everything I’d ever dreamed, if I wanted. But… all I ever wanted, all the good I’d thought I’d done was a whole lifetime ago, and it didn’t matter anymore. Almost everyone who knew me was gone, and people learned about this… caricature, instead. Then, two weeks later, I’m called up to fight alien robots falling from the sky."

Ryan chuckled despite herself, and Steve smiled in response. "I'd spent all my time those two weeks pounding a heavyweight bag, alone in a SHIELD gym. And no one questioned it."

"Idiots," Bucky muttered, and Ryan chuckled again.

"Everyone was just… in awe, sort of," Steve mused. "I mean, to them, I came back from the dead. I was this super-soldier Alpha, some stoic paragon of virtue and nostalgia come to life. And I just… couldn't feel anything good anymore. So I filled the role, because I didn’t know what else to do."

"How did no one realize?" Ryan said, anger starting to stir in her chest. "They just – you're human! All that you went through, how could they just – "

"They didn’t see him that way," Bucky growled, chest vibrating against her back. "They saw Captain America." He spat out the epithet like a bitter aftertaste.
“And, when we grew up… fellas were supposed to be like that, to a certain extent,” Steve added. “We were the providers, had to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Jesus, Buck, you remember the breadlines, down by the Bridge?” he asked, looking away out the glass wall.

“Up and down whole blocks,” Bucky replied darkly. “People lost their jobs left and right, and had to wait hours in line for a cold bowl of soup. Everyone helped everyone they could, but admitting you needed help… it was hard.”

“And there weren’t really words like depression,” Steve murmured, still staring far away. “We didn’t know nearly as much about mental health as now, so people from now never think of people then having the same problems. So, no one thought I needed help. And I didn’t know how to ask for it. Didn’t want to, at first.”

“You’ve got superpowers, you’re not allowed to be in need,” Ryan whispered. “I get the feeling.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Steve murmured, meeting her eyes again. “Eventually, though, the others finally caught on. I met Sam two years after I woke up, and he got me in touch with John, my therapist. Bruce saw I wasn’t sleeping, and he taught me how to meditate.”

Steve leaned back, looking up and away as he remembered. “Tony… well, he tried his best; he would make improvements to my combat gear, insisted I stay here with everyone else. Thor was a good sparring buddy, he would even let me win sometimes. Clint tried to make me laugh, I think? There were a lot bad puns in there. And Nat kept trying to set me up with date after date, it was ridiculous.”

Ryan threw a hand over her mouth to stifle her sniggering. “Oh my god, that’s amazing. Did you go on any of them?”

“No,” Steve smiled. “Threw myself into missions instead. And, a few short months after that, I discovered Buck was alive. And trying to kill me.”

“Brainwashing’ll do that to you,” Bucky shrugged lightly. Steve laid a hand on his knee, and they just gazed at each other for a moment.

“I talked with John twice a week while I was searching for Buck,” Steve continued, turning back to Ryan. “And – very long story short – it was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. But, I don’t hate myself anymore. I’m happier now than I ever thought I could be again. And I want that for you, too.”

Ryan exhaled heavily, exhaustion rolling through her. “Why do you care?” she whispered, echoes from long ago ringing in her memory. “Why do you both care?”

Steve held her eyes captive as he reached up, cupping her face with both hands now. “Is it so hard to believe that you’re worth caring about?”

“I’m no one important,” she whispered back.

Bucky pulled her in a little tighter, holding her safe and secure. “You are to me.”

“And to me,” Steve said.

Ryan closed her eyes, and tried her best to believe them. “Okay.”

Steve touched his forehead to hers, and Bucky buried his face in her hair. Steve was so close, his scent intertwined with Bucky’s. All she had to do was lean in…
So she pulled back, opening her eyes. They both sat back, too.

“We should all get some rest,” Bucky suggested softly, taking her empty bowl. “It’s been a long day.”

“Yeah,” Ryan sighed, getting to her feet. Steve stood as well, then drew her into his arms again.

“We don’t have to go right away,” he murmured, rubbing her back a little. “To… see your parents, I mean.”

“I just want it done,” Ryan mumbled into his chest. God, he smelled so good. “I get off late tomorrow. Can we go after?”

“Of course.” He sighed deeply, then pulled back. “Do you want Bucky to come, too?”

She hugged her arms to her chest and shrugged. “I don’t mind either way.” She looked to Bucky, but he shook his head.

“You two go. Steve and I might draw attention; we’re easier to spot together.”

Ryan nodded. Slowly, wearily, she grabbed her ever-present backpack and swung it back on. “Don’t worry, I’ll stay here tonight,” she mumbled, and Steve and Bucky relaxed.

“Goodnight, then,” Steve murmured.

“Sleep tight,” Bucky added.

She nodded again, and the elevator doors closed behind her.

* * *   * * *   * * *

The next day flew by, despite Ryan’s internal protestations. She got up early and walked in the long way, barely seeing the crowds around her. Work fell into easy routine of faking customer service smiles and endless book shelving, as she stubbornly shoved away all thoughts of what was coming after. She looked at the clock an hour or so in, though, and it read 9:11. She wanted to laugh and cry and scream all at once.

She didn’t eat all day, again. Bucky was gonna kill her, she thought listlessly as her stomach rumbled. Eating would be a challenge, though, with her hands shaking almost constantly. Ms. Palermo looked over and opened her mouth to speak more than once, but never got the words out.

A motorcycle was waiting out front when she exited, some twelve hours feeling more like twelve minutes. Steve had his helmet off, and handed her an extra one. “Thought this would be faster than the subway.”

“Thanks,” she managed, then slid it on. “Should I just – “

“Yes, around my waist,” he instructed, kicking the bike back to life. She held on a little too tight, and they took off opposite the setting sun.

She really did like riding motorcycles. It was sort of what she imagined flying could be like, when she was little and secretly hoped she might be able to someday. She’d never told her parents that
secret, she reflected as they zoomed along. Her dad had only ever taken her out once, and they’d kept that secret from her mom, who’d thought she was too young. She had too many secrets to keep.

And suddenly, there it was. Ryan hadn’t been lying to Pamela; she’d tried to go, more than once. But…

“Do you want to be alone?” Steve murmured, and she shook her head violently. Steve swallowed heavily, then took her hand and led her down the brick pathways in the park.

She heard the burbling and rushing, first. The memorial itself was a fountain, of sorts; names etched in shining metal squared off a deep, dark chasm, water flowing inwards to disappear. The last rays of sunlight reflected off pools atop each side, and she had to squint as they approached.

A few other people milled about, but they looked like tourists. Ryan ignored them, willing her heart to stop racing.

“Do you want to find their names?” Steve whispered solemnly. “They should be together.”

She nodded wordlessly, and they slowly walked along the side, searching together.

Along the second side, she spotted it. Her heart leapt to her throat, veins coursing with adrenaline. *Mary Green.* Then –

*Brian Schullman.*

She clapped a hand to her mouth, shoving away from Steve. Before her mother, *Terry Iwaskiewicz,* and after –

“I don’t – it shouldn’t, they put mates together,” Steve stammered, and Ryan let out a cry, shaking and sobbing. “Sweetheart, I’m so sorry – “

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed, shoving his hand away furiously. Steve backed away instantly, white as a sheet. “Those – *fuck* this! *Fuck all* of them, just – “

She pounded a fist on top of the names, and a tremendous splash of water sprayed forward past the falls to the other side. “Ryan!” Steve hissed, but she shoved him away again.

“Don’t – just because they were unpresented, they hated them! They fucking – and he died saving their stupid fucking lives!” Ryan gestured around wildly. “No one even cares! No one cares that they’re *dead*! They’re dead, and they sure don’t fucking care that I’m still stuck here alive!”

“Ryan, your eyes, people can see – !”

“I *needed* them!” she screamed, and the ground rumbled beneath them a moment, a sprawling crack snapping into the concrete. “I needed them and they’re dead because fucking lunatics murdered them for no reason! It’s not fair!”

“Ryan, please,” Steve urged, “I know it’s not, but people are watching – “

“I don’t care! I don’t care, they wouldn’t even put their names together because they weren’t mates, those *fucking* – “

She cut off, sobbing incoherently as she sank to her knees in front of her mother’s name. Immediately, Steve yanked her into his arms, and she didn’t fight him off this time as he cradled her head to his chest.
“I n-need them,” she whispered brokenly. “God, Steve, I just – “

“Shh, it’s okay,” he promised softly, clutching her to him. “It’s okay, just – “

“They loved each other!” she sobbed. “They’re not even together, we have to put them to-get-her – “

“Of course we will,” Steve growled, shaking her a little. “Sweetheart, I swear to you, we’ll make it right, okay?”

She threw her arms around him, and Steve lifted her up, tucking her head in the crook of his neck. His scent surrounded her, powerful and protective, and she inhaled as deeply as she could.

A few minutes later, her breathing started to calm at last. She pulled back, and Steve wiped away a tear with his thumb. “Don’t you dare apologize,” he inserted as she opened her mouth. “We’re gonna fix this, okay?”

She nodded, wiping her running nose on her flannel sleeve. “I’m good,” she muttered, getting back to her feet. “I – let’s just find my dad and go.”

Steve nodded, and she turned back to the memorial for a second. “I-I’m sorry, Mom,” she whispered, not entirely knowing what she was apologizing for. Everything, probably. “I love you.”

Steve grabbed her hand again, and they kept going, the rest of the memorial now empty of people. The next side of the square, three-quarters of the way down, read Alexander Green. “I love you too, Daddy,” she murmured, then turned and stalked away, wiping her streaming eyes.

“You alright?” Steve asked softly when they got back to the motorcycle.

“I’m really sick of crying all the time,” she muttered, then put her helmet on.

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Some time later, a knock sounded on Ryan’s bedroom door. “Come in,” she said listlessly, staring up at the ceiling.

“I’m sorry to intrude,” Thor’s voice called out, and Ryan sat up, surprised. “If it is a bad time, I will return again.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” she said, and he stepped fully inside. “What’s up?”

Thor smiled gently. “I have not told you much of Asgard, have I?” he said, coming to sit at the foot of the bed.

“Oh, um. No, not really,” she replied, a little confused.

“Well. I am the crown prince, the son of Odin the All-Father and his queen, Lady Frigga,” Thor started, staring out the window at the city lights, casting orange shadows across her darkened room. “I have brothers and sisters, but none I was so close to as with Loki.”

Ryan shifted away from him, a twist of anger stirring in her gut. “Thor, I’m sorry – I don’t think I can hear about Loki.”
“It’s alright,” Thor reassured her, his smile small and saddened. “I do not expect anyone on all of
Midgard to ever forgive him. I mention him only to highlight my own shortcomings.”

“What do you mean?” Ryan asked, taken aback.

“You letter,” Thor explained quietly. “You declared that you forgave all our wrongdoings. I
wished to ask you why.”

Ryan chuckled a little. “Do you think I shouldn’t?”

“My father did not teach me mercy,” Thor replied softly. “The closest he came was when to bear an
insult rather than retaliate. And I did not wish to hear of it from my mother. I believed it was a sign
of weakness, rather than strength. But had I not been so reckless, the events which sent me here
years ago – it was in a place called New Mexico, your government kept it quiet – they would never
have happened. And from there, Loki would never have come to hate me so, and he would not have
come and attacked your home.”

Ryan stared at him, stunned. “I – I’m sure it’s not that simple, Thor, it – “

“I have made peace with it, such as I can,” Thor murmured, turning to face her for the first time. “It
is why I have pledged to stay and keep this planet safe, until I am called to take the throne in
Asgard.”

He sighed, looking thoughtful. “I am caught between two worlds, in a way. My lady Jane, my
mate, is from here. And I must admit, I have… come to love this planet in ways I never anticipated.
It has taught me much, often at great personal cost. I wish now to repay those debts.”

“You’ve helped save the world more than once. I think we’re cool,” Ryan shrugged, offering a
small smile.

“But after all I have been through, and all I have put your world through,” Thor insisted, “despite
how I thought I had finally learned to judge character truly, in whom I should put my trust… I
allowed everything to happen to you. I doubted your sincerity and innocence, and yet you forgave
all of us. Why?”

“Because… I didn’t want anyone to feel guilty or upset anymore,” Ryan said in a rush, her cheeks
turning pink. “Because I was absolutely miserable, constantly, and I couldn’t stand it. Because the
thought of filling myself up with hate and anger for people that I once cared about made me sick. I
just – it was the right thing to do, and I wanted to do it, so… I did.”

Thor chuckled low, shaking his head. “Would that we all had even half the goodness and wisdom
inside of you.”

“I’m not better or wiser than anyone,” Ryan muttered, cheeks flaming red. “I just… if I make the
wrong choices, I could hurt so many people.”

“The right choice is not simply discerning the proper course, though that in itself is both difficult and
impressive,” Thor replied. “But having the strength and will to carry on despite hardship is even
more so. Where did you learn such qualities, one so young as yourself?”

“I’m not that young,” Ryan said, raising an eyebrow.

“I am, in Earth’s timescale, over five hundred years old,” Thor countered, and Ryan’s mouth dropped
open.
“O-oh.  You, uh, you look good.”

Thor chuckled again. “Thank you. Asgardians can live up to several millennia, in Earth years. But it seems, in consequence, we are indeed slower to learn, as well.”

“All depends on who your teachers are, I guess,” Ryan shrugged. “And, you could say I had a bunch. But mostly… I mean, I’ve gone through hard times. That’s fair to say, I think.”

“Yes, Ryan, it is,” Thor replied, raising a pointed eyebrow.

“Well, you can either let those turn you into something you don’t like, or… you can take it one day at a time, and make the choices you think reflect who you are, and who you want to be. I haven’t always made those choices,” she added quickly. “I… killed Kilgrave. He’s dead, because of me, and I will have to live with that for the rest of my life. But, if my options are to hate people, or to actually care about them… discerning the right choice was easy.”

“And staying the course?” Thor questioned pensively.

Ryan looked away out the windows herself now. “My… mother, um. A few months before she was killed, she said I always had to see the good in people, because most only look for the bad. It always stuck with me. She… she was killed by extremists, who made the choice to hurt others because of fear, hate, misguided religion, or whatever. But it was my choice whether or not to hate them back. And I don’t like what hate did to them, so I’m not going to let it happen to me.”

Thor nodded solemnly. “Did you never entertain the idea of revenge?”

“Of course I did,” Ryan whispered. “For… years. I – I was so angry, and I pushed everyone away, and then… I used my powers to hurt someone, when I was 15. After I’d sworn to myself to never use mind control. It was a wake-up call.

“After I left that foster home, I was put in a girl’s home until I was 18. And when I got there, I found out the lady in charge didn’t take care of the place properly, and all the girls were younger and hungry and miserable and fighting and… it was my penance. So I worked after school as much as I could to actually get decent food, and I helped with homework and set up chore rounds, and eventually, I kind of took over running the home. And making those little girls’ lives better… I finally thought my parents would be proud of me. So I’ve tried to be someone they could be proud of ever since.”

“How could they not be, of one such as you?” Thor said, clapping her on the shoulder and almost knocking her off the bed.

“Thanks,” she muttered, embarrassedly rubbing her arm. Then she exhaled heavily, laughing a bit at the end. “You know, you’d make a good therapist, probably. You make me cry less than Pamela does, anyway.”

“I shall take that as a compliment,” Thor grinned, getting to his feet. Then he paused, the smile disappearing. “My mother was killed, too, just a short time ago. The pain was… almost unbearable. I’m sorry you have had to bear it alone, for both your parents, these long years. But please know, you are not alone anymore.”

Ryan swallowed heavily, turning away. “Thought you weren’t gonna make me cry,” she joked weakly, and Thor laughed heartily.

“My sincerest apologies, good lady,” he said, bowing pompously. “I shall endeavor for laughter only, hereafter.”
“Why, thank you, kind sir,” Ryan replied in kind, pretending to curtsey.

Thor laughed some more, but then paused again. “I have noticed that Clint, Natasha, and Tony are still particularly subdued since your return.”

“I didn’t mean to upset everyone,” Ryan muttered. “I – I just want things back to normal.” Her heart ached a little in her chest as she said it.

“I do not think you upset them, not in the way you are thinking. But I am sorry to say that you will likely have to take the first steps, in that regard.” Thor closed the door behind him, and Ryan flopped back on her bed again.

She lay there a long time, trying to think. She and Clint had always liked playing Mario Kart together, that was normal. Natasha… what did she even like? She’d ask Darcy. And Tony…

“JARVIS?” Ryan whispered, looking up at the ceiling.

“Hello, Ryan. Can I be of assistance?”

“Um, maybe. You know Tony pretty well, right?”

The AI sounded amused, if that was possible. “I believe that would be a fair statement, as indeed he created me. He is not shy about his wants and dislikes.”

“I guess not,” Ryan said, smiling. “So… how do I make things go back to normal with him?”

“Mr. Stark is at his best when he is fixing things,” JARVIS replied after a moment. “You and he are similar, in a way; helping others are strengths you share. If you ask him for help, and aid him in return, I believe that exchange would provide a genuine connection.”

“Oh. Okay, great!” Ryan replied. “Um. What on earth could Tony ever need help with that I would be able to do?”

“He is not particularly open with his own shortcomings. But you are the mind reader, not I.”

Ryan was stunned for a moment, then burst out laughing, curling into herself on the bed. “Oh my god,” she wheezed, tears of mirth rolling down her face for once. “That was wicked funny!”

“Glad to be of assistance, Miss Green.”

Chapter End Notes

Man, Ryan, there's always so much going on with you. But things are getting back to normal :) Well, "normal."
In Which Ryan Finally Talks To Tony

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve slammed the apartment door shut, reinforced windows rattling all the way in the living room. He’d kept his anger in check as they’d left the 9/11 memorial, but now he stormed to the bedroom, throwing away his bike jacket and stalking into the closet to find workout clothes. He needed to hit something.

There were no footsteps, but Steve heard Bucky behind him anyway as he yanked on a compression shirt. “She was seen.”

Ice flooded down his spine. “Fuck – how bad is it?”

“I took care of it,” Bucky said, leaning against the doorway.

“Is it online already? JARVIS, get Tony – “

“I took care of it,” Bucky emphasized, folding his arms.

Steve turned around, searching his mate’s impassive expression. “Where were you?”

“Watching.” Bucky’s face softened a little at Steve’s blatant anxiety. “There were six camera angles, and eleven other people nearby: a family of four, a trio of mates, and two couples. The family had two little kids, they hurried away when Ryan started swearing. The trio was older and left before anything happened. One couple recognized you and took photos.”

He reached into his left pocket and pulled out a small blue chip with gold wiring; a DSLR memory card. “I’ve got them here. The other couple recorded everything on both of their cell phones. Destroyed those already, and JARVIS hacked the security with Tony’s permission.”

Steve dropped his eyes shut, rolling out his neck. “All of it? You’re sure?”

“Positive. No one’s gonna talk, either.” Bucky walked over and pressed a kiss to Steve’s clenched jaw. “I’m covering her six now, too.”

Steve pulled Bucky into his arms, relaxing infinitesimally. “Is breá liom tú, mo anamchara.”

“Is breá liom tú araon, m’fhíorghrá.” Bucky pressed another kiss to his jaw, pausing there a moment, then stepped back. “I thought you’d like the honors.”

Steve took the memory card in hand, then crushed it with a crunch that littered fragments to the floor. The primal satisfaction of protecting his mates was short-lived, however. “You heard, then.”

Bucky’s expression darkened, body stilling. “If I knew who to go after, they’d be down already.”

“Buck – “

“No one hurts her and gets away with it. Not anymore.”

Something deep inside growled in approval, and some of the sound rumbled up into his chest. A
ghost of a smirk crossed Bucky’s face in response.

“What, like you’d just let this one slide?” he challenged, raising an eyebrow.

“Never.” Steve sighed, looking away. “But it’s the memorial of a terror attack that started a goddamn war we couldn’t win. This one’s more careful.”

Well, look at you.” Bucky’s arm whirred a little as he pulled off his shirt, changing into his own workout gear. “Used to be you’d just march down to city hall straightaway, start fucking hollerin’ at anyone who’d listen.”

Steve rolled his eyes, bending down to lace up his sneakers. “I never hollered. And what happened to all those years of you yellin’ at me not to fight?”

“You’re big enough to handle it now, when you’re not doing somethin’ stupid on top of it.” Bucky strode away then, calling back over his shoulder, “Bet I’ll break more heavyweight bags than you.”

“JARVIS?” Steve said as they entered the elevator. “Please tell Pepper we have to talk. First thing tomorrow, if possible.”

Bucky punched through three. Out of sheer stubbornness, Steve took down four. And in the back of his mind, amorphous plans began to take shape.

* * * * * * * * *

Ryan did not want to meet with Pamela again. At the same time, she also very much wanted to meet with Pamela again. Maybe that was just how these things went, she reasoned, walking back to the Tower after work. There were hundreds of people bustling about on the sidewalk, and she overheard a woman remark how quiet the city was today, probably because of the continued heat. The entire city was a contradiction; why would what happened in it be any different?

“Good evening, Ryan,” JARVIS greeted when she entered the private elevator. She smiled as she pressed the button for the fifth floor.

“Hi, JARVIS. How was your day?”

“As enjoyable as any, thank you. And yours?”

“It was fine.” The doors opened, and she looked up to the ceiling. “I have to meet with Pamela now, though. Talk to you later?”

“Of course. Have a good session,” he replied, and Ryan smiled again.

“I’ll try.” She stepped out, and there Pamela waited again, giving her an amused look. “What?”

“You make small talk with the AI,” she answered with a smirk. “Says a lot about you.”

Ryan frowned as she took her seat. The TV wasn’t on this time, but they were alone as before, kitchen and bar and common room deserted. “His name is JARVIS.”

She raised an eyebrow, looking impressed. “Got it. I’ll apologize when he’s listening again. Well, you ready to get started?”
Ryan nodded, and Pamela leaned back in her chair. “How did your homework go?”

“Awful.”

Pamela chuckled a little. “I like the honesty, hon. What happened?”

Ryan told her, words getting shorter and more clipped as she went on. She curled up in her chair when she was done, staring at nothing out the window.

“So. What are you going to do about it?” Pamela asked, words blunt but tone soft. Ryan shifted a little, exhaling a heavy breath.

“Steve said he’d help me fix it. But…”

“But what?”

Ryan chewed on her lower lip, sighing in frustration. “They… I don’t want…”

Pamela waited patiently as she fumbled through her words. “It’s alright, sweetie. Take your time.”

“I don’t have any family left,” Ryan finally said. “Mom was an only child, and… my grandparents were old, they died when I was little. Littler. I, uh, I called them Gray and Pop-Pop,” she recalled, almost managing a smile.

Pamela just nodded, staying silent.

“I didn’t find out about my dad until later,” she continued after a while. “He was an undocumented immigrant, from Mexico. My mom was an immigrant too, from Ireland.” She laughed humorlessly, playing with her fingers in her lap. “Are they still called immigrants if no one hates them?”

“The Irish used to be racially prejudiced against, especially here,” Pamela shrugged. “It was before any of our times, though.” She paused to prop up her chin on her hand, staring intently. “So. You take after your mother, then.”

“Yeah. No one’s ever thought I’m Latina,” Ryan said quietly. “I only found out about my dad… after. When I met mis abuelitos.”

Pamela raised both her eyebrows at how she spat out the words. “I’ve never heard you talk badly of anyone, I don’t think. What happened there?”

“I learned how things were gonna be for me for the rest of my life,” she intoned. “I learned that Dad got here with nothing when he was 17 because he was unpresented, and his family hated him for it. And I learned that if anyone found out, they’d do the same to me.”

Pamela nodded sagely, jotting down a few notes. “So you pretended to be a Beta.”

“I thought… they were going to take care of me,” Ryan breathed. She could still see contempt miring their faces, hear them whisper insults in Spanish and think she couldn’t understand. “But they just – they sold our apartment, took care of the money stuff and left. Whatever was left went into storage, and I got thrown in the system. They didn’t…” She cut off, swallowing heavily.

“I had been wondering, what happened to all your things,” Pamela said softly. “And how you ended up in foster care. How many families did you go through?”

Ryan didn’t answer for a few moments, and Pamela wrote something else down on her notepad. “What are you writing?” Ryan asked, tone almost accusatory.
“That your dad’s parents were dicks.” Pamela laughed a little at the startled look on Ryan’s face. “Objective truth there, sweetie. You ready to keep going?”

“I – yeah.”

“Nuh-uh,” Pamela chastised instantly. “What’s our rule about lying?”

Ryan took a deep breath. “Can we please talk about this some other time, if that’s okay?” she murmured, hesitant and unsure.

“Course we can,” Pamela shrugged nonchalantly, flipping the page on her legal pad. “Next time, we will pick up where we left off on your parents, the memorial, your grandparents, and your time in foster care. And we still have more than enough to talk about.” She flashed Ryan a smile, and she tried her best to return it. “Ryan-girl. What makes you happy?”

Ryan blinked, completely taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said,” Pamela replied. “When you wake up in the morning – inside, outside, wherever – and you smile the first time that day, what’re you thinking of?”

Steve’s elated laugh. Bucky’s sparkling eyes. How she felt waking up and realizing she was in their bed, wrapped up in Bucky’s arms. The way her heart raced when Steve held her close. “Um, I like to read, and I –

“No, not like that, hon,” Pamela interrupted. “What makes you feel good? What fills you up inside, makes you ready for another day?”

“I – I don’t know.” It was true; she was completely stumped. It wasn’t something she’d ever really thought about before. “I mean… I don’t mean to be a downer, but that kind of thing… doesn’t really matter, in my life.”

“Why not?” Pamela asked, giving her an appraising look.

“Because – I’ve never had… any kind of future,” Ryan managed to get out. “I don’t have the brains for college, I’m dirt poor and homeless, and I’ve just – I’ve lied to the entire fucking world my whole life! I’m – I was unpresented, and now somehow I’m not, and I – I’m a goddamn freak of nature.”

Pamela’s frown deepened. “Okay, first of all, you’re allowed to say whatever you want to me, sweetie, but calling yourself names isn’t going to help you. And second: you have no plans for the future? No dreams, or hopes, or even fantasies?”

“I – no,” she whispered brokenly. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” Pamela repeated, dropping to a murmur. “What, you’re not allowed to? Your parents came here for a better life, sweetie. You think they didn’t want that for you?”

“I know they did,” Ryan whispered. “And I fucked everything up.”

“How did you manage that?”

“You know how,” Ryan sighed, dropping her head back and staring up at the ceiling.

“Right, right. By getting superpowers you didn’t ask for, by making the best of every bad situation and coming out on top, and saving the lives of all of the Avengers and more. You’re a human disaster.”
“Probably not human,” Ryan muttered petulantly, folding her arms as her cheeks flushed a little.

“Not the point right now, hon,” Pamela countered. “Although you are, no doubt in my mind. But, I think that’s probably enough for today.”

Ryan almost snorted. “Wow, I didn’t even cry today,” she noted, and Pamela grinned at her.

“How do you feel?”

“Fine.”

“Fine,” Pamela mocked, and Ryan glared at her. This woman somehow pushed every button Ryan had. “Oh come on, lighten up. It’s homework time!” Ryan’s expression crumpled, and she added, “Don’t worry, this one’s easier. Sort of. You’re gonna look at yourself in the mirror once a day, every day, and say something nice about yourself.”

Ryan was surprised. “That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Mm. I sure hope not. That’s not all of it, though.”

Of course not.

Ryan tried to hold back a sigh. “What else?”

“It’s time to start practicing using your powers, hon,” Pamela said gently.

Ryan’s stomach dropped to her feet. “Please, no,” she breathed, trying to tamp down the sudden rush of panic.

“A little every day, that’s all it takes,” Pamela replied, giving her a sympathetic but appraising look. “More mishaps happened before the spa, then. Am I right?”

Ryan swallowed heavily, then shook her head. “I – I had nightmares, and they – and some Alpha grabbed me once, and…”

“It’s alright, sweetie.” Pamela stood up and went to her, laying a hand on her shoulder. “But we want to get you to the point where your powers aren’t ‘they’, anymore. It’s all a part of you, not something separate you have to subdue and control. And accepting every part of yourself is the only way you can be whole.”

“I hate them,” Ryan whispered, starting to tear up.

“We’ll find the reasons not to. I promise.” Pamela squeezed her shoulder once, then straightened up. “Just pick some things up and put them down, alright? I’ll see you soon.”

Well, she had the problem Tony might be able to help her with now. If she could figure out the words to ask him. She’d been sitting just above the line of the glass wall for over an hour, screaming guitar on Master of Puppets filtering up the stairwell. She hadn’t worked up any more courage yet.

“My apologies for interrupting, Ryan,” JARVIS’ voice suddenly piped up. “But Captain Rogers has inquired after your person. It seems he has texted you several times without response.”
“Oh, sorry, it’s on silent.” She scanned the messages – 8:32, *Hope your session went well;* 10:21, *Is everything okay?* – and held her phone to her chest. God, a couple of friendly text messages and her heart was singing *Ode to Joy.* How pathetic was she? “Could you please tell him I’m fine?”

“Of course. And, if I may, Mr. Stark is not doing anything of remote consequence. Now is an excellent time to interrupt him.”

Ryan giggled, dropping her head. “You two are funny,” she said as she got to her feet. “In the good way.”

“A veritable Odd Couple,” JARVIS agreed. “Good luck, Ryan.”

“Thank you, JARVIS.” With that, she took a deep breath, exhaled it slowly, and entered the lab.

Blaring metal guitar suddenly blasted in her ears, deafening in intensity. “Shit!” she shouted, clapping her hands over her ears. The lab walls were soundproofed, apparently, because the music sounded like a jet engine taking off. “JARVIS! Can you turn it down, please?!”

The room rung with silence. Or maybe that was her ears, she thought, slowly removing her hands.

Suddenly, Tony slid out from underneath the machine he was welding – *Jesus, is that a rocket?*! “JARVIS, if you start on that hearing loss lecture one more time, I swear to God - !” Tony barked as he tore off his goggles. Then he saw Ryan, and his eyes widened a little. “Oh.”

“Hey,” Ryan said weakly, trying to smile. “Um, I’m sorry to bother you – “

“Nope! No bother, none at all,” Tony interrupted a little too loudly. He started fiddling with his blowtorch again, and Ryan automatically took a step back. “Always happy to sign something for the fans. Long as it’s not a body part, got in a wee spat of legal trouble last time – “

“It was not signing the autograph, but rather what you did after, sir, that caused the lady to sue,” JARVIS added dryly. Tony rolled his eyes dramatically.

“It’s funny, Big J, I don’t remember writing the program for you to narc on me - if you’ve got bugs, I’m more than happy to exterminate.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, sir. I believe Ryan has a more pressing issue.”

“Well, then,” Tony said, gesturing his arms widely. “Step into my office. At your service, your wish is my command, blah, blah, blah.”

“It’s not that big a deal, really,” Ryan replied, making her way through the maze of tools to lean against a workbench. “So… I’ve been talking to a, uh, a therapist, and…”

Tony, remarkably, had no witty remark as she met his gaze. Just a perfectly neutral expression as he nodded for her to continue.

“I have to practice, um… using my powers,” Ryan continued, hugging her arms to her chest and staring at the rocket instead of him. Wait, rockets were supposed to be bigger than a foot and change, right? “But I can’t – “

“– have anyone around. Or be seen,” Tony finished for her. “Or break anything, ideally. Luckily, there’s a place I think suits your needs perfectly.” He fiddled with the settings on the blowtorch as he continued. “J? Privacy settings, up on the roof. And get the pool filter going, it’s probably nasty.”
“There’s a pool on the roof?” Ryan said in surprise as JARVIS replied, “Right away, sir.”

Tony gave her a look. “Right,” Ryan smiled. “It’s you; that was a dumb question.”

“Yes, it was. Have fun splashing,” Tony said in a clear dismissal, turning back to his invention.

Ryan hesitated, biting her lip. She didn’t want to be annoying, but she had to help him too, right? “So, uh, is that a rocket? It kinda looks like one.”

“Um, no. It’s a self-contained, remote-controlled propulsion device able to generate over 36 million kilojoules of upward force in a series of precisely controlled reactions.”

Ryan giggled. “So, it’s a rocket.”

“Yep,” Tony agreed, popping his lips on the p. “And it’s approximately 8,000 times more efficient than the garbage NASA came up with for JUNO at JPL, those morons.”

“Pretty sure NASA’s, like, the reason we have cell phones,” Ryan grinned, hopping up to sit on the table next to where he worked.

“And I’m the reason the 2030 manned mission to Mars will cost several billion dollars fewer,” Tony countered, raising an eyebrow pointedly. “Look, did you need something else? I’m kinda busy.”

Ryan’s heart sank. “Well, can I help you with something?”

Suddenly, Tony switched off the blowtorch and threw it to the ground with a sharp clang. Ryan startled at the noise, and the sudden fierceness on his face. “Look, what is your deal?!”


“No one forgives people!” Tony shouted at her. Then he ran a hand over his face, growling in frustration. “Jesus.”

Ryan felt a sudden stir of anger, deep in her gut. “Who did this to you?”

It was Tony’s turn to look taken aback. “What?”

“You’re a genius!” Ryan snapped, hopping off the table and glaring at him. “You’re a Beta, you’re really good-looking, you’ve got an amazing mate and a huge company and a billion and a half dollars and you’re a fucking superhero! And you still think nothing good can ever happen to you!”

Tony took an involuntary step back when she jabbed a finger at him. “You’re the fucking American dream! Yeah, you did something bad to me, but you’re sorry for it! So I forgave you! Who was such a fucking jerk that you can only believe people hate you?”

The lab was dead silent. Tony stood frozen in place, jaw agape. Suddenly, a wave of embarrassment rushed through her, and Ryan felt her cheeks flame. She ducked her head, ready to start apologizing, when Tony swallowed heavily.

“Not all of us had heroes for parents,” he murmured, barely audible. He pushed past her, fiddling with something she didn’t recognize on a workbench.

“I – learned about your dad in school,” Ryan muttered, looking at his back. “He saved a lot of lives, in World War II.”

“Yeah,” Tony breathed, voice dark. “Brilliant inventor. And I was his least favorite creation.”
Ryan didn’t know what to say to that. So she went with the cliché. “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.” Tony put down his screwdriver, shoulders slumping. “No, everything was my fault.”


Tony didn’t respond, but she heard his breath hitch once or twice. “I just want things to go back to normal,” she continued. “If that can’t happen, then tell me, and I’ll leave.” With that, she turned around and walked away, hugging her arms to her chest.

“Ryan,” Tony called after her, voice strangled. She turned around, one foot on the stairs. He was staring down at his hands, braced on the table. “Movie night. Tomorrow at 8. Tell everyone else.”

A smile broke out over her face. “Could we maybe watch Star Wars? I fell asleep when I was supposed to watch it last time.”

Tony nodded, still avoiding her eyes, and she left.

“That went well,” she muttered when the door closed behind her. “So much for helping, huh, JARVIS?”

“On the contrary, Ryan. I believe that was exactly what he needed.”

*** *** *** ***

When she got to her room, there was a simple glass vase full of sunny daisies and bright sprigs of goldenrod on her dresser. She stared at them for far too long before she noticed the note tucked underneath.

*Saw these and thought of you. See you tomorrow? :)*

- *S + B.*

She fell asleep with a stupid grin plastered on her face.

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Chapter End Notes

Thanks for all the love <3 Your kudos and comments keep me going strong!!
In Which Ryan Has a Really Good Day

Chapter Notes

About time she got one, huh? :) Just a few more chapters to go now, I think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You have… I have?” Complimenting herself in the mirror was weird. What person were you supposed to talk in?

She met her own blue eyes, eyebrows pulled together. “You have decent skin.” Mirror-Ryan looking back at her didn’t appear to disagree. Good enough.

But then she turned her head a little, and sighed at the sight. “Well, except for the scars.” A thin line up her cheekbone going into her hairline was the worst one. On her face, anyway. “And the dark circles when you’re tired. And the forehead wrinkles.” She sighed again, wrinkles only deepening at her frown.

“Oh, ouch.”

“Jesus!” Ryan swore as Darcy suddenly appeared in the mirror. She snorted, cracking up at Ryan’s hand clapping over her heart.

“Oh my god, why are you so easy to scare?! You’re like, stupidly brave and a total scaredy-cat at the same time.”

Ryan shrugged, shaking her head as a blush spread over her cheeks. “Sorry.”

“No, don’t – gah!” She growled a frustrated noise, miming a strangling motion. “I’m the one that just scared you, you don’t apologize, just – god, Ryan! Stop being nice to everyone except yourself!”

Ryan blinked, taken aback. “Oh. Um, sorry.”

“No! Bad!” Darcy chided, jabbing a finger as Ryan stepped back in alarm. “No apologizing for nothing, either. God.”

Ryan almost apologized again, but she caught herself in time. A whiff of Darcy’s carnation scent, bright and sweet, made her chuckle under her breath. Sassy and fierce outside, sweet underneath; pure Darcy. “Got it. So, what’s up?”

An unsure look suddenly crossed Darcy’s face, before she settled on a small smile. “I, uh – c’mere,” she said, gesturing out of the bathroom. Ryan followed obediently, sunshine brightening the room as Darcy bounced down on her just-made bed. She raised her eyebrows, pressing down and springing her hand back up. “Oh, wow. I need a mattress like this.”
"Yeah no, it’s the softest thing I’ve ever slept on. Like, by far," Ryan laughed, sitting beside her. "But really, is everything okay? You kinda made a weird face."

Darcy shifted, looking out the window for just a second before turning back. "We’re cool, right?"

Ryan’s eyes widened in surprise. "Yeah, of course.” She paused, trying to think through her response. "I – look, I know things have been weird, since I… came back. But I promise, I really don’t hold anything against Clint or Natasha at all. I was gonna talk to them today – “

“No, no, I – frick,” Darcy interrupted. She ran a hand through her hair, looking more stressed than before. “I know you don’t, I’ve been trying to tell them that and they’re just being dumb. Everyone I love is a martyr or a masochist, I swear,” she grumbled, flopping onto her back and staring at the ceiling.

Ryan giggled, and Darcy managed a smile. “They are! Superheroes are ridiculous human beings. Except for Sam, he’s cool.”

“God, too real,” Ryan replied, lying down next to Darcy. “He’s just so smooth, how does he even do it?”

“He’s a black guy surrounded by a bunch of white dorks. It’s not hard.”

Ryan burst out laughing, and Darcy giggled alongside, both of them just lying in the sun. As their laughs died down, a sense of peace washed over her, and she relaxed further into the bed. Having friends was really nice.

“But, anyway. What I meant was…” Darcy continued, and Ryan propped up on her elbows to look at her. “I’m the idiot that dragged you to that damn spa, and – “

“Hey, no, Darce, please.” Ryan sat up again, but Darcy wouldn’t look at her. “Jesus, that was… one of the nicest things anyone’s ever done for me. I’m just crazy, is all.”

That made Darcy meet her eyes, vibrant hazel cutting daggers at her. “God, don’t talk about yourself like that! You know how much of a basket case I’d be if I went through half the shit you have? God, I “ – she jumped up to her feet, gesturing widely – “my parents live in Iowa! I see them like five times a year and send them on vacation whenever they want, cause Clint and ‘Tasha have tons of questionably legal money from their shady pasts! I’ve never been hungry, I’ve never been without a roof and Starbucks money and all my old friends, from back home? You know how jealous they are that I’m mated to Hawkeye and the Black Widow? That’s I’m best friends with Thor and Jane Foster and live with the Avengers?”

She actually paused, waiting for an answer. Ryan tried, “Um. Pretty jealous, probably?”

Darcy threw her hands in the air, rolling her eyes. “The point is, Ryan, you’re here now, too, and somehow you’re just as normal as I am! You’re not crazy, or broken, or damaged, or whatever. You’re allowed to have problems, you know!”

Ryan stood up too then, running a hand through her hair. “Darcy, I am broken. I have been for a long time, and I’ve been trying to put myself together that long, too. But… now, I think I… might actually have a shot at doing it for real.” It was the first time she’d vocalized that hope, the quiet flicker inside living next to where Steve and Bucky had taken full residence. It felt kinda nice.

Darcy shook her head, then muttered, “Come here, you loser.” She tugged Ryan into a tight embrace, and Ryan froze in surprise. Then, exhaling shakily, she threw her arms around her.
A minute later, Darcy sniffed. “You’d better not be crying,” she wavered, voice breaking at the end.
Ryan laughed wetly, wiping her eyes with one hand. “Please, I never cry.”
“Yeah, right.” Darcy finally leaned back, red-rimmed eyes crinkled. Then she took Ryan’s hand and squeezed it once. “Come on. It’s too damn early for all these feelings, and it’s Saturday, so we’re going to retail therapy until I die.”

Ryan chuckled. “I’m sorry, Darce, I kinda had plans already today. Can we go tomorrow instead?”

“You have a life outside me?” Darcy joked, winking teasingly. “What’re you doing?”
Ryan hesitated just a moment, then bit the bullet. “Um, I actually have to practice using my powers.”
Darcy’s eyes widened to saucers, excitement blooming on her face. “Oh my god, can I watch?!”
Ryan was floored. “Oh, um. You – you want to?”

“Ryan, are you kidding? You make stuff fly like – like magicians with crappy wire tricks, but for real! It’s fucking awesome, of course I want to watch!”

Ryan stared, stunned. No one had ever… liked her powers before. A feeling like sunshine poking through the clouds lit up inside, spreading a goofy smile over her face. “Um, yeah, I guess. Oh, wait,” she added, shadows obscuring the sun again. “I can’t – um, the uh, the mind-reading thing comes on whenever I do anything. So…”

“Wait, wait, wait – so back when we met, and you made the coffee fly, you were reading my mind?” Darcy asked quickly, looking a little alarmed. “I mean, it’s okay, I asked you to, but – “

“Wait,” Ryan breathed, eyes wide and brows furrowed. That day, they were in the kitchen, and Clint had surprised her –

A look of wonder bloomed on her face. “They always – but… no, you’re right, they didn’t! I don’t know why, but…”

Darcy grinned. “You know, this whole time I’ve worked for Jane, I’ve only learned one thing.” At Ryan’s raised brow, she added, “When weird shit happens, drive right into the fucking sandstorm, cause that’s where the hot guys are.”

“W – what?” Ryan exclaimed, laughing. Darcy laughed and threw an arm around her shoulders, sending a quick text with her other hand.

“Alright, Jane’s on her way – we’re gonna science the shit out of this!”

Ryan snorted, shaking her head. “Alright, Damon. But if we get stuck on Mars, it’s your fault.”

“Please, Tony could rescue us in, like, ten minutes.” She tugged Ryan forward, leaning her head on Ryan’s shoulder for a second. Then, she suddenly let go, diverting over to her dresser. “Ooh, these are pretty.”

“Oh, thanks,” Ryan answered as Darcy leaned in to smell her flowers, sunning themselves in their vase. Then she paused, eyes narrowing a moment, then grabbed the card still sitting next to the vase. A smile, a little too mischievous for Ryan’s taste, slowly spread across her face.

“What?” Ryan asked. Darcy looked up, schooling her features back to normal.
“Nothing, I’m good. Come on, super official superpower scientific investigation time!” she cheered, grabbing Ryan’s hand and whisking her out the door.

*** *** ***

“JARVIS? Um, are the privacy settings still on?” Ryan asked, stepping out into the warm breeze along the roof. It was oddly quiet, but the Empire State building still stood tall towards the west. Clear water sparkled in an Olympic-sized pool only stretching across a quarter of the matte white roof, smelling faintly of chlorine.

“Yes, Ryan. The least unnecessarily technical explanation for the system is a set of electromagnetic fields functioning like a two-way mirror to still allow enjoyment of the view and fresh air. I assure you, no one can see inside.”

“Alright, then! Let’s get this party started!” Darcy exclaimed, darting over to dip her toes in. “Ooh, it’s warm.”

“Wait a sec, Darce, jeez,” Jane admonished as she and Ryan joined her. “Ryan, what is it you’re looking to do in these practice sessions?”

Ryan shrugged, sitting cross-legged at the edge of the pool. “Well, apparently the telepathy doesn’t work the way I thought it did, necessarily. So, figure that out, if I can. And… I’m supposed to pick things up and put them down, apparently.”

Jane chuckled. “Sounds doable. Alright, let’s get the baseline, then. You can focus on just one mind at a time, right?” At Ryan’s nod, she flipped open her Macbook, sitting poised to take notes. “Alright, we’ll start with that and look into multiple subjects later. Darce, you want her to read your mind or mine?”

“Oh, me!”

Ryan gave Jane a nervous look. “Really, you guys don’t have to – “

“Ryan. This is unprecedented, unexplained, and completely unknown science fiction come science fact. This is one of the best days of my life,” Jane said, face deadly serious.

“Oh my god, I should not have invited you,” Darcy quipped from behind them, and Ryan stifled a laugh.

“Well, if you’re sure…”

“Do it, do it, do it!” Darcy chanted, bouncing like an excited puppy. Ryan took a deep breath, then tried to smile. “Okay, I’m ready!” Darcy said, screwing her eyes shut and scrunching up her face.

“Oh no, Darce, it doesn’t hurt!” Ryan said quickly, eyes widening at the bracing look on her face.

“I’m concentrating, you dork! Come on!”

Ryan looked back to Jane for a second, who nodded encouragingly. So she took another deep breath, and focused on Darcy.

Then, she burst out laughing, so hard she almost lost her balance and toppled into the pool. Darcy
sniggered, opening her eyes again. “That’s not even the funniest way Clint’s fallen down stairs, trust me.”

Jane started laughing too, pausing her typing. “Oh my god, are you thinking of – “

“The bachelor party!” she and Darcy said together, all three of them dissolving into tears of mirth afterwards.

“That – “ Ryan cut off, laughing over her words – “oh my god, just – he didn’t even spill his beer! How was he okay after that??!”

“He’s broken so many things, he kinda just bounces up and brushes it off now,” Darcy said, wiping her face. “I’ll tell you the whole story later, it’s amazing. God, I love that idiot.”

Her words made Ryan ache inside, her smile fading a little, so she turned back to Jane. “So, was that good enough?”

“Yeah, great, just – alright, Darcy,” she called. “On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your physical reaction to the stimulus and give any comment necessary on the answer.”

“Uh, like a 1?” Darcy replied, frowning a little. “If I hadn’t known she was doing it, I wouldn’t have noticed, but I could just barely feel it happening.”

“You could?” Ryan said in amazement. Darcy nodded, shrugging.

“Yeah, like – like there was a little corner in the back of my head that… lit up, almost?” Darcy splashed her feet in the pool a little, looking deep in thought. “No, scratch that. It was like, you’re asleep in bed and someone comes in the room, and some light comes in from outside and like, wakes you up just a tiny bit? I sensed you there more than actually felt anything.”

“Oh shit, that’s fascinating,” Jane breathed, typing furiously. “Alright, and Ryan, rate the effort expended on a scale of 1 to 10, and comment on the actual event – how you saw the memory in her mind, if you could hear anything, et cetera.”

“Um, about a 1, also,” Ryan answered, fidgeting a little. “It – it doesn’t take much effort or anything, it…” She sighed in frustration, trying to figure out how to vocalize the feeling of being in someone else’s head. “It’s like, I’m here, right? And Darcy’s there, and I… open the door, I guess? It’s the same as when I just tell my hand to do something, pretty much.”

That made Jane pause, biting her lip as she scanned over the notes. “Expand on that, if you can,” she said absently, and Darcy chuckled, muttering something about mad scientists.

Ryan thought for a few minutes, watching how the breeze made sunlight sparkle on the water. Eventually, she said, “It’s kind of like an extra sense and an extra limb, rolled into one. Like, you breathe in purposely to smell something, and then you smell it, right? And I… pick something up with my powers, and it does what I tell it to, or whatever. It feels as natural as breathing.”

“Holy shit,” Darcy muttered, sounding a little in awe. Ryan shifted uncomfortably, feeling her face flush.

“Natural… as breathing,” Jane repeated as she typed, then looked back up from the computer screen. “And the actual mind-reading part, describe that.”

“It’s like your mind’s eye, but stronger,” Ryan replied. “Like, when Darcy saw that memory, I saw it like it almost like a movie in my head. And yeah, I could hear it, too.”
“Can you see more than one thing at once? Our minds aren’t linear, we think of lots of things at once.”

“Yeah, I can – I mean, my thoughts work the same way as everyone else’s, from what I’ve seen. So, I see what’s in someone’s head, and I just… understand how to process it.

“I mean, right then you were really focused on that memory,” Ryan continued, looking to Darcy, “but you have that ‘Work from Home’ song by Fifth Harmony stuck in your head, too, right? And you were feeling excited, and a little nervous about everything. Your thoughts felt that way.”

“Oh my god, yes!” Darcy said, sounding surprised and excited. “Oh my god, this is like the best magic trick ever, I love this.”

Ryan ducked her head, still blushing, but said, “So, yeah. I mean, I think some people can concentrate enough so their minds are just really quiet, and I don’t, uh, ‘read’ anything. Natasha can do that, but Clint let some things slip through.”


“Yeah.” Ryan kept her focus on Jane, still happily recording away. “Do you need anything else?”

“Eventually, yeah. But…” She looked up, eyes narrowed in thought. “You said it’s like opening a door. Is it actually like a door, or is it like a valve?”

“Uh, what?”

“Oh!” Darcy said, excitement returning to her voice. “Valves let stuff through one way, but doors can do both! Nailed it.”

Jane rolled her eyes, but nodded. “Gold star, Darcy. Essentially, Ryan, I’m wondering if you can only receive, or if you can exert an influence on someone’s mind. We already know you can control people with your voice, but that obviously connects right to the mind.”

Ryan blinked. “I have no idea. I… never even thought about it.”

A sympathetic smile spread over Jane’s face. “It’s alright. That’s not what we’re technically here to investigate – Darcy made a noise of protest, but Jane ignored her – “but consider for the future? I mean, the possibilities are practically endless – you could maybe share thoughts and memories with people, look deeper into their psyches, maybe even be able to influence emotions or psychological triggers or – “

“Yeah, yeah. Got it,” Ryan interrupted, a little overwhelmed. Good god, like just being able to read minds wasn’t bad enough. “Would, um, would it be cool to move onto the…”

Jane nodded, “Of course. Alright, the goal here is to figure out the trigger for the telepathy coming on with the telekinesis, and your control over it should you want to turn it off. Think back to a few times you’ve used your powers, and try to pinpoint some variables that were different from when you made the coffee fly around Darcy.”

Ryan chuckled a little, saying “Well, the most obvious one is that I wasn’t pinning someone against a wall that time.”

Jane raised her eyebrows, mouthing dropping open. “That makes a lot of sense, actually! Whether or not you felt in danger dictating the telepathy turning on instinctually, I mean – you’d be able to know where all the potential dangers were around you automatically!”
Ryan and Darcy looked at each other, identical looks of surprise on their faces. “Yeah, I guess that does make sense,” Ryan shrugged. “But if it’s instinct, I won’t be able to control it.”

“No true,” Darcy inserted. “I learned to suppress my gag reflex pretty quick when I first – “

“Okay, thanks, Darce!” Jane interrupted, shooting her a pointed look. “God, you have no filter.”

It took Ryan a moment, but then she got it. “Oh my god, Darce,” she giggled. Her irreverence just might be Ryan’s favorite thing about her. “Anyways.”

“We won’t know until we try,” Jane said. “Ready?”

Climbing to her feet, Ryan nodded. “How much of the water do you want me to move?”

“Might as well establish a baseline of ability and the rate of perceived effort, too,” Jane replied, keys clacking under her fingers. “Lift and hold as much as you can over your head, okay? There’s no danger right now, so ideally you won’t hear anything from our heads, but pay attention to see if you do.”

“Wait, I want a good seat!” Darcy shouted, hopping up and dashing over to sit on the lounger next to Jane’s. “Okay, go!”

Ryan looked down to the water, and there was a lot of it, she realized. She didn’t know how much she could do, but Jane said to try to push the limit. So she held out a hand, hovering over the water, and took a breath.

With a low rushing from the pool, she swept her arm slowly upwards, hand glowing faintly blue. The water followed her, not a drop spilling down as it streamed up out of the pool and over her head, circling in a perfect ring. Sunlight diffracted everywhere as it drifted lazily, until she stopped it with a flick of her fingers. It actually looked kind pretty, she thought, just floating there as she slowly lowered her arm, the water stilling in place.

“How’s that?” she asked, turning back to Jane and Darcy. They were staring, eyes wide, mouths gaping as light bounced on their faces. “Hey, you were right!” she exclaimed, realizing. “I’m not hearing anything from either of you!”

“Holy sh – oh my god,” Darcy breathed, unable to tear her eyes away from the humongous ring of water. “You just – all of it?!”

“I did?” Ryan asked, looking back down. Her own eyes widened at the sight of the pool, completely empty and perfectly dry. “Oh.”

“Alright,” Jane said in a strangled voice. “So, that took...”

“Um, a 2 for effort?” Ryan answered. “Streaming it out like that was pretty easy, and holding it there is fine.”

Jane shook herself, then started typing furiously. “We’re gonna need a bigger boat.”

Ryan snorted, then asked, “Could I put it down now, or do you want me to – “

“No, it’s fine,” Jane replied, not looking up even while Darcy stared, frozen in fascination. Ryan nodded her head towards the pool, and the water rushed back down. She quickly held up another hand as waves tried to splash over the side, sending them back in and settling the water back to calm.
“Whoops,” she joked, turning back to Darcy with a crooked smile. “Didn’t mean to splash-land it.”

Darcy just stared at her, then flopped back on the pool chair with a dramatic groan. “Terrible puns will be the death of me, I swear to God.”

“What?” Jane asked, looking up distractedly for a quick second before going back to her notes.

“Nothing.” Ryan said, laughing at herself. In that moment, she felt more content than she could remember feeling in years. Practicing her powers was somehow the best homework she’d ever done. “Do you want anything else right now?”

Jane didn’t answer at first, pausing her notes to look to the pool where the water resided again, calm and clear. Then she frowned, muttering under her breath, “No, no, that’d be impossible, you’d have to manipulate subatomic interactions with – “

“Stop her now or she’ll go on about mysterious particle thingies until we’re dead,” Darcy said, throwing an arm over her eyes.

“Jane?” Ryan asked, sitting cross-legged again on the pool edge.

“You’re manipulating the water’s motion as a whole entity,” Jane began a moment later. “But… can you manipulate within the water?”

“English, Dr. Foster,” Darcy said dryly, and Jane shot a glare at her.

“The water molecules have their own constant thermal motion; all atoms do, solid, liquid, gas, or plasma,” she explained. “I’m wondering if you can manipulate that as well, with whatever energy you’re harnessing to do this.”

“I’m using some weird energy?” Ryan questioned in alarm, and Jane nodded quickly.

“One previously undescribed, I think. It’s the only physical explanation I have so far.” Jane shrugged, a smile spreading over her face. “So, what I’m asking is – can you freeze the pool?”

* * *   * * *   * * *

Ryan stayed up on the roof long after Jane and Darcy left, just watching the sky slowly glow violet and magenta. If a few tears – overwhelmed, relieved, or otherwise, she couldn’t tell – dropped ripples into the pool, no one had to know.

The elevator door dinged behind her, and she quickly dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. Her self-directed promise to stop crying all the time was failing so far.

“Ryan?” Bucky’s voice called out softly. She ignored the flutter in her stomach as she turned around to see both him and Steve coming over, a wicker basket in the metal hand that wasn’t holding Steve’s. In Steve’s free hand was a pair of wine glasses, a woven blanket tucked under his arm. A sharp pang of longing pierced through her, but she tried to smile.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, jumping to her feet. “I’ll get out of your hair – perfect picnic evening, though, have fun,” she added, gesturing towards the orange-streaked clouds aflame at their edges. “I’ll see you guys la – “
“Ryan,” Steve interrupted, sounding a little amused. He laid out the blanket beside the pool as Bucky laughed quietly, setting down plates and napkins. “We brought it for you.”

Oh. “Oh,” she said, trying to pass off the shock for nonchalance. It didn’t work, apparently, as Steve smirked at her. “You didn’t have to do – “

“Would you have eaten anything otherwise?” Bucky inserted, raising an eyebrow at her.

Her heart plummeted to her shoes. More guilt, more trying to fix things that weren’t their faults. Of course that was why. “You still didn’t have to. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Steve said, unwrapping a bowl of blueberries and placing it next to a ten-high stack of roast beef sandwiches. “Buck and I could never eat all this ourselves.”

Ryan snorted. “Right. You just accidentally made six sandwiches too many, that’s all.”

“Our mas taught us right,” Bucky shrugged, handing her a wine glass of lemonade. “Waste not, want not.”

It’s not that kind of picnic, she told herself firmly as she sat on the blanket edge. They’re just being nice.

“So, how were your days?”

Steve loaded up plates with potato salad, fruit, one sandwich for her and four for each of them as they recounted their days. A meeting with Pepper that morning for some Stark Industries event they were part of; then they’d parted ways, Steve to volunteer at the VA with Sam for the afternoon and Bucky sparring with Natasha, doing laundry, freerunning in Prospect Park, and packing the pic –

“Wait, back up one,” Ryan interrupted in surprise, quickly swallowing her bite of sandwich. “Freerunning, like – like jumping off walls and stuff?”

“Scaling buildings is my favorite,” Bucky grinned. “Way more fun than those damn boring jogs Steve goes on every morning.” Steve rolled his eyes in response.

“Just cause you’ve got an attention span of five minutes – “

“I’m a fucking sniper, knucklehead.”

“Doesn’t make sense to me either,” Steve shrugged, then laughed when Bucky threw a blueberry with deadly accuracy into his hair.

“Anyway,” Bucky said, turning back to Ryan, “any time you want to come with. I’ll show you the ropes.”

“Oh, no,” Ryan replied quickly, shaking her head, “I’m not great with heights.”

Bucky raised an amused eyebrow, looking out pointedly towards the edge of the roof. “This is what, Steve? 1200 feet up?”

“As long as I stay away from the edge, I’m good,” Ryan clarified. Then she chuckled, saying, “Oh man, I remember when I first discovered I was scared of heights – I was ten and I still didn’t stop crying ‘til we reached the ground floor, it was so embarrassing! I was, like, clinging for dear life to this office chair, and my mom literally had to roll me through her entire office into the elevator, and everyone was just dying laughing – she never took me…”

Ryan trailed off, clearing her throat against the sudden prickling in her eyes. “Um. Into work,
“again.”

She shoved a bite of sandwich into her mouth, staring down at her mostly-empty plate. *Dammit.*

It was quiet for a few moments. Then, Steve offered, “Bucky’s scared of moths.”

“Oh my g – it was one time, Rogers, and it flew in my fucking *mouth!*” Bucky shouted, and Ryan burst out laughing as they kept teasing each other back and forth. God, but she loved them so much.

“Yeah, well, you could do with a little less fearlessness,” Bucky grumbled, even as his eyes sparkled at Steve. “You know what this idiot did, Ryan?”

“Oh, here we go,” Steve said as Bucky continued, “Jumped out of a goddamn airplane to duke it out with Stark and Thor, *without a parachute!*”

“Wait, what?!”

“Exactly!” Bucky exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air. “Jesus, I can’t leave this guy alone for ten minutes.”

“No, I meant – you don’t need one?” Ryan said incredulously. “You, what, can just stick the landing? That’s amazing!”

“The shield helps,” Steve grinned as Bucky groaned dramatically.

“Don’t encourage him,” he said, even as a grin spread across his face. Then, he added, “I can do it too, you know.”

“Wow,” Ryan breathed. “I mean, I knew you guys were strong, but not *that* strong.”

“Right after I got the serum, I could bench press a ton,” Steve said, trying and failing to look modest. “Now, it’s somewhere around 3,000 pounds. On a decent day.” At a pointed smirk from Bucky, he rolled his eyes again and added, “And Buck’s even stronger than me.”

Ryan was floored. “Okay, not to sound like a fangirl or anything, but. That’s *wicked* cool!”

Bucky sniggered, starting to pile up their empty plates. “Ryan, you do know you can move stuff with your mind, right?”

She blushed, ducking her head. “Yeah, well. I like what you can do.”

“And we like what you can do,” Steve said simply, holding out a hand to help her up. She took it, trying to keep herself from getting any redder. “Speaking of, we ran into Darcy before we came up here. How did today go?”

“Oh, um. Good, actually,” Ryan shrugged, shuffling from one foot to the other. “We learned some stuff I didn’t know about before, so that’s good, I guess.”

“Really? Like what?” Bucky asked, sounding excited as he folded up the blanket.

“Well, the, uh, mind-reading doesn’t always come on automatically, like I thought. More as a precaution when I’m in danger, we think,” Ryan explained. “We have no idea why, but…”

Steve and Bucky exchanged a quick glance, then turned back to her. “Did you figure out anything else?” Steve asked softly.
A small grin broke out over her face. “Yeah, um. It’s actually kinda cool, I think.” She looked back at the pool, nervousness running through her. Darcy and Jane hadn’t been freaked out, though. Maybe they wouldn’t, either. “Um. Could I maybe show you?”

“Of course,” Steve said quickly, a bright smile lighting up his face. He and Bucky stopped cleaning up immediately, standing rapt with attention.

Ryan took a deep breath. No danger, she reminded herself. Then, hand glowing bright in the dimming light, she swept up a small stream of water from the pool, hovering over their heads as Steve and Bucky stared up at it. With a moment of concentration, she swirled it around in a circle as it became opaque, turning from clear to pure white in seconds. Then, she slowly lowered her hand, and fluffy white flakes began to fall.

“So, apparently, I can make it snow,” she said, hair covered in frozen droplets as she watched them fall above them. Then, she dared to look back at Steve and Bucky.

Both of their mouths were wide open, staring in shock at the small cloud overhead. Then, Bucky started laughing, voice ringing with joy, holding up his metal hand to catch the snow falling down. Steve turned back to her, pure awe in his eyes.

“Holy fucking shit,” he said, and Bucky laughed even harder. “Ryan, just – Jesus, this is amazing!”

“Jane figured it out,” Ryan shrugged, ducking her head and grinning as she hugged her arms to her chest. A moment later, the last of the snow fell, and Bucky looked at her with tears in his eyes.

“God, Ryan,” he murmured, then swept her into a huge hug. “Thank you. For showing us.”

She buried her face in his chest, breathing in his wonderful scent as Steve hugged them both from behind. She sighed in contentment, leaning back into Steve a little. “Thanks for not being freaked out.”

“Never.” They both pulled back just a little, Bucky looking down at her with an unreadable expression in his eyes. “C’mon. We’ll be late for movie night.”

She’d worried that it might be awkward with everyone still, but she was wrong. As they gathered together in the common room, curled up contentedly on couches and in each other’s arms, Ryan had never felt more at home. Within ten minutes, no farther than she’d made it into the movie last time, she fell asleep in her chair, and woke up to a bright Sunday morning in her bed.

Chapter End Notes

I've been wanting to go more in-depth into Ryan's abilities for FOREVER now, so I'm glad chapter 50 I could finally fit it in. Good god. But, strong female friendships! Our little trio getting closer and closer! We're getting there, people.
I'm SO sorry it's been forever, guys. I've just moved and started grad school, so things have been crazy lately. But, there's only a few more chapters to go in this one, and I've got tons planned already for the sequel!!

But I have to warn you, though, once grad school really starts ramping up, posts will take longer in coming. I wish it could be different, but I'm taking classes, doing research, and working 20 hours a week as a TA, so I'm busier than ever :(

She should’ve known the happiness wouldn’t last.

“Bucky! Bucky, no, please – !”

“Kill him,” Kilgrave sang, giggling maniacally as Steve launched his shield across the common room. The glass wall shattered inwards as thunder raged above, shards spraying across her as she screamed in pain, drowning out the clashing metal of Steve’s shield colliding with Bucky’s arm.

“Do it, Ryan!” Steve screamed at her, fighting off a brutal onslaught while Kilgrave approached the other Avengers, forced to their knees and dripping with blood. “You have to stop him!”

“I can’t! Steve, please!” she sobbed, and Kilgrave sneered at her.

“You already did,” he said, “and now he’s longing for the same.”

Bucky roared, an inhuman snarl rumbling out of his chest, and doubled his attack on Steve. “Ryan!” Steve shouted at her, terrified and desperate.

“A little rusted,” Kilgrave whispered in her ear, flicking his tongue against the shell of it. Bucky roared louder and socked Steve in the gut, making him grunt in pain. “But the furnace is still lit. And come daybreak, he’ll forget. Permanently.”

With a sweep of his leg, Bucky had Steve on the ground, and he pummeled into him mercilessly. Steve lay unresponsive, blood dribbling from his mouth.

“NO!” Ryan screamed, struggling against the chains on her legs as she ran in slow motion, trapped halfway across the room. “Steve! Bucky!”

“Seventeen,” Kilgrave murmured, digging his nails into her arm.

“Ryan,” Steve gasped, reaching out a trembling hand.

Kilgrave threw her to the ground, crowding in close. “Benign,” he growled, ripping her shirt to shreds and leering at her exposed chest. “девять. возвращение домой – “
Suddenly, a surge of rage, protective and furious, coursed through her, and Ryan threw Kilgrave to the side with a jerk of her head, eyes glowing bright. He crumpled to the floor, unmoving.

Ryan shot up to her feet, and Bucky stood silently, aiming a gun at her heart. She glanced at Steve, now standing perfectly unharmed as everyone else aimed their weapons at Bucky. “Drop it!” someone shouted, and Bucky cocked the hammer.

Steve’s bright eyes met her own. He nodded.

So she looked at Bucky, his brown eyes dead and cold, and whispered, “Stop.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Stop.”

The single syllable resonated through space, reverberating off walls and drumming itself into the asset’s mind. It shook the floors violently and wrestled with his swirling, panicked thoughts, shocking them into silence.

The asset was frozen in place, capable only of staccato breaths. Her left arm mirrored his right, held straight out, practically touching the gun trained on her heart. His wide eyes glared back into the icy glow of hers.

“You are not what you have been forced to be, Bucky. You are a good man.” She paused a moment, the hand holding his chin trembling slightly as she used the other to gently stop the trailing tears on his cheek. “You are a good man, and one we all love very much,” she finished softly, her voice no longer ringing with power but whispering gently as a confession.

Bucky dropped his head to her left shoulder, tears streaming and breath shuddering in earnest now. She wrapped both arms around him and tugged him flush against her, tucking his head into the crook of her neck and looking to Steve across the room.

“Oh, sorry,” she mumbled, and the glimmering blue light outlining his body dissipated immediately. The next second, she and Bucky were enveloped in his strong grasp, keeping their shaking bones from shattering apart just as he always did. The other now-freed Avengers left the room quietly. The threat was neutralized, and the little family and the outsider girl needed time to mend their frayed edges again.
Bucky chuckled low in his chest, and she felt the vibrations rather than heard the sound. “I don’t know what we’d do without you,” he muttered, almost to himself. She felt him pulling back, and she sat down on her heels to look him in the face again. He swiped the back of one hand across his eyes, the other reaching to entangle with Steve’s behind him.

“I’m so sorry – “ he began, but the girl cut him off, shaking her head firmly.

“I hate it when you apologize for that. It’s shit, and you know it. The only people who should be sorry are the few sick bastards left who hurt you.” Her anger smelled like sun-scorched pavement and cinnamon red hots, tickling Bucky’s nose when he sniffed back the last of his tears. He knew her feelings were directed at HYDRA, not him.

The girl got to her feet and turned toward the door, away from Steve and Bucky. “No one should have the power to control peoples’ minds.” With an all-too-familiar pang of self-loathing that sharpened her scent to bitter poison, the girl began to walk away.

“Ryan, wait.” Steve used his Captain America voice, the one that brought all attention to him if it wasn’t already there. She stopped a moment, turning half back around to face the common room wall. “You just helped Bucky out of his worst flashback in months before anyone was hurt. I wasn’t even enough to do that,” he continued, scent tinged with a note of regret. She knew it was directed at himself, but her guilt remained, sour and biting. “You kept everyone safe, and brought Buck back to us. We can never thank you enough.”

Bucky burrowed his face into his Alpha’s chest, unable to feel embarrassed about his breakdown in Steve’s arms. He still hated himself, the fact that he was responsible for the danger and worry and pain he put them all through, and shame clouded his scent. The smell of warm cinnamon countered, enveloped him in peaceful sanctuary. Steve’s arms remained his solid ground.

Ryan smiled weakly, azure eyes still pointed at the floor. “That doesn’t change facts, Steve. Wrong actions with good intentions might be pretty common, but they’re still a few shades grayer than I can justify. At least, in my case.” She turned around and walked out of the room, staring resolutely ahead. Bucky felt Steve’s arms tighten around him further.

“Steve?” he said quietly.

“Yeah, Buck?”

“I want her to join the family.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

* * * * * * *

Steve jolted awake, cold sweat drying on his forehead. Beside him, Bucky shot straight up, searching the room wildly. Their eyes met, and a strange, déjà vu-like realization sent a thrill down Steve’s spine.

“Were you just drea – “

“Yeah,” Bucky panted, white as a sheet. “You were there, and Ryan – you guys were there, what the fuck?”
Steve sat up, mind whirling. “Ryan, it – it had to be her, she – “

“She – no.” Bucky shook his head, looking dazed. “She was there, Steve, I could – feel her. And you.”

“I know. I could too.” Leaning back, Steve took a deep breath, exhaling heavily. A bizarre sense of – emptiness? Loneliness? Both and neither, some indescribable feeling – permeated the back of his mind and spread an aching hollow down to his heart. By the way Bucky suddenly nestled into his side, burying his face in the crook of Steve’s neck and scenting deeply, he felt it too. Steve wrapped his arms around his mate, tugging him in closer. The feeling eased only a little.


“When we both thought she was in trouble?”

“Knew she was in trouble,” Bucky corrected. “She lied, we both know it. But that, and practicing her powers… maybe that’s how it happened.”

“Was it her nightmare or yours, then?”

“Mine,” Bucky whispered, and Steve pressed a kiss into his hair. “I was in the chair before you two showed up.”

Steve took a deep breath, sighing it out through his nose. “There’s a lot we don’t know about lucid dreaming, or whatever. Ryan brought us all together somehow, but we couldn’t control ourselves until she stopped Kilgrave in there. Maybe it was just a – “

Bucky gave him his signature quit-being-a-moron-Steve look, and Steve cut off, rolling his eyes. “We don’t know for sure, we don’t want to scare her.”

“So, what?” Bucky said, sitting up and looking down at him. “We keep on keeping secrets about her from her? Jesus, Steve, you don’t think the first round of lies here was enough?”

“We’re not lying!” Steve insisted, setting his jaw. “She gave us permission to ask Simmons about her powers, and we’d already figured out half of it anyway – “

“And now she’s looking to discover it herself!” With a frustrated huff, Bucky threw back the covers, running his vibranium hand through his hair. “These aren’t even bad things, just – you can’t protect her from herself, Steve.”

“I’ll protect her from everything, if I have to,” Steve vowed, getting out of bed himself. “You and her both. You know that.”

Bucky rolled his eyes, growling in frustration. “Would you just stop being so goddamn stubborn, for once!”

“I am not losing another mate!” Steve hissed, positioning himself between Bucky and the door. “She’ll run again, you know she will! We’ve just barely gotten her to stay here again, if she thinks – “

“She needs to make the decision herself!” Bucky shoved forward, practically baring his teeth as he got up in Steve’s face. “She chose to come back, after everything – we don’t get to choose for her. She has these powers, it’s her life!”

“So we make that choice for her?” Steve half-yelled, throwing his hands in the air. “We decide to
tell her everything about her powers, our connection, everything, even when we know she has too much on her plate already? When just a week ago, she thought we were going to throw her in a cell because she had a bad flashback?"

“Do you trust her?”

The words slapped across him like an actual blow to the face. Immediately, Steve murmured back, “With your life.”

Bucky’s face softened then, the anger leaving his eyes. He reached for Steve’s hand, and Steve took it, squeezing once. “Then let’s prove it.”

Steve looked away, sighing through his nose as his anger evaporated away. “When?”

“After the announcement,” Bucky said after a pause. “It’s only a week out. Timing makes sense.”

“Okay.” He squeezed Bucky’s hand again, then dropped it to stride over to the closet and pull out his running sneakers. “You want to come?”

“It’s 4 AM, you lunatic.”

Steve chuckled under his breath. “We don’t actually need the sleep, mo anamchara.”

“Some of us enjoy it,” Bucky grumbled, flopping down and throwing the covers over his head. Steve laughed again, then tossed the shoes away and leapt on the bed on top of his mate, pinning him down playfully. Bucky thrashed under his grip, mock-grumbling as he rolled them over and tangled them further into the blankets. Steve got both of his wrists pinned in one hand, Bucky only half-resisting, and pulled the covers down to reveal Bucky’s face, bright with laughter.

“Get off me, you big oaf,” Bucky grinned, wriggling underneath him. Steve returned the grin, excitement bubbling up inside and spilling out into a quickly stifled giggle.

“We’re gonna tell her,” he breathed, then ducked down to kiss Bucky on the cheek. “She’s gonna know.”

“I know,” Bucky murmured back, brown eyes sparkling up at him.

“That we love her,” Steve continued, kissing Bucky’s other cheek.

“That she’s our perfect mate,” Bucky added, rewarded with a kiss to his forehead.

“That we want her, with us, forever,” Steve murmured in his ear before scenting at his neck.

“That I’ve wanted to rip her clothes off for the last six months,” Bucky murmured back, and Steve swatted him upside the head. “Hey, consensually!”

“Damn right,” Steve rumbled from his chest, pressing kisses up Bucky’s jawline. Then he paused, leaning back with a sober expression.

“What?” Bucky asked, eyebrows drawing together. Then his countenance fell, realizing. “I’ve been trying not to think of that.”

“Me, too,” Steve muttered, untangling them from the blankets and lying down on his back atop the sheets. “But… What he did to her. She might not ever want to. And I don’t blame her.”

“Of course not.” Bucky sat up, exhaling a heavy breath. “That was the one thing they never
bothered to do to me.”

Steve looked over at him sharply, Bucky’s eyes hardened and cold. “You never told me that.”

“I was a machine to them. Most people aren’t into in fucking machines.” He took a deep breath, a hint of anger leaking into his scent. “The dream. He still haunts her.”

“It’s not a dealbreaker for me, not even close,” Steve said, and Bucky immediately shook his head.

“For me, either. But… I hope she wants us.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Miss Green? Ryan?”

Ryan jerked awake, half-blinded by the sunlight streaming through her windows. “What? What’s wrong?”

“You merely slept through your alarm, Ryan. As you set it earlier than usual, I thought I should wake you, as it is now later than your usual time.”

“Oh, shit!” Ryan threw back the covers and leapt out of bed, dashing into the closet for clothes. “Am I too late?”

“No, he is still asleep. And unlikely to awaken for some time, I might add.”

“Oh, good,” Ryan said, pausing with one leg in her jeans. “Cool. And, um…”

“Yes?”

“Did you, um… There’s nothing saved of me when I woke up during the night, right?”

“Of course not. And your privacy settings are still engaged.”

Ryan smiled up at the ceiling, pulling on her last clean flannel. “Thanks, JARVIS. It was just a weird nightmare, is all.”

“There is no need for explanation. Best of luck, Ryan.”

“Come on, how hard could it be?”

Forty-five minutes and a mild burn to her left hand later, she grinned brightly as Tony finally came into the communal kitchen, looking both concerned and confused. “Ryan? Why won’t JARVIS let me open my own fridge?”

“Surprise!” she half-shrieked, yanking away the upside-down pot on the kitchen island to reveal a stack of blueberry pancakes, only slightly overdone. “Happy birthday!”

Tony stared at the plate, then at her, eyes dim and hair still disheveled from sleep. “My birthday’s tomorrow.”
“No!” Ryan said, gaping at him. “Shit! I’m so sorry, I looked it up forever ago and put it in my phone – “

“It’s fine!” Tony inserted, laughing at her wide-eyed look of horror. He moved past her to grab the coffee pot, shaking his head in amusement. “May 29th is what you’re looking for. Lucky for you, I take the whole week off in celebration of the second most important day of the year.”

“Jesus, I somehow got it as the 28th,” Ryan sighed, checking her phone’s calendar. “JARVIS, I’m not blaming you, but why didn’t you tell me?”

“You seemed so enthusiastic, I didn’t have the heart. Also, you open at the library tomorrow, and I knew you wouldn’t have the chance otherwise.”

“Oh. Thank you, then,” Ryan said, smiling gratefully upwards.

“That’s it, I’m combing through you for nits later,” Tony mock-grumbled, sitting at the island and pulling the plate of pancakes over. “I did not program you for bouts of sentimentality.”

“If I only had a heart,” JARVIS said dryly, and Ryan giggled.

“I understood that reference,” Steve’s voice piped up, and Tony groaned aloud, glaring dramatically at him as he entered the kitchen. “Hey, Ryan,” he continued, smiling softly at her, and her heart leaped in her chest. “Uh, how’d you sleep?”

“Great,” she said, shifting from one foot to the other. A strange, empty feeling had been haunting her ever since she woke up screaming at 3:37 AM, and it took hours to fall asleep again through it. Here with Steve, though, it wasn’t so bad anymore. “Sorry, I’ve got to get to work, I’ll see you later?”

“Have a good day,” he murmured, and she felt her cheeks turn pink as she fought off a goofy smile.

“Ryan?” Tony called after her as she left, and she turned back around. He smiled, shaking his head again. “These pancakes are terrible, and I’m still waiting on my espresso.”

“Sorry,” she grinned back at him, recognizing his teasing tone. “We never did get that espresso maker.”

“Excuses, excuses. Eight tonight on the roof, don’t be late,” he mock-scolded her. “Or did they never teach you how to tell time in the school for feral street children?”

“What’s tonight?” Steve asked, as Ryan stuck out her tongue at him.

“Birthday extravaganza, night one!” Tony said in an affronted tone, and Ryan sniggered as Steve rolled his eyes.

* * * * * * * *

“Ryan. There is a heat wave and an Olympic-sized pool on the roof with an attached hot tub big enough for 16 people. Did you really think we wouldn’t be swimming?”

Rolling her eyes with a smile, she sat cross-legged on the edge, splashing one hand lazily in the
warm water. Creedence Clearwater Revival warned about the bad moon rising as most of the
Avengers and a few strangers milled around, chatting in various states of inebriation. “I don’t know
how to swim, and I probably wouldn’t anyway, so…”

“You never learned how to swim?!” Darcy exclaimed, swimming over in one wide stroke. “Alright,
your level of deprivation is just egregious, now. Come on, I’ve got a spare bikini,” she ordered,
pulling herself up on the side and splashing Ryan a little.

“Thanks, Darce, but I’m good,” Ryan said, trying to pull out of Darcy’s grip on her wrist as she
marched them away.

“Ryan, come on! There’s nothing to be scared of – “

“I’m not – Darcy, please,” Ryan begged in a low murmur, giving her a desperate look as Thor and
Clint looked over from across the pool. “I – I have scars, alright? From – what happened.”
A look of understanding washed over Darcy’s face, followed quickly by something like pity as she
dropped Ryan’s arm. “Ryan, come on, no one’s gonna judge you – “

“I just can’t, okay?” Ryan looked away, exhaling a deep breath. “And I don’t want anyone else to
be upset by them, either. So, bikinis are pretty much out.”

“Yeah, I bet you look terrible in them now,” Natasha’s voice came from behind them. Darcy
automatically leaned up to kiss her hello before they both looked back to Ryan. “They’re nothing to
be ashamed of,” Natasha continued quietly, some unreadable emotion in her eyes.

“I know,” Ryan said, tone bordering on defensive. “Excuse me, I have to use the bathroom.”

“No, wait – I’m sorry, please don’t go,” Darcy pleaded, grabbing Ryan’s hand again. “Come on, the
lobsters are almost done, let’s just go eat.”

And suddenly, Ryan was struck with a loneliness she hadn’t felt since the day she’d saved Bucky on
that rooftop. If it wasn’t the lobsters, it was the week off for birthdays, or the AI that woke her up
this morning, or even just the goddamn pool. Or how the Avengers had made it clear she was unlike
anyone else they’d ever known.

And Darcy could just stand there and kiss her mate, the intimacy so casual it made Ryan’s heart
ache. “I – I don’t eat lobster, I’m sorry,” she lied, starting to pull away again.

Darcy looked ready to dig in her heels, but Natasha put a hand on her shoulder, muttering,
“Пожалуйста, дорогая, отпустить ее.”

Immediately, Darcy dropped her hand, expression crestfallen. “Sorry, Ryan.”

She tried her best to smile at her, an empty cavern where her happiness was supposed to be. “No,
it’s fine. I’ll see you later, alright?”

“No, don’t leave already!” Bucky inserted, and Ryan turned around to see him and Steve arrive from
the elevator. “Night’s still plenty young.”

“We’re just gonna jump in the pool, we’ll back out in a minute,” Steve added, an excited look on his
face.

“I – yeah, alright,” Ryan said, trying to answer their smiles with one of her own again.
“Come on, I’ll sit with you,” Darcy said, pulling her down to a dry edge of the pool again. “Nat, could you grab me a beer, please?”

Natasha nodded, and then it was just the two of them, Darcy’s bright red bikini still dripping down to the ground. “I really am sorry,” she muttered, looking down at her feet splashing in the pool. “I just thought you really loved your flannels, I didn’t mean to – “

“It’s fine,” Ryan interrupted a little too shortly. “Let’s just… talk about something else.”

Darcy opened her mouth again, but whatever she was going to say was drowned out as both Steve and Bucky took running starts, yelling and whooping as they half-jumped, half-tackled each other off the edge and into the water. Half a second later, a huge wave of water splashed up and came down right over both her and Darcy.

“Guys!” Darcy yelled playfully as they resurfaced, both of them laughing as Darcy splashed back as them. Ryan, however, shot to her feet in horror, the whole front of her dripping wet.

“Sorry, Ryan,” Steve grinned, but his face fell when she pulled her cellphone out of her short’s pocket, frantically pressing the power button. “Oh, shit, did your phone get wet?”

“Fuck,” Ryan muttered under her breath, as the phone didn’t light up at all. She backed away, saying, “I have to go try to fix this, sorry – “

“No, don’t apologize! It was our fault, let us do it,” Bucky insisted, swimming over to the edge. Ryan looked back to argue, but then, the words stuck in her throat.

Bucky pulled himself up out of the pool, water streaming down in rivulets, and a hot, intense feeling both entirely foreign and intensely familiar coursed through Ryan’s entire body. He shook the water from his hair, metal hand smoothing it down, and Ryan’s mouth went dry. He started to walk over, torso bare but for the wet shine across his thick, sculpted abdomen, and she froze in place.

Then, Steve did the exact same, and Ryan saw practically in slow motion how a single drop traveled from his shoulder down his bare chest, running down smooth white skin stretched over rippling muscles, down further until it reached –

A wild thought passed through her mind, and she choked back a nervous giggle. So that’s what Karen meant. You really do just know.

“It’s okay, guys, we’ve got it,” Darcy suddenly inserted, jerking Ryan back to reality. She grabbed Ryan’s hand, quickly pulling her away without any resistance as Ryan felt her cheeks start to flame. When they reached the elevator, Darcy clapped a hand to her mouth, hiding a gleeful smile.

“Down, girl,” she giggled in Ryan’s ear, and Ryan stared at her in horror. “Oh my god, would you relax, please?” Darcy added, laughing at the look on Ryan’s face. “You’re hardly the first person who’s ever drooled at a hearty slice of beefcake.”

“Oh my god,” Ryan breathed, hiding her face in her hands. She just about wanted to die right there.

“Darcy, please, please, you can’t tell anyone – “

“Ryan!” Darcy said, laughing again as the elevator dinged. “It’s okay, god! You didn’t do anything wrong, don’t you know they’re totally – “

“Ryan!” a new voice suddenly slurred, the doors in front of them opening. A second later, Ryan was engulfed in a huge embrace, and she almost gagged from the smell of alcohol burning her nose. “I’s been forever!”
“Foggy?” Ryan said in disbelief, pushing away to look at him. He swayed where he stood, eyes bloodshot and one shirt sleeve unrolled, hair unkempt and a stain on his shirtfront. “What happened?”

“I have to – to give you somethin’,” he whispered conspiratorially, eyes widening as he felt through his pockets. “Whe – what’d you do with it?”

“Jesus,” Darcy proclaimed, eyebrows furrowing as she frowned. “Come on, let’s get him out of here.”

“No, you stay,” Ryan said, and held up a hand before Darcy could argue. “It’s fine, I’ve got it. Stay here and have fun. Come on, Foggy, I – left it downstairs.”

“You did?” he half-shouted, and Ryan tugged him back into the elevator and quickly pressed level five.

“Ryan?” JARVIS piped up as they started to move. “Mr. Nelson insisted upon seeing you. Given his inebriated state, I thought it best to let him in and bar him from leaving until he’s sobered again.”

“No, that was good, thank you,” Ryan replied, as Foggy started sniggering in the corner. His scent was muted and depressed, and it worried her further. “Foggy? What happened? Why are you so drunk?”

“Cause you – you’re my only friend, didja know tha’?” He groaned once, leaning against the wall. “Oh, I’m gonna be sick.”

“Shit, not yet, Foggy, please,” Ryan begged, backing away to the opposite side. “JARVIS, which floor are the guest rooms on?”

“Level 9, Ryan. I’m taking you there now.”

“Who’s that talkin’?” Foggy asked, scrunching his face in confusion up at the ceiling. “He’s nice.”

“That’s JARVIS, the AI Tony programmed to be his friend,” Ryan replied shortly. “Come on, Foggy, what happened? Where are Matt and Karen?” Suddenly, her stomach dropped to her feet. “Fuck, are they okay? Did something happen to them?!”

Then, Foggy’s face screwed up, and he burst into tears where he stood. “They – they – “

“Shh, Foggy, it’s okay,” Ryan whispered, fighting back her own frightened tears as she grabbed his hand. “It’s okay, just tell me.”

“Th-they’re gone. Everythin’s gone.”

****

Ryan turned down the lights, Foggy’s chainsaw snores drowning out the TV set to the local news. He’d said nothing else after his dramatic pronouncement, just thrown up on the floor as soon as they got to the spare room’s bathroom and fallen asleep after she’d made him rinse out his mouth and dragged him to bed. It wasn’t her first time cleaning up vomit, and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

“…exclusive video footage from last night in Hell’s Kitchen, where eyewitnesses say shots were
fired, several were found injured and one man discovered *beheaded* in an alley in the shipping
district,” the news anchor said as Ryan turned up the volume. “Warning, this footage may be
disturbing and not suitable for younger viewers.”

Shaky video of a fight, high up on a rooftop, revealed what looked like Matt in his bloodred attire,
fighting hand-to-hand alongside a woman wearing a red mask across her mouth against a man in a
black ninja outfit. A dozen other men were already on the ground, gunshots firing in the
background. A scream of pain from the woman, and the footage cut out.

“Police are not releasing any details, but an inside source confirmed Frank Castle, the escaped
convict known as The Punisher, as well as local vigilante Daredevil, were both involved in the
incident. More to come as the story develops.”

Ryan shut off the TV, then buried her face in her hands. If something had happened to Matt and
Karen… They’d done so much for her, and she’d done nothing to repay them. All this shit they
were going through, and she hadn’t even been paying attention!

Oh, god, she couldn’t have any more deaths on her hands. She didn’t think she could take it.

“Ryan? Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes are asking after you. Would you like me to say you
are indisposed at the moment?” JARVIS asked. Ryan quickly wiped her cheeks, taking a deep
breath.

“Yeah, tell them I’m fine,” she muttered, automatically clicking on her phone to check the time.
“Oh, fuck.” She’d forgotten it was fried. Great, now she’d have to scrounge up the money to
replace it...

“Ryan?” Foggy mumbled behind her, and she turned around to see him blinking himself awake.
“Oh, god. I’m sorry.”

He sounded much more sober now, and it was a small relief. “It’s fine. Do you need some water?”

“Please.” Ryan grabbed a glass from the bathroom, and Foggy gulped it down. “Um… do you
happen to know why I’m here?”

“You said you had to give me something,” Ryan said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “But –
did something happen to Matt and Karen?”

Foggy looked away, clenching his jaw. “They’re gone.” Ryan clapped a hand to her mouth, and he
whirled back around, looking contrite. “No, no, not like that! They’re alive!”

“Oh, Jesus, Foggy,” Ryan sighed, blinking back more tears. “Just – what happened?”

“Matt cheated on us,” Foggy said shortly, and Ryan’s jaw dropped. “He was going to run away
with this batshit crazy chick he knew from law school until she got herself killed. And Karen – she
was, I don’t know, fascinated by that lunatic Castle and won’t drop it, and when we took his case,
we pretty much fucked over Nelson and Murdock. So, she decided she needed some space.”

“God.” Ryan laid a hand on top of his, and he tried to smile at her.

“Maybe it’s for the best,” he shrugged, pulling his hand away. “I’ve only been in love with Matt
since the day one, and Karen’s only absolutely brilliant and amazing. Obviously, it wasn’t meant to
be.” He sniffed once, blinking rapidly. “Don’t fall in love, Ryan. It’s all fairy tale bullshit.”

“I’ll try my best,” she muttered, pain lancing through her heart. She stood up, handing him the TV
remote. “Get some sleep.”

“Oh, wait!” Foggy said, digging in his pocket. He pulled out a crinkled envelope, offering it to her. “I just remembered. I was supposed to get this to you forever ago.”

She took it, and her heart sank when she recognized her handwriting on the outside. “I told Tony to take this!”

“Come on, it’s not like he needs the money,” Foggy said, lying back against the pillows. “They signed an affidavit absolving you of any financial obligation to them, for everything that happened since you’ve met.”

Ryan closed her eyes for a minute, too many emotions at once all churning in her chest. “Alright, well. I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks, again,” Foggy said, and she nodded, closing the door behind her.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Back in her bedroom, she sat in the corner of the glass and wooden walls, staring out at the city beyond. In her lap, she held her oldest notebook, open to the first page. She hadn’t revisited this one in a while. Taking a deep breath, she started reading.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Mom made spaghetti for dinner every Sunday. Dad learned English watching I Love Lucy. Mom liked John Williams and Tchaikovsky, and Dad liked Metallica and classic rock. Mom brought me dress shopping when I was eight, and I got the yellow one with the flowers. Dad took me riding when I was nine and told me not to tell her. Mom and Dad talked to me only in Spanish until I was two so I’d be bilingual.

Gray and Pop-Pop never knew about me. Mom and Dad both told me not to tell anyone, ever. I think they’re right.

She’d forgotten how bad her handwriting used to be. She closed the notebook, and gently placed it back in its slot with the others in her backpack. The remnants of the nightmare played in the back of her mind, mixing with Foggy’s story and the piercing, aching emptiness that’d been growing inside her all day.

There was more she’d forgotten, too, it seemed. Like how Steve and Bucky really felt about her. How she wasn’t meant for some happy ending, no matter what Pamela said about not owing the universe a debt. How she was taking advantage of people, staying there.

How she wasn’t one of them. Not really.

Well. That was that, then. She stood back up, laying her backpack down on the bed, and went to grab a spare set of clothes from the closet. A few minutes later, she scribbled down a note, and closed the door behind her.

Chapter End Notes
You recognize that bit in the beginning? I FINALLY TIED IN THE PROLOGUE GUYS!!!

So, that leaves us at the end of the events of Daredevil season 2. No more significant MCU events will be covered in this work now, anything else that happens is strictly my story's universe.
In Which Ryan Makes a Better Choice This Time

Chapter Notes

If anyone was frustrated with last chapter, I feel you. Ryan was being very frustrating. But, I think you'll like this one better.

Also, sorry about the drought and then flood of updates. Like I said, my schedule's crazy weird right now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“She never came back last night. I’m worried,” Steve muttered so Sam wouldn’t hear. Rows of sizzling bacon and a griddle of flapjacks covered his voice as he, Sam and Bucky made a late Saturday breakfast. “Maybe we can go visit her at the library.”

“We don’t want to crowd her. Just text,” Bucky suggested, sipping his third cup of coffee. Sun shone bright through the windows, a hint of summer already in the breeze drifting lazily in.

“We can’t; we fried her phone last night, remember?”

“Oh fuck, you’re right. Hey, Sam?” Bucky called over towards the stove, but Sam didn’t turn around. “Sam? Okay, are you fucking serious?”

Steve huffed a laugh, then said, “Hey, Sam?”

“Yes man, what’s up?” Sam replied immediately, turning around with a pointed smile. Bucky scowled at him to no effect.

“Did you happen to hear if Ryan’s phone is okay?” Steve asked, and Sam raised his eyebrows.

“What happened to it?”

“Nothing, you maniac,” Bucky grumbled, getting up to pour a fourth cup of coffee.

“Says the guy who landed on my car roof, smashed through my windshield and ripped out my steering whe – “

“None of it was even yours! It was a fucking rental!”

“Do I want to know what they’re yelling about?” Foggy’s voice piped up from behind, and Steve stopped laughing at them to smile at Foggy.

“Good morning, Foggy. And no, not at all.”

“I figured,” Foggy nodded. “Anyway, could you point me towards Ryan’s room? I was trying to give her the money she left for Tony back, but she tried to leave it again.”

“Of course she did,” Bucky muttered, rolling his eyes and turning back to his steaming mug.
“Fifth floor. She won’t be there, though, she opened at the library this morning,” Steve answered, an odd feeling of déjà vu whispering through him. He stood up from his seat at the island, unease churning his stomach. “I can take it, if you’d like.”

“No, it’s fine, enjoy your breakfast,” Foggy said quickly, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. “And, uh, tell Ryan thank-you, for last night. I was a mess, she was great.”

Steve nodded, and Foggy left, Bucky taking a seat to leave the kitchen quiet. Less than a minute later, though, Steve met Bucky’s eyes, and they stood up simultaneously just as Sam set down a huge platter, piled high with pancakes.

“We’ll be right back,” Steve called over his shoulder as they rushed to the elevator, Sam yelling after them, “It’s really weird how you two do that, you know!”

Thirty seconds later, the doors opened, and they hurried out together. As they ran down the hall, Foggy reappeared in Ryan’s doorway, even more ashen-faced than before.

“She left this,” he mumbled, holding out a folded piece of paper, and Steve’s heart plummeted. Trying not to tremble, he took it from Foggy and opened it, turning so Bucky could read as well.

_I’m sorry. It’s for the best. If I ever make it back to New York, I’ll look you up._

- Ryan

“No,” Bucky breathed beside him, and Foggy gave him a sympathetic look. Steve closed his eyes, forcing back emotion, until he suddenly scented a rush of anger from Bucky.

“What did you tell her last night?” he growled, an ice-cold glare fixed on Foggy as he stalked forward.

“Jesus, man, calm down!” Foggy said in alarm, backing away down the hall. “She – she asked what happened with me, and I told her – “

“What?”

“They left me, okay?! I was upset, I was drunk, I told her love sucks!” Foggy shouted back at him, and Steve quickly inserted himself between them.

“Alright, alright, just – do you have any idea where she is? Did she say anything else?”

Foggy ran a hand through his hair, distress souring his scent. “I don’t know, I – Claire got her a bus ticket out of Hell’s Kitchen last time she left, maybe she’d try that again?”

Bucky grabbed Steve’s arm, and Steve nodded once as they took off for the stairs to the garage. “You drive, Sam’s calling the library to make sure she’s not there,” Steve said, tucking his phone away before straddling the back of Bucky’s Kawasaki. Bucky tossed him a helmet, and a second later, they zoomed full-speed out of the garage heading west towards 51st and 10th, Bucky’s metal arm shining in the morning sun.
Ryan felt perversely proud of herself. She hadn’t cried at all since she’d left. The night out on the park bench was familiar enough, and she’d taken enough money from the envelope to pay for a bus ticket. Now, she just had to decide where.

Seattle rained a lot, that probably wasn’t great. Phoenix had scorpions and snakes and fake psychics, that sounded terrible. Maybe she’d just go crazy, try Los Angeles or Miami or something. Eternal sunshine sounded nice.

She readjusted her backpack, staring up at the schedule listings scrolling on the screen. Hell, Boston was just a few hours away. It’d been a while. She missed sunrises by the Charles and clam chowder, honestly.

“One for Boston at 11:30, please,” she said, a bored-looking lady taking her money without glancing away from her phone. Her ticket printed with a click, and Ryan claimed a sticky bench seat outside in the terminal opposite the smokers. Only twenty minutes to wait.

She jiggled her leg unconsciously, checking her phone twice in ten minutes before realizing each time that it was dead. More people came out to wait, a tan woman in a pink hijab sitting next to Ryan and bouncing a smiling baby boy on her lap. Ryan grinned at him, and he clapped his hands and giggled.

Ten more minutes dragged on, and she started to get impatient. She’d made her choice. Ignoring pain was her default. But sitting there was only delaying the inevitable, and the sooner she stomped out her childish dreaming, the sooner she’d get over it. Them.

At last, the bus pulled up with a litany of creaks and groans, and she stretched out her neck as she stood. She nodded at the lady and her baby, who smiled back as they went ahead of her in line.

Suddenly, the sound of an engine revving echoed deafeningly under the awning, and Ryan startled, clapping her hands to her ears. A motorcycle screeched around the corner, stopping so fast it left skid marks on the road, and Ryan’s eyes widened at the sight of a shining metal arm.

She dashed out of line and over to the bike as they took off their helmets, Bucky running a hand through his flattened hair. “What are you doing here?!” she hissed, eyes wide as she glanced behind her again. Everyone was looking on with interest, a few people whispering to each other, eyes bright with recognition.

“Ryan, please, you can’t go,” Steve said, climbing off the bike in one smooth motion. “Come on, why’re you doing this?”

“I told you in the note,” she muttered, glancing back again. Several people had phones out, and she took a deep breath, closing her eyes a moment. “It’s for the best, now just – please, can we not make a big deal?”

“No, we’re doing this,” Bucky suddenly Inserted, taking a step closer to her. “How is this better, for any of us?”

“No, we’re doing this,” Bucky suddenly Inserted, taking a step closer to her. “How is this better, for any of us?”

“Bucky, come on,” Ryan begged, “you know why, please – “

“No, I don’t!” he half-yelled, and Ryan gestured frantically for him to quiet down. “This makes no sense, you didn’t even talk to us! Just talk to us, tell us what’s wrong!”
“Ryan, please,” Steve said again, “what did we do? Just tell us, we’ll do anythi – “

“You didn’t do anything!” Ryan exclaimed, waving her hands in frustration. “You did too much, even, and I – I can’t take advantage of you anymore!”

“You’re not taking advantage of anything!” Bucky proclaimed. “We wanted you, we wanted to help you!”

“Yeah, because you felt guilty, and I don’t want that from you!”

Both Steve and Bucky’s eyes widened, but Ryan barely noticed in her agitation. “You’ve been amazing, really, and I’m so grateful, but – it can’t keep going, I don’t belong here! I can’t keep letting everyone pretend to care about me, and I can’t keep pretending, either!”

Steve paled, clenching and unclenching one hand at his side. “What were you pretending?” he asked in a low mutter, intense with emotion.


“What?” Bucky muttered, his own eyes shining.

“I didn’t mean to,” she whispered, “I just – “

“Pretending what?”

“That I’m not completely fucking in love with both of you, okay!?”

Their mouths dropped open in tandem, and Ryan felt sick to her stomach. “It’s so fucking stupid of me, I didn’t mean to, and I know you don’t feel the same, and that’s why I have to go!”

“Ryan,” Bucky breathed, but she barely heard him.

“I don’t expect anything, I wasn’t even going to tell you! I tried to get over it, but it wasn’t happening, and I just – I can’t be around you guys anymore, everything’s messed up and it’s wrong for me to put that pressure on you – “

“Ryan,” he said, more insistently, but she still ignored him, starting to pace in her distress.

“ – I just wanted to leave quietly! I didn’t know what else to do – “

“Ryan!” Bucky shouted, closing the space between them in two strides.

“What, Bucky, what?!!” she yelled, tears spilling down freely now as she paused, the whole world holding its breath.

He stepped even closer, face alight with wonder, and he brushed away the tears with his thumbs, hands cupping her face.

“Shut up,” he whispered, and he kissed her.

Ryan froze in place, eyes wide with shock. Then, some instinct deep inside made her lean into it, closing her eyes and just feeling. It was chaste, lips firm and warm against her own, but it felt like a promise meant to last.

Seconds, minutes, or a lifetime later, Bucky pulled back. A stray tear rolled down his cheek now as he just smiled at her, eyes alight and scent bursting with joy. Then, Steve stepped forward, gently
taking her hand in his own and cradling her head with the other.

“What he said,” he murmured tenderly. Then, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers.

He felt different from Bucky; his lips a bit softer, wider. His perfect, wonderful scent surrounded her, swirled deliciously with Bucky’s left behind, and her heart swelled so big she thought it might explode.

“Fucking finally!” Clint’s voice suddenly rang out, and Steve broke their kiss to whirl around, half-shielding Ryan behind him. Awareness of the rest of the world came flooding back, and Ryan realized everyone at the terminal was clapping and cheering, and the rest of the Avengers were all gathered on the other side behind them.

“Yes! I win!” Darcy screamed, and both Bruce and Sam groaned dramatically, digging wallets out of their pockets as she pumped her arms up in celebration. “May 29th, on the dot! Hand it over, boys!”

“Actually,” Natasha said with a sly grin, “I bet May 29th before noon, and it’s 11:48.”

“What?!” Darcy shrieked as Clint yelled, “Hah! We both lose! Suck it!”

“You had a betting pool, and you didn’t invite me?!” Tony shouted, throwing his arms in the air, looking scandalized.

Suddenly, Bucky stepped forward, shooting them all a deathly glare. “Get out of here!” he hissed through clenched teeth, and Jane lowered her phone with a chastised expression. Pepper simply raised an eyebrow at him and kept recording.

“But, James, we are here to offer our felicitous congratulations!” Thor boomed, arms open wide in delight. “We all have been awaiting for this day for ages now – “

“What?!” Ryan squeaked, her face burning red. Steve pulled her into his side, releasing her hand to put a protective arm around her shoulders.

“Alright, show’s over,” he announced, shooing them off with his other hand. “You mind? We’re trying to have a conversation, here.”

“I didn’t know Ryan could speak body language,” Clint cracked, Darcy sniggering alongside him. Then, he let out a high-pitched yelp, turning tail and bolting as Bucky took a single step towards him.

“Bucky!” Ryan laughed, and he turned back around to grin at her.

“Come on, sweetheart,” he murmured, and the old nickname sent a new thrill down her spine. “Can we please go home, now?”

Home. With them. Ryan choked back another sob, this time with happiness as she nodded vigorously.

Just then, Steve burst out laughing, and both Ryan and Bucky looked at him in surprise. “We rode a two person bike here,” he said, and Bucky groaned as Ryan snorted with laughter.

“Well, I can’t call an Uber, cause my phone’s dead and I spent all my money on an interstate bus ticket,” she giggled, shaking her head. “So, I’ll meet you guys back there in an hour?”
“Jesus Christ, you’re not walking!” Tony interjected, sounding horrified. “Oh my god, Ryan. Also, I did not need all this drama taking away from my birthday, thank you very much.”

“Sorry, Tony,” Ryan said, rolling her eyes at him. He met her smile with his own, brown eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Go on, you crazy lovebirds,” he said, gesturing towards a limousine parked behind them. “Before I change my mind.”

“So we’re walking back, then?” Sam said, sounding amused.

“I’ve never taken the bus,” Tony shrugged. “It’ll be an enlightening experience, I’m sure.”

Steve shook his head at them, huffing a laugh before he took Ryan’s hand again. “You ready?” he asked softly, eyes sparkling down at her as Bucky took her other hand. She nodded again, and Bucky led them forward.

“Ryan,” Pepper murmured as she passed, and Ryan paused. “JARVIS is already erasing the videos from the spectator’s phones. Don’t worry about a thing.”

Ryan’s heart swelled even further, and she managed a thank-you before Bucky tugged her forward again. A minute later, she climbed into the limo after him, and Steve shut the door.

* * *   * * *   * * *

They all shuffled with seatbelts along the back bench for a moment as the driver rolled them away, the engine silent and ride smooth. Hugging her backpack to her chest, a stray thought crossed Ryan’s mind, and she chuckled under her breath.

“What?” Bucky said, laughing along with her.

“Just – in every crappy rom-com I’ve ever seen, the camera fades out after the dramatic reunion,” she said, leaning her head back on the seat. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now.”

“Well,” Steve said, bumping his knee against hers and making her cheeks turn pink again. She turned to look at him, and his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You could start by telling us what you meant, when you said we were helping you out of guilt.”

Ryan dropped her gaze, hugging her backpack even tighter. “Do we have to do this now?” she whispered.

On her left, Bucky took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “That hurt, Ryan,” he said, and guilt lanced through her, leaving her breathless. “A lot, actually. Did – do you really think that little of us?”

“No!” she exclaimed, horrified. “No, no, that’s not what I meant at all!”

“What, then?” Steve asked softly, shifting away from her when she squirmed a little.

The words stuck in her throat, and she sighed heavily. “Just, why – why else would anyone care?” The about me was left unsaid, but by the looks on their faces, they both understood.

Steve turned in his seat, facing her sideways. “We should’ve asked this before, and I’m sorry for
that,” he murmured, “but, can I touch you?”

She nodded, and a moment later was wrapped up in two sets of arms, Steve resting his forehead to her temple and Bucky pressing a kiss to her cheek. “One of these days, we’re gonna make you believe all the reasons why, a mhuírin,” Steve vowed in a low mutter.

Oh, god. Don’t fucking cry again, Ryan scolded herself as she squeezed her eyes shut, hoping the moment would never end.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered a minute later, and Bucky brushed his lips against her cheek again.

“What for?” he murmured, holding her a little tighter.

“For being so crazy and difficult,” she said. “For making you chase after me like that. I just… I thought I was doing the right thing, and I…”

“I understand,” Steve whispered against her skin. “Bucky?”

“Of course,” he said. “I’ve made the same mistakes, and worse.”

Ryan nodded, and tried to muster up just a little more courage. “I… I don’t know how to do this,” she confessed in a whisper.

Steve leaned back, brushing her hair behind her ear. “Do what?”

“Whatever… happens now,” Ryan said, voice wavering a little. “I don’t…”

Steve and Bucky met each other’s eyes, communicating silently between them, until Bucky nodded. “This isn’t exactly what we’d planned,” he admitted, giving her a crooked smile.

Ryan’s face fell, and Bucky quickly added, “I meant, there’s a surprise we were planning, and we were going to talk to you after that.”

“But, since that’s off the table,” Steve added, “can we tell you about the surprise back at the Tower?”

Ryan nodded, looking out the window for the first time and seeing they were just down the road from home. “What kind of surprise is it?”

“You’ll find out,” Bucky said, smile widening. “It was Steve’s idea.”

“The good ones always are,” Steve shrugged, and Bucky leaned over Ryan to thump him on the shoulder.

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“Alright, close your eyes. No peeking,” Bucky ordered, and Ryan obeyed. “Good,” he murmured, and he slid her backpack off her shoulders and down to the ground before taking both her hands in his. “Now, c’mere,” he added, and Ryan was slowly led forward to the couch, Bucky pressing her to him when they sat.

Ryan held back a smile as he settled one arm around her shoulder. If this alone was the surprise, she loved it.
“Okay,” Steve said, his voice entering the room and body sinking onto the couch beside her, “it’s not quite ready yet, but. Open your eyes.”

She did, and in front of her on the coffee table was an open laptop. The screen displayed a website devoid of color and pictures but bearing the headline –

“The Unpresented Memorial Foundation,” she read aloud, and her jaw dropped. She clapped both hands to her mouth, wide eyes fixed on the black script.

“Tony started a whole slew of foundations after he shut down his weapons manufacturing divisions,” Steve said with a tender smile. “He and Pepper helped us with this one, and they even offered to put it under the Stark Industries charities division, so it’s already been staffed and had offices set up.”

“The first public project,” Bucky added, “is a plaque to be added to the 9/11 memorial, listing the unpresented. If they were in civil unions, like your parents, they’re noted and listed together.”

“And if you’d like, it’ll be dedicated to your parents specifically,” Steve finished. “The charity money also goes to support the families of unpresented who lost their lives in the line of duty. Specifically, their kids. That will be named the Mary and Alexander Fund.”

They both stopped talking then, and Ryan closed her eyes, her hands shaking. “I – I don’t know what to say.”

“No you like it?” Bucky murmured. She turned and threw her arms around him in response, burying her face in his shoulder. He held her tight, cradling her head with one hand.

“Th-thank you,” she breathed, pulling away to turn into Steve, who welcomed her with open arms. “I don’t – just, thank you.”

“I promised we’d make it right,” Steve said, dropping a kiss into her hair. Then, he released her and sat back, endless blue eyes captivating hers. “I thought about what I could say right now a million times those months we were apart. Every day, there’d be something. I’d go run in a park, and hope you’d appear around the corner. I’d hear a stranger laugh, and I’d want to beg to hear yours just one more time. I’d see red hair in a crowd, and my heart would jump every time.”

He shifted a little, dropping his gaze to take her hand. “We wanted you to be happy,” he continued, meeting her eyes again. “But the happiest I’ve felt, since we met, was the day you came back to us.”

Ryan’s breath hitched, and he gave her a dazzling smile. “And that same day, I made a promise to myself. That I’d do whatever it took to make you happy. As long as you would have me, I’d be yours.”

He looked to Bucky then, who took her other hand as she turned to face him. “I… I just fuckin’ love you,” he said, and Ryan chuckled wetly, tears leaking out the corners of her eyes. “I could sweet-talk you all day, if you want, but that’s what I want to say. I can’t imagine my life without you in it anymore, and I don’t ever want to again. You and Steve. That’s all I need.”

He reached up with his right hand, brushing away the wetness on her cheeks. “Say something, sweetheart,” he whispered, just the slightest uncertainty in his eyes.

Ryan took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “I didn’t think it was possible for me to feel like this.” She huffed the slightest laugh, looking down and away. “I never… pictured this. I mean, I haven’t thought about my future beyond where the next paycheck is coming from in years. But if I had, I don’t think I could ever have come up with something I’d want more than both of you.”
Bucky smiled brightly at her, brown eyes sparkling, and Steve rumbled low in his chest, sending a thrill down her spine. “We’re yours,” Steve vowed, taking Bucky’s hand in his free one and connecting all three of them. “I love you, Ryan.”

“I love you so much, sweetheart,” Bucky whispered.

With a heart fuller than she could possibly imagine, she whispered back, “I love you, too.”

Steve released Bucky’s hand to take her chin, pointing her towards him. “Can I kiss you?” he murmured, blue eyes aflame and scent heady with passion, enveloping her in its embrace.

“Anytime,” she murmured back, and melted into him as he claimed her lips for his own. Sweet and chaste but still somehow possessive and demanding, and she only wanted more. She pressed closer, and Steve growled with pleasure, tangling both hands in her hair, moving them over the back of her neck. A small gasp escaped her as she went limp with pleasure, and he pulled back, eyes dark and intense.

“Sorry,” he muttered, gaze fixed on her lips still. “It’s easy to get carried away with you. It won’t happen again.”

“I didn’t mind,” Ryan replied, cheeks flushed but mouth curling into a smile. “I have no idea what I’m doing, though, so I’m sorry I probably suck at it.”

Bucky suddenly cupped a hand to her face, eyebrows furrowed in disbelief as she turned to him. “Shit, was I – at the bus stop, that wasn’t your first, was it?”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess it was,” Ryan said with a shrug, and Bucky’s mouth dropped open in horror. “I never really wanted to kiss anyone else, so that’s fine with me.”

“Not with me. We’re doing this right, from now on.” Bucky stood up then, pulling her up with him. “Ryan. I have something very important to ask you.”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise, but nodded. He took both her hands in his, a solemn look on his face.

“Will you go on a date with me?”

Suddenly, Steve sniggered from the couch, and Bucky shot him a deadly glare. “Goddammit, Stevie, would you shut up?!”

Ryan held back her own laugh and smiled up at him, squeezing his hands so he’d turn back to her. “Not to be contradictory, but don’t the love confessions normally come after you go out for a while?” she said, and Bucky smirked at her.

“We’re not normal people,” he replied. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes, I will go on a date with you.”

They grinned at each other like fools, until Steve stood up and wrapped them both in his arms. “I call next weekend,” he murmured in her ear, and she’d never been happier in her life.
Well? What'd you think? :)

In Which New Challenges Arise From The Old

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Ryan froze in place at the sight of Pamela’s raised eyebrow and mischievous grin. “So. Heard you had quite the day today.”

Clearing her throat, Ryan held back a smile as she took her seat in the armchair. “It was good.”

Pamela rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “I was wondering how long it’d take those boys to crack. Another week, I’d have smacked them both upside the head.”

“Did everyone know except for me?” Ryan muttered under her breath.

Pamela chuckled. “Pretty much, sweetie. Can you tell me why you didn’t know?”

She clicked her pen and sat ready with her legal pad while Ryan pondered her answer, silence stretching almost a full minute. Eventually, she said, “Because… I was putting myself down so much, I couldn’t.”

“Thank you for sharing that, Ryan,” Pamela said softly, a proud smile on her face. “You were putting yourself down. How so?”

“The same way you told me not to.” Ryan shrugged her shoulders. “You know.”

“I don’t want to put words in your mouth. Can you tell me anyway?”

Ryan sighed deeply, frustration mounting. Just after Bucky had asked her out – Bucky asked me out! He and Steve!! – she’d remembered that she’d skipped out on Ms. Palermo at the library without so much as a good-bye, and she’d hurried off to try to explain. Steve and Bucky had kissed her together on either cheek, and she’d practically floated on air the entire way over.

Thankfully, it turned out that Sam had made her excuses, and her job remained intact. The rest of the day, she’d fought off giddy smiles, far more chipper than anyone shelving books had a right to be. Now, all she wanted to was to be a few floors up, doing whatever they were doing. But she had to get through her session with Pamela first.

“I thought they were helping me out of guilt, because I didn’t believe I deserved any better,” Ryan said at last. “So I was calling myself worthless.”

“Good girl,” Pamela praised. “Alright, so that was your mindset this morning, and then you decided to run away. We’d talked about that too, hadn’t we?”

“I thought it was for the best,” Ryan insisted, sitting up a little straighter. “I wasn’t running, I was trying to –”

“Do what was right, all on your lonesome?” Pamela filled in. “Be as perfect as you could be, not cause a lick of trouble?”

“I thought you weren’t putting words in my mouth,” Ryan snapped, crossing her arms.
Pamela raised her eyebrows, looking impressed. “First off, I’m proud you’re sticking up for yourself, hon. You wouldn’t have done that even two weeks ago. And second, these are all the same words we started our first sessions with, weren’t they? They’ve already come from both of us.”

Ryan gritted her teeth, looking away. “Fine. I screwed up. I won’t do it again.”

“Ryan, I’m not here to chastise you,” Pamela said. She set aside the legal pad for a moment, leaning in closer. “You’re not being punished. You’re not being judged. All I’m asking is that you acknowledge the truth of what’s happening, so you can make the kinds of choices you want to make in the future.”

Ryan felt about two inches tall, and she squirmed uncomfortably in her seat. “I’m sorry.”

“No apologies to me,” Pamela gently reminded her before sitting back again. “We’ll figure out if anyone else needs one later. But, I have to say, all this ties in perfectly to what I wanted to discuss today.”

“What did you want to talk about?” Ryan asked, looking up again. She stilled, though, at the serious, almost somber look in Pamela’s eyes.

“We’ve gone through the gist of what happened to you early on,” Pamela replied. “There’s more to talk about there, for sure, but. We can’t really ignore the elephant in the room any longer.”

The happiness in Ryan’s heart suddenly cowered behind jolt of fear, as she realized what Pamela was saying. “I don’t want to talk about him,” she said in a rush, hoping against hope that would be good enough.

By the sympathetic look Pamela gave her, it wasn’t. “Honey. Listen close, now. Those boys upstairs love you with all their hearts. I know, because Bucky’s told me. I’m sure they told you that, too.”

Ryan gave her a small nod, curled up tight in the armchair. Pamela continued, “I’m so happy for the three of you, honestly. But, I’m worried about the timing of all this. Because last week, you told me you’ve never really considered your own future. And this morning, you ran away. Again.”

The words stung, deeper than Ryan wanted to admit. “I won’t do it again,” she muttered.

“Some habits aren’t so easy to break,” Pamela replied. “Especially when they’re tied into some of the most horrible things a person can experience.”

She picked up her pen, scribbling something down as Ryan tried not to think. “What are you writing?”

“That you’re particularly reticent about this subject, so I need to be a little nicer than usual,” Pamela answered. “I’m not against holding someone’s hand for a bit when they really need it.”

“I’m fine, I don’t – “

Pamela gave her a look, and Ryan clacked her jaw shut. Jesus, how did Pamela manage to get under her skin every damn time? “If I’ve really survived some of the most horrible things a person can experience, then why are you babying me now?”

“We put bandages on wounds, not salt,” Pamela countered. “Being gentle with someone in pain isn’t showing weakness, for either party. It’s a sign of respect.”
Ryan hadn’t thought about it like that before. Slowly, she nodded, and Pamela gave her a small smile.

“Nothing in our lives is an island,” she continued. “Do you think there’s even the potential for what you suffered at Kilgrave’s hands to color your choices in the future? Especially now?”

Just the name still made part of her twinge in fear, her heart beating a little faster. The feeling wrestled with furious anger and piercing guilt, all surrounding the box of memories shoved into the deepest corner of her mind. *He can’t hurt you anymore,* she reminded herself unhelpfully. *You murdered him, remember?*

In a last ditch attempt, Ryan muttered aloud, “Does it have to be today, of all days? I – thought today would just be happy.”

“You’re in charge here, Ryan. If you say no, then it’s no. But, you’ve had this bottled up a long time. If we do it later, what benefits will you gain from that?” Pamela asked, tone neutral and open.

*Why does she always have to be right?* “None,” Ryan muttered aloud.

Pamela nodded sagely. “I can’t think of any real ones, either. Just a few minutes of bravery, sweetie. And your boys are waiting for you just upstairs.” She gave Ryan a small, close-lipped smile. “All we’ll do tonight is tell your story. The rest can come later.”

Ryan swallowed heavily, clutching her backpack to her chest. “The girl’s home kicked me out after I graduated high school, because I was 18,” she began, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice. “I knew it was coming, so I had time to… prepare. And I was going stay nearby anyway, to help the other girls. I’d… sort of trained up this girl Katie, to take care of things once I’d gone. I just gave them all the money I could.”

“This was still in New York, right?” Pamela asked, and Ryan nodded.

“I’d been in and around the city almost as long as I’d been in Boston, at that point. I got into a routine, and things were… fine, honestly. Then…”

“Then Kilgrave,” Pamela murmured. Ryan closed her eyes, then wrenched them back open when a cruel smile ghosted through her mind’s eye.

“It was July 18th, at 7:34 PM,” she muttered darkly, squeezing her hands into fists. “I remember because I hadn’t showered that day, and I know I looked like shit, and I was debating whether to do it then or in the morning. I checked my watch to see if it was too late in the day. And… I passed him on the sidewalk, and I smiled at him.”

Pamela’s brows furrowed. “You smiled?”

“I just randomly met his eyes, and I – *fuck,*” Ryan breathed, gritting her teeth against the nausea in her stomach. “The fucking bastard *liked* that I smiled at him. I hadn’t – if I’d been ten fucking seconds later, none of this would’ve ever happened!”

Pamela straightened up then, looking her square in the eyes. “You’re only responsible for the choices you make, not the choices of others. You understand?”

Ryan took a deep breath, exhaling through her nose. Her hands were still shaking, but thankfully without any blue light radiating away. “Yes.”

“Good. You’re doing amazingly well, Ryan. Keep going. You’re almost there.”
“He told me to come with him,” she breathed. “And I did. I couldn’t stop. He – he sent me to get dressed, and I couldn’t stop. We had fancy pasta for dinner, and I couldn’t stop.

“And then he took me to a hotel room, and asked if I was an Alpha, Beta, or Omega. When I said I wasn’t, he just shrugged and… took off my clothes.”

“Do you remember what happened next?” Pamela asked, quiet but firm.

“He said to lay still,” she answered, arms crawling with goosebumps as she hugged her backpack so tight her fingers turned white. “He was done in two minutes, he – he fell asleep after that. He made me stare at the clock all night.”

“When did he leave?”

“8:37 AM. I could move again at 10:06. I threw up all over the floor.”

“Understandable,” Pamela said. “What did you do then?”

“My backpack and my clothes were still there. I changed, and I ran.”

Nodding, Pamela sat back and took a few notes, letting Ryan try to unclench her body from the ball she’d curled herself into. Her head spun, her stomach roiled with nausea, but… a small sense of relief sat underneath it all. She’d never told anyone the whole story. She’d never thought she’d be believed.

“Sweetie, that was one of the bravest things I’ve ever seen anyone do,” Pamela murmured, expression tender but proud. “Thank you for finally reopening that door. How do you feel?”

Ryan shrugged. “Terrible.”

“Well, the good news is, you don’t have to relive everything that happened with him the second time. Not yet,” Pamela said. “I’m not that cruel. So. Your body and autonomy were violated without your consent. After that happened, how did it impact you, do you think?”

Ryan opened her mouth to answer, but then paused. The silence stretched a few minutes while she gathered her thoughts.

“I’d never been afraid for my own safety before,” she finally managed to say. “I – being homeless is so much worse for other people. I’ve been hungry and cold and sick, but never actually scared I wouldn’t make it through. I always knew that if someone was – if someone tried to hurt me, I could stop them. There was always a last, last resort. And he took that away from me.”

Ryan clenched her hands tighter, nails biting into her palms. “It was – he took everything. I had nothing, so he took me instead – I couldn’t close my eyes without seeing him, that fucking bastard. I couldn’t lie down without feeling him, and, I showered a hundred times and I still smelled like him – “


“But it was different. When it actually happened,” Pamela filled in quietly. “Am I right in saying so?”

Ryan nodded, pulse starting to calm as a wave of shame washed through her. “He was a murderer. And now I am, too.” She looked to Pamela. “Am I a monster?”
For wanting your rapist dead? For wanting a serial killer dead? For killing him when he was about to murder the men you love?” Pamela said quietly. “You’ve asked me before. What do you think now?”

She shook her head, eyes dropping shut. “I… hope not. I don’t want to be.”

“And that, sweetie, is progress.” With a click of her pen, Pamela set aside the notepad. “Ready to finish up?”

“What else do I have to do?” Ryan muttered, utter exhaustion sweeping through her. The adrenaline of reliving the experience left her drained, and she stifled a yawn behind a hand.

“I have just a few more questions, and then we’re done for now,” Pamela answered. “First. Did you ever get tested afterwards?”

“Tested?” Ryan looked up in alarm. “No, I – I took a morning-after pill, I should be fine!”

“Is that what public school taught you? Good lord.” Pamela shook her head incredulously.

“Alright, hon, I know it’s been years, but we’re getting an appointment on the books anyway, just to be safe. Morning-after pills do not protect against any kind of STI, and many of the infections don’t show any external symptoms.”

Ryan’s eyes widened, and Pamela gave her a reassuring smile. “That being said, I doubt you have anything. After all this time, there would’ve been some sign.”

Swallowing nervously, Ryan nodded. “Alright, second now,” Pamela continued. “We’ll go more in depth later, when you’re up to it. But, can you name me one specific way these experiences have affected the choices you make?”

Ryan thought for a while. Then, she slowly muttered, “I saw it as punishment. Like we talked about before. So, I tried to be even more perfect afterwards.”

“That’s a very good connection, hon. Thank you for telling me,” Pamela praised. “And lastly. Can you think of a way to counteract the thoughts that lead to you trying to be perfect all the time?”

“I already tell myself I’m not perfect all the time,” Ryan said with a self-deprecating shrug. “I don’t really know what else to do.”

“Those are the negative thoughts that lead you to that perfectionism,” Pamela replied. “You put yourself down, you try harder and inevitably fail at an unattainable goal, and you put yourself down more.” She gave her a piercing look. “We know that being perfect all the time is illogical, unreasonable, and unattainable, right?”

Ryan sighed again, but nodded. “So… telling myself it’s okay to not be perfect?”

“Absolutely,” Pamela said, smiling wide. “That’s your homework this time. Whenever you feel the urge to bottle up something that hurt you, you tell yourself that’s not healthy, and try to remember it’s okay to be flawed. And speaking of your homework, how did the self-compliments and the practice with your powers go?”

“I, uh, kinda forgot the compliments after a day or two,” Ryan admitted sheepishly. “But the practice went really well, actually. Tony lets me use the pool on the roof, and Jane and Darcy helped me figure out some new stuff. It was actually kinda cool.”

“Wow. I am very impressed that you let other people in like that,” Pamela said, both her eyebrows
raised. “Excellent work, sweetie. Keep practicing. And now,” she said, giving her a kind smile, “I think you’ve got some very impatient people waiting for you upstairs. I’ll see you in a few days.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

Come back upstairs after your session? There’s more we need to talk about. And, we just want to see you again.

Steve’s earlier words weighed on her as she raised a hand to knock on their door, shoulders slouching and eyes prickling with tiredness. She didn’t think she could handle any more emotions that day.

“Ryan,” Bucky breathed, grinning as he opened the door. The apartment smelled amazing, like fresh-baked bread, but paled at the happiness in his scent perfuming the air. “Sweetheart, you don’t have to knock, you can just come in.”

“Thanks,” she muttered, trying to smile convincingly back at him. His expression dimmed, so she thought it must not have worked. “Sorry, just – you know, Pamela. But, uh, what did you guys want to talk about?”

Bucky didn’t reply at first, just ushering her inside and asking if he could take her backpack. Steve came out of the bedroom, his bright smile turning to concern as he exchanged a glance with Bucky.

“So, you may not know this, but Bucky and I? We’re actually really famous.”

Steve and Bucky met eyes, and it struck her just how often they did that. Read each other’s minds just by a glance at each other. She might be able to read minds, but not so... intimately. But it was fine, normal for them. It shouldn’t bother her.

“We need to talk about when we go out together,” Bucky said smoothly, looking to her now. “And how you want to go forward with that.”

“Oh, um. You mean like, where we’re going? I’m good with wherev – “

“No, not like that,” Steve cut in, holding back a laugh. “So, you may not know this, but Bucky and I? We’re actually really famous.”

“No! You never told me!” Ryan grinned back at him. “But, seriously. You guys go out all the time without the fake mustache glasses, and no one ever bothers you.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Steve admitted. “So. When I first got out of the ice, no one recognized me. I was a well-known figure from the past, but no one looks for Abraham Lincoln on the subway, right?”

“And my face was never known,” Bucky added, absent-mindedly twirling a strand of her hair. She leaned towards him a little, and he smiled at her, carding fingers through her hair. “Steve played the poster boy for the war, but me and the other Commandos were lackeys; the press didn’t care until after, when Steve went missing. And I was already... gone, by then.”
“Then, New York,” Steve continued, looking just a tad somber. Ryan bumped her knee against his, and he gave her a grateful smile. “I ducked out to D.C. before most people figured out what happened. What little video footage survived, the mask on my helmet hid my face. A few people put two and two together from old photographs, but I was barely recognized. Until Bucky came back, that is.”

“Turns out, modern America loves a good reunion story,” Bucky said.

“I think I know the rest,” Ryan piped up then. “Both of your faces were everywhere for a while.”

Bucky grinned mischievously, and Steve immediately rolled his eyes with a groan. “You saw that one of Steve, right? Where he’s all squinty and depressed, looks like he needs to take a sh – “

“I swear to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Buck,” Steve grumbled, and Bucky and Ryan both sniggered. “Anyway. Long story short, Pepper negotiated some legal loophole, and now our images are technically classified, as part of the Avengers Initiative. Anyone prints them without our permission, they’re in trouble.”

“Oh!” Ryan said, realization dawning on her. “I’d been wondering about that, actually – I thought Tony just owned the press, or something.”

“Well, yeah, but not all of it,” Steve said with a sigh. “All this is to say, though, that seeing me and Buck together is old news and big trouble. Add in you, though, and it’s top gossip. People will risk it. And we owe Pepper way too much to start a media frenzy without permission.”

They fell silent then, and Ryan sank back into the couch. It wasn’t like she followed celebrity gossip. She’d never really considered that aspect of their lives, or what might happen now that she was… what was she? Did she have a title? They were dating now, technically, because they’d both asked her out on dates... Weren’t they?

“What’re you thinking?” Bucky asked quietly, shaking her out of her reverie.

Before she could think better of it, she blurted out, “Am I your girlfriend?”

Steve and Bucky raised their eyebrows, looking surprised, and she flushed pink, fidgeting her hands in embarrassment. “That was a stupid question, ignore – “

“Oh course you are,” Bucky interrupted, and Steve nodded fervently. “I mean, in the old days, we’d ask you to go steady and all, but we figured the mutual ‘I love you’ worked.”

Ryan wiped a hand over her face, covering a sheepish smile. “Right. Sorry, I just – I don’t know how to do any of this.”

“Well, we’ve never been a trio, either,” Steve shrugged. “We’ll all figure it out as we go.”

“What is why we wanted to bring this up now,” Bucky said. “What we do outside of the Tower has to take this into consideration, is all. If we’re not careful, it’s your face everywhere, and we don’t want that.”

“Yeah, no, definitely not.” Ryan sighed through her nose. It wasn’t a deal breaker, of course. But, it wasn’t ideal, either. Even with the warm glow lighting up inside at how she could now call them her boyfriends. “So. Practically speaking?”

“Well, we want it secret, we keep most things here,” Steve answered. “Anything outside, we keep quiet, or cover up what we can. Buck already has the plans set for tomorrow night, right?”
“Course.” Bucky grabbed Ryan’s hand, gently squeezing her fingers. “I’m so excited, babydoll.”

Ryan bit her bottom lip, trying to keep back a silly grin. “Me, too.”

But the thought of tomorrow made her check the clock, and she frowned in disappointment. “Okay, well. I have work early again, and I’m really tired, so I think I should crash for the night.”

“Ryan?” For the first time, Steve sounded tentative. He stood up alongside her, taking her hand. “Would you – like to stay the night?”

Her heart skipped a beat, then thudded in doubletime. Did he mean it?

“You don’t have to, or anything,” Steve continued in a hurry, fidgeting one hand through his hair. “Just, if you wanted to…”

“Real slick, Bogart,” Bucky said, rolling his eyes as he stood, too. “I need a shower, Ryan, and Steve needs one too if he’s sleeping in the bed tonight. If you want,” he murmured, coming a little closer, and Ryan’s breath hitched. “You can come back in, say, a half-hour or so. If you don’t feel like it, then tomorrow it is.”

Ryan felt her cheeks flush a little redder, and she cursed her biology for the thousandth time. “Yeah, sounds good,” she managed to eke out.

“Great.” Then, he leaned in close, and brushed his lips against her cheek. “Hurry back,” he breathed in her ear, then flashed a crooked smile over his shoulder as he disappeared into the bedroom.

Steve shrugged, then kissed her forehead. “He always was better at smooth talking than me.”

Ryan tried to smile back at him, her heart twisting again. They have just about the craziest past in the world, you idiot. Of course they’re going to talk about it, she thought. Aloud, she said, “Right, well. I guess I’d better go shower, too.”

Steve’s smile widened to a grin, and he picked up her backpack and handed it to her. “See you soon,” he breathed, then gave her one last smile as he followed Bucky into their room.

Something nagged at her as she took the stairs down the few floors to her bedroom. Depositing her backpack just inside, she searched for a clean flannel to cover her arms. They’d talked about what they needed to talk about, right? And of course Steve and Bucky communicated well, they’d known each other all their lives. It was just as natural for them to talk about their shared past, too. She was being ridiculous.

Even under the warm spray of the showerhead, however, the insistent feeling refused to drain away with the rest of the day. She was missing something. And… shouldn’t the thought of spending the night in someone else’s bed upset her, after reliving…him?

She sighed, squeezing out a dollop of shampoo. Apparently, what “should” and “shouldn’t” were all screwed up for her today, anyway. And this way, she wasn’t alone.

Exactly a half-hour later, Ryan exhaled heavily, stomach jittering, then opened the door without knocking. A moment later, with a gentle smile, Bucky scooted aside, and she sat in the middle of the bed, trying to act like she didn’t want to both hide under the covers and jump for joy all at once.

But when Bucky wordlessly wound his right arm across her waist, and Steve pulled them both in close, her nerves vanished. She breathed in their wonderful scents, and Bucky kissed her still-damp
hair as Steve’s arms hugged her tight.

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured.

“Goodnight, ghrá mo chroí,” Steve echoed.

She’d really have to ask him what language he kept speaking in sometime. “Goodnight,” she whispered back, and fell asleep in seconds.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Waking up in Bucky’s arms felt like sleeping in on the first day of summer vacation, sunlight streaming through windows in lazy contentment. Waking up because Bucky rolled on top of her did not.

“Bucky,” she rasped, half her chest constricted from breathing as she jostled him with the arm not pinned to her side. He barely stirred. “Buck, you’re kinda squishing me.”

“Hmm?” he grunted, one bleary eye cracking open. She pushed at his shoulder, and he inhaled sharply. Both eyes flew wide as he flung himself off of her, the mattress bouncing beneath them. “Oh shit, sweetheart, you okay?”

She chuckled at the worry on his face, sitting up and stretching her squashed shoulder. “I’m good. Just didn’t expect to wake up a pancake.”

Bucky smiled, then stifled a yawn behind his metal hand. “Sorry. Steve says I’m an octopus. It’s fine when I do it to him, though.”

Ryan’s expression faltered, then she put on a smile. “Yeah, well. I have to get to the library.”

“Gimme a sec, I’ll eat with you and Steve – “

“No, it’s fine,” Ryan interrupted. “Go back to sleep.”

She made to scoot off the empty side of the bed, Steve apparently playing the early bird again, but Bucky’s arms wound around her waist and stopped her.

“I’m so excited for our date tonight,” he murmured in her ear. That brought a real smile to her face, and he hummed happily as she leaned back against his firm chest. “Got something special planned.”

“Nothing too special,” Ryan replied. “I only own flannels.”

“It’ll do.” He kissed her cheek, nosing there for a moment before letting go. “Seven, sharp.”

“Got it.” As she opened the door to leave, she looked back and murmured, “I love you.” Bucky snored softly in response, already asleep.

* * *   * * *   * * *
Steve had left a note saying he was sorry, called into a meeting, have a great day, love you so much. Ryan hoped it was meant for her.

She grabbed a banana on the way out, and the day passed by in an excited blur. She had a date tonight!

Chapter End Notes

Figuring out the pacing of this story and where it best should end for the sequel is a bitch. If I had to put a number on the rest of the chapters, though, I’d guess another 6-ish. Or maybe 7, to get to a round 60.

To my once-loyal readers and commenters who jumped ship from this nonsense, I don’t blame you in the slightest. Everyone still around, I love you all dearly <3 <3 <3
The moment the clock struck five, Ryan flew out the library door, yelling good-bye to Ms. Palermo, who shushed her with a wink. Two hours to shower, try to make her hair and nails presentable, and hopefully find some clean clothes before –

A piercing squeal of tires, and Ryan shouted in alarm, throwing herself back as a compact black sedan suddenly did a U-turn through honking horns and screeched to a stop, perfectly parallel to the curb in front of her. Ryan stared, mouth gaping and heart pounding, when the dark tinted window suddenly rolled down.

“Sorry about that,” Natasha said with a grin, not sounding sorry in the slightest. “Get in.”

Ryan stared some more. “I – um… how did you know I was – why?”

“I was in the neighborhood,” she shrugged.


“People are staring. Get in,” Natasha ordered again, and Ryan hastened to obey. The next moment, the engine revved like a tiger's roar, and Ryan slammed back against the seat as they zoomed into traffic.

“So, how was work?” she inquired casually, horns pealing in their wake.

“Great!” Ryan squeaked, knuckles white as she grabbed the handle above the door, swinging slightly as they cut through downtown traffic like a Vin Diesel car chase. “Um, Nat – “

“Отвали, придурок!” Natasha yelled out the window, swerving around a cement truck that ducked into their lane. Ryan screwed her eyes shut, stomach dropping like on a rollercoaster ride.

“Nat, I’m sorry, but could you maybe please just – !“

“We’re here,” she announced, the car suddenly screeching to a stop. Ryan opened her eyes, and they were inside Tony’s car garage, a half-dozen Ferraris and a Tesla on either side of them.

“Oh,” Ryan said again, peeling her now sore and cramped fingers off the handle. “Um, thanks for the ride.”

Natasha smirked, climbing out of the car. “When you want to learn, you know where I am.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ryan nodded faintly, and Natasha’s smirk only deepened.

Just as she exited the car, the elevator door dinged open, and Darcy exploded out of it a second later.
“Oh my god, what took you so long?! Come on, we’ve got less than two hours – “

“For what?” Ryan said in alarm as Darcy grabbed her by the arm and dragged her bodily away.

“To get you ready for your first date ever!” Darcy shrieked in her ear, Natasha chuckling softly in the background.

Before she could even respond, the doors opened to Natasha, Clint, and Darcy’s floor, and Darcy yanked her into the apartment. In their haste, she half-tripped over a pair of purple combat boots scattered in the doorway and almost fell over. Darcy chucked them out into the hall, cursing Clint out under her breath.

“Oh my god, what took you so long?!” Clint yelled, dashing in from the living room to grab Ryan’s backpack out of her hands and throw it into the kitchen. “We’ve got less than two hours, people!”

“Guys! What the hell – “ Ryan shouted, but she was ignored in the frenzy that suddenly swept her into the largest bathroom she’d ever seen.

“Use the shampoo and conditioner I laid out for you,” Darcy ordered, pushing her towards the frosted glass of the shower door. “And scrub your nails, we need them soft and sparkling!”

“Make her use the exfoliating face wash!” Clint shouted from the next room, and Darcy dashed over to the silver marble vanity and flung a bottle at her face. Ryan fumbled the catch and it clattered to the floor.

“Hurry up! 15 minutes, washed and dried, condition for four! Those legs had better be perfectly smooth!” Darcy slammed the door shut behind her, and Ryan heard her and Clint giggling in the hall.

Ryan blinked once, taken aback at the sudden quiet, then hurried to strip off her clothes. She wouldn’t put it past Darcy to bodily pull her from the shower if she dawdled.

Exactly fifteen and a half minutes later, she furiously toweled herself off, threw on her clothes, and finished brushing her teeth just as Darcy started pounding on the door.

“I’m coming!” she yelled, and a second later she was being ushered out the door, down the hall, and into a spare bedroom. A spinning office chair sat in front of a large vanity, Clint already there fussing with several bottles of nail polish. Kesha blasted from an old-fashioned boombox, Clint wiggling his hips in time.

“Do we do gold, or dusty blue?” he shouted over the music, holding them up for Darcy to inspect.

“Did we decide on the royal blue, pink or the yellow?”

“The blue – I couldn’t find the right yellow for her skin tone, and pink would obviously look terrible with her hair – “

“Do I get a say?” Ryan asked, Darcy pushing her down into the chair and toweling her wet hair some more.

“Nope,” Clint and Darcy said simultaneously.

“Go with the gold, she needs a metallic contrast,” Darcy added, and Clint started shaking the bottle. “Also, Kesha? Really?”
“I love Kesha!” Ryan and Clint exclaimed together, before Clint whooped and high-fived her. Darcy rolled her eyes and plugged in a hair dryer.

“Alright, let’s see what we got,” Clint muttered to himself, leaning in uncomfortably close and inspecting Ryan’s face. “Okay, for someone who lived on the streets for years, you have incredible skin tone. What face wash do you use!?”

“Bar soap, mostly,” Ryan replied, pulling back in alarm.

“What?!” Clint clapped a hand over his heart, looking scandalized. “Okay, okay, fine. We’ll deal with that tragedy later. Here’s the game plan: Nat’s on nails, Darcy’s hair, and I’m makeup. Sit back, relax, and you’re going to look amazing, okay?”

Darcy turned on the blowdryer then, cutting off her reply. Natasha popped up from behind her, taking her left hand and starting in with a nail file while Clint shook a bottle of lotion. And this time, Ryan closed her eyes and didn’t feel scared at all.

*** *** ***

“Alright, in the future, five minutes in the morning. Brows, lashes, lips – just frame the face. And… done!” Clint exclaimed, brushing back a lock of her hair. “What do you think?”

“Wait, no! She has to get dressed first!” Darcy interjected, grabbing the chair to keep Ryan from turning around to the mirror. “The full effect!”

“Oh, right!” He dashed over to the closet and pulled out a garment bag, handing it to her. “And we have – oh, wow, we made good time.”

“Get dressed,” Natasha ordered, gathering up her mates and herding them away. “If something doesn’t fit, let us know.”

The door closed behind them, and Ryan chuckled under her breath. Out of both times she’d been kidnapped, she preferred this one. And who knew Clint had been a makeup artist? she thought, unzipping the bag. Then she gasped, her free hand clapping to her mouth and almost smudging her lipstick.

A few minutes later, she came out of the bedroom, and Darcy shrieked in delight and snapped a picture before Ryan could stop her.

“Darcy!” she protested, laughing and grinning even as she hid her face behind her hands.

“You dare smudge my makeup! That was a fucking masterpiece!” Clint chided, taking more pictures. Ryan gave it up for a lost cause, and smiled for them instead.

“Guys, you’re – this is amazing, really, I love it,” she said, “but Bucky said I could wear my flannels. What if I look too fancy?”

“We told him about the change of plans,” Natasha informed her with a smirk.

Clint nodded, adding “In fact, he should be here just about – “

A knock on the door interrupted him then, and he raised his eyebrows. “Now.”
Darcy shrieked in excitement again, jumping forward and grabbing Ryan’s hand. “Oh my god, this is so exciting! Okay, okay – don’t stay out too late, don’t have more than one drink, and if he tries to give you a hickey, smack him in the face.”

“Wait!” Ryan exclaimed as she was shepherded towards the door. “My backpack, I had – “

“Don’t worry, I rescued them,” Natasha said. She handed her a small bunch of daisies that Ryan had bought on her lunch break and carefully stored, smoothing out a few petals. “Nice touch, by the way.”

“Oh my god!” Darcy exclaimed again, fanning her face with her hands and blinking furiously. “You got him flowers? Oh my god, you’re the cutest thing ever!” Then she shoved Ryan towards the door again. “Stop making him wait!”

“Okay, god!” Ryan took a deep breath, pausing just a moment, then opened the door.

*** *** ***

Muffled voices and excited shrieks filtered through the door, and Bucky rolled his eyes. He could never decide if Stark or Darcy was the bigger drama queen. 

Nah, it’s still Stark.

The door finally swung open, and he lifted his eyes, ready to showcase his best charming smile. Then, his mouth dropped open instead.

Ryan stood there, blushing a gorgeous pink and smiling wide. Her copper hair fell in soft ringlets over her shoulders, where white skin peeked through cutouts in a softly shimmering, royal-blue blouse that matched the sparkle in her eyes. Its long sleeves were folded up just past the top of her wrists, where a glittering gold bracelet rested. A lighter blue skirt flared out over her thighs, charcoal stockings covering her legs down to ankle-tall leather boots. Grey eyeliner accentuated perfect, long lashes, and he had to hold himself back from kissing the rose pink lipstick right off her. She stared back at him, seemingly just as entranced.

“Wow,” he breathed before he could stop himself. “Sweetheart. You look… amazing.” He remembered the roses he held behind his back just then, and he pulled them out just as Ryan mirrored the motion.

“I – I got you some, too,” Ryan stammered, holding out a little bunch of white daisies. “I didn’t really know if…”

“Th-thank you,” Bucky stuttered back, completely floored. No one – not even Steve – had ever bought him flowers before. He felt his heart thump wildly in his chest, already bursting with happiness as he took them from her and she took his.

“Alright you crazy kids, be responsible!” Clint said, coming up and grabbing the flowers from both of them. “We’ll take care of these – now get out of here!”

“Jesus, Barton,” Bucky grumbled, and Ryan giggled again. “You ready?” he directed at Ryan, holding out a hand. With a nod, she took it, and the apartment door closed behind them.
“So, uh, what are we doing?” Ryan asked breathily as the elevator brought them down to ground level. Nerves had fluttered in her stomach since she’d opened the door to see Bucky, stunning in a fitted gray cardigan, white button down, and black skinny tie and jeans. The hallway to the apartment could’ve been a runway, and he’d fit right in. Oh, god, was her hand sweating?

Bucky squeezed it gently, brushing up against her side. “The short version of the story,” he began, “is when I first came back to New York, after… everything, I helped out at this little restaurant for a while. Something to keep my hands busy while I sorted some things out.”

Ryan nodded, giving him a small smile. “I’ve done that before, too.”

Bucky smiled back at her. “Well, I worked below minimum wage for hours longer than anyone except Thor can, so the owners loved me. When I went back to Steve, they told me I was welcome anytime. So, I asked them if we could have the place to ourselves tonight.”

Ryan bit her lower lip, ducking her head to hide her silly grin. “What kind of food is it?”

“Italian. My folks are turning in their graves,” Bucky said with a wink. “I gotta say, it was nice to learn in this century that rivalry had finally died its last death.”

“Your family were strict Catholics, then?”

“Oh, yeah,” he replied as they walked through the private entranceway outside to a waiting car. He opened the door for her, and joined her in the back as the driver took them south. “Steve’s Ma was, too. The Barnes just ended up over here a little sooner than his parents, so they inherited older grudges.”

“I didn’t realize that was still going on that late. Wasn’t hating Jews and Germans and people of color enough?”

“It’s cliché to say, but. It was a different time.” Bucky shrugged, looking thoughtful. “I grew up with German mobs, Italian mobs, Irish, Jewish, you name it. Steve and I would be lifting apples for him and his ma, minding our own business, and all of a sudden two guys would pass by each other and set off a gang riot.”

“God,” Ryan said. “Wait – you guys stole stuff?”

“Almost everyone did, at some point or another. It was that, or they’d starve.” Bucky shrugged again. “Where do you think Steve got his stubbornness from?”

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said quickly, “I didn’t mean to sound judgmental – “

“No, no, sweetheart, you didn’t. Really. Not many actually know what growing up in the Depression was like.” He shifted in his seat, turning to face her fully. “But, I have no idea what growing up in the 1990s was like, either.”

“Not like that.” Ryan looked down to their still-joined hands, and he stroked his thumb over her wrist. “I guess one thing that stands out is how quickly things changed. Like, I would watch Looney Tunes on Saturday mornings every week in elementary school, and now they don’t exist anymore. Cell phones used to be huge, like the size of actual bricks – then I bought a flip phone in high school, and it fit in my back pocket. Things just got… bigger and louder and faster all in a
“I know the feeling,” Bucky chuckled. The car pulled to a stop then, and Ryan looked out to see a brick building bearing the moniker Vittalia’s outside her door, in a quieter part of the city. The sign on the window read Closed, but as Bucky opened the car door for her, an older, matronly woman came bustling out.

“James! So wonderful to see you,” she exclaimed, reaching up to plant a wet kiss on his cheek. “And your date, she is more beautiful than you say!”

Bucky shot her a charming grin, settling an arm around Ryan’s shoulders. “Thank you, Luisa. This is Ryan.”

“Oh, my dear, you’re so skinny!” Luisa exclaimed, pulling her into a hug before Ryan could so much as stick out her hand. “Both of you, you don’t eat enough – come inside, everything’s prepared!”

They were ushered into a small dining room, a single table with a white lace tablecloth and a real candle chandelier glowing softly above. Violin music trilled softly, operetta singing above it as they took their seats.

“Now wait right here, Carlo wants to see you too,” Luisa instructed, and she disappeared into the back in a flash.

Bucky chuckled under his breath, and Ryan turned back to him. “Do you like it, sweetheart?” he murmured, bumping his knee against hers under the table.

“I love it,” Ryan replied, bumping his knee back. “I didn’t know you were such a romantic.”

“This is the kind of thing Steve and I never got to do, before,” Bucky answered. “I like that we can, now.”

*Him and Steve. Right.*

Ryan instantly felt guilty, and shoved the traitorous thought back as she flashed Bucky another smile. Just then, Luisa and Carlo came out of the kitchen, bearing more plates of food than Ryan had eaten in the past month.

“Oh, my boy, you stay away too long!” Carlo exclaimed, setting down trays of ravioli and lasagna to grab Bucky’s face and kiss both cheeks. “Luisa and I, we’re not any younger, yeah?”

“I know, I know,” Bucky said, “I’m sorry about that. You’re both doing well, though, right?”

“Healthy as a horse,” Carlo declared, pounding his chest with one fist. “Now, we have a taste of everything for you, yeah? And special tiramisu for dessert – you tell us when you want. Enjoy, my friends!”

In the next half-hour or so, Ryan tried four kinds of pasta she’d never had, and ate more than she knew possible. Neither she nor Bucky touched the pasta all’amatriciana, though. They talked about more trivial matters between bites – the baseball season so far, her work at the library, how Bucky finally tried Indian food for the first time last month. Bucky put away three times the amount she did, but never once spoke with his mouth full.

“Oh, Luisa, you’re killing us,” Bucky grinned as the woman came out, bearing a plate of tiramisu and two forks. “I think I gained two pounds just sitting here.”
“Good. You never ate enough when you worked with us,” Luisa replied, giving him a stern look. “I see through that smile, James. You watch out for him,” she directed at Ryan with a wink. “My girls all mated nice boys, not troublemakers like that one.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Ryan smiled back. “Thank you so much, though – you’re both so nice, and your food is fantastic.”

Luisa patted her on the arm. “Anytime, my dear. Carlo and I, we make sure he treats you right,” she joked, winking again before she left.

A few minutes later, they said their good-byes, and Bucky took Ryan’s hand and led her back outside. The last sunbeams shone pink and orange towards the west, and the moon was already a crescent halfway through the sky.

“Got something else planned too, if you’re up for it,” Bucky murmured, squeezing her hand. “What do you say?”

“As long as it’s nothing to do with food, I’m game.”

Bucky smiled. “Come on. It’s just up the road a ways.” He let go of her hand to unbutton his cardigan, draping it over her shoulders, and settled his right arm on top. Ryan held back a giggle; she wasn’t cold, but appreciated the gesture anyways.

A few minutes later, they reached a small but quiet park, darkness beginning to fall in earnest. A metalwork gate blocked their way in, but Bucky inserted a key into the lock and opened it with a creak.

“Where are we, exactly?” Ryan asked, not recognizing this section of the city.

“Where the rich people live,” he answered, leading her inside. “The old rich, not Stark.”

“And you have a key to their park, because?”

“Because it’s easier than climbing the fence.” He squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. “I know you don’t like breaking rules, sweetheart – “

“I trust you,” Ryan blurted out. Bucky paused, turning to her with an almost stunned look. She shrugged in response. “You’re not going to get me in trouble, right?”

“Never.”

“Well. We’re not hurting anyone or anything, and nature doesn’t deserve to be locked up,” Ryan said, shrugging again. “And, I trust you.”

Bucky blinked once, then gave her a dazzling smile, holding her hand even tighter. “Let’s go, then.”

A moment later, the crunch of loose gravel turned to soft whispers on grass as he led her off the neatly kept path and into a copse of oak trees. Cicadas sung in the last of the day, peaceful chirping that drowned out what little of the city she could hear. Then, he turned a corner, and there in a clearing hung –

“A hammock?” she said aloud, and Bucky gave her an uncertain look, eyebrows drawn. “No, I love it!” she added quickly, “just – wow. I didn’t know what to expect, but…”
“‘M glad you like it,” he murmured, tugging her towards the edge of the tan canvas cloth. He’d hung it diagonally between a square of trees, so above them was a clear patch of inky blue sky, a few stars already peeking out.

Clumsy as she knew she could be, she took a moment to ponder the best way to climb in without instantly falling back out. As she hesitantly steadied herself against the near edge, she heard Bucky chuckle under his breath, and suddenly her feet swept out from under her, his arms lifting her bridal-style like she weighed no more than a feather.

“As funny as it would be to watch you trip over your own arm,” he teased, and she thumped her hand against his solid chest even as she curled in closer. He climbed in and arranged them both with ease, she on her back and him pressed up against her side, curling his flesh arm across her torso and draping his cardigan like a blanket.

“Good?” he whispered, breath a soft wind against her cheek.

“Good,” she replied, cheeks turning pink while she tried to keep from squirming with happiness. His scent complemented that of the woods around them, both enveloping her in perfect peace and quiet.

For a while, they lay there in contentment, just watching stars appear and planes fly miles overhead. The city could never quite leave her behind, she thought wryly. But a little escape was better than none.

Bucky eventually stirred, nosing into her hair and scenting deeply. “So. I brought us here for a reason.”

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t want anyone else around,” he explained. “To hear.”

She shifted, turning halfway on her side to be able to face him. “Hear what?”

He hesitated a moment, and it worried Ryan more than it should. Finally, he said, “Whatever you want me to tell you.”

It took her a moment to parse through his words, frowning in confusion. Then, it dawned on her, and she barely kept her mouth from dropping open. “Oh.”

Bucky gave her a small smile, but it didn’t mask the pained glint in his eye. He kept quiet, though, and it seemed on her to start. So she looked back up to the sky, recognizing Jupiter bright overhead, and thought.

“What’s your favorite food?” she murmured at last.

“You really want to ask that?” Bucky said, a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

“I don’t know what it is. So, yes.”

He smiled at that, pulling her flush against him. A light breeze rocked them back and forth, and his voice murmured just louder than the rustling leaves in the wood. “My ma was a terrible cook, used to make the worst biscuits. Burned them almost every time, the house’d smell like charred toast for hours. I miss them every morning.”

She laid her hand on his arm slung across her, not knowing what to say. That seemed to be good enough, though, as he smiled at her, holding her a little tighter.
“What do you miss about the 1940s?” she asked next. “Besides terrible food, apparently.”

“Not much, if I’m being honest,” Bucky whispered. “People, mostly. I had sisters, did you know that?” When she shook her head, he continued, “Becky was oldest, Winnie was youngest. The rest of my family was in Indiana, I never really knew them. But… I said my good-byes when I got called to the front. And they never found out what happened after.”

He paused again, and it was too dark for her to make out his expression now. “I miss the Howlies. Steve looked them up when he woke up, and only Dugan and Jones were left. They both passed before I got here, though.”

She knew better than to say she was sorry for him, or that it was awful. They both knew.

Instead, she asked, “How are you so… okay?”

She felt him shift against her a little, readjusting his arm. “The serum Steve and I got, we think. Things like PTSD and depression are chemical, right? Like your brain gets sick. So, we can heal.”

He started carding his metal hand through her hair, the gentle petting relaxing her even further. “I took meds for a while, but I didn’t need them very long. And Pamela, she still helps.”

“Does any of what happened still… haunt you?” she asked, barely above a whisper.

“Course.” He sighed, a little bit of melancholy leaking into his scent. “I don’t have nightmares much now, and what used to trigger me doesn’t anymore. I’ve been healing. But I’m not how I used to be, and I don’t think I’ll ever be again.”

Ryan chuckled under her breath before she could stop herself, and she felt him frown at her rather than see it. “Pamela keeps telling me to just be the me I can now. I don’t think we can go back.”

She nudged his foot with hers where they lay against each other. “Plus, I didn’t know you back then. I like you just fine.”

“That so?” Bucky joked back, but she heard the warmth behind the words. He leaned in and kissed her on the forehead, holding her to him. “I don’t know what we’d do without you,” he murmured against her skin.

“Be the way you were before I showed up?”

Bucky chuckled, apparently not noticing she was mostly serious. “Like you just said, we can’t go back.” He kissed her one more time, then lay quiet, waiting for her.

Finally, she asked, “What… do you like best about Steve?”, chickening out at the last second. She’d wanted to ask about herself.

Bucky hummed, considering. “He... has a great ass.”

Then he chuckled as Ryan pushed at him, making the hammock swing back and forth in the cooling air. “You jerk,” she mumbled, and he stopped short.

“Wow, you and Stevie, huh? Both picking on me, callin’ me the same names. I really must be a jerk,” he said, and Ryan could hear his smile in his words. “But, honest. He’s the most genuine person I’ve ever met. I always know he’s my Steve, not anyone else, and I love him for it.”

Ryan stayed silent when he was finished, trying to hide the quiet anguish released at his words.

None of what he loved about Steve applied to her. She’d kept so many secrets…
She felt Bucky sniff at her hair again, more deliberately this time. Apparently, some of her thoughts were coming through her scent, because he pressed his lips to her cheek again. “You know what I like best about you, sweetheart?”

She didn’t answer. “There is no reason on this earth that you should be as good as you are,” he murmured into her ear. “Everything we put you through, and you forgave us. You have the best and kindest heart, a ghrá, and I’ve loved it from the moment you saved my life.”

He wiped away a stray tear on her cheek, brushing his lips against where it fell. “But, if you really were talking physical, I like Steve’s eyes best. I always hated having brown eyes, the way his baby blues sparkle.”

Ryan sniffed once, appreciating the change of subject. “Don't be silly,” she chastised ever-so-gently. "His... they're like the ocean. Deep and blue, inviting you in then dragging you under."

Her cheeks heated as the words came out, but the world was dark and quiet enough for confession that night. "That makes yours the earth where they meet,” she finished. “Land and sea don't exist without each other."

She felt Bucky’s breath catch beside her, and her cheeks burned in the cooling air. God, when she get so sappy?

She wriggled a little, and Bucky quickly shifted to his side, reaching with his metal hand to stroke lightly down her face. "The sky meets them both at the horizon," he whispered. "World's not complete without it."

She couldn’t help it. Moving on instinct alone, she surged forward and crashed her lips to his, not knowing what she was doing but needing even more. Bucky made a noise low in his throat, then took over the kiss, pressing against her insistently.

Then, she felt his mouth open just a little, and she followed suit, his bottom lip slipping between hers. Bucky groaned another sound that sent tingles down her spine, and he suddenly pulled away.

“I want to do this right,” he growled, both hands gently cupping her face. “And I’ll get carried away if we keep going, sweetheart.”

That didn’t sound so bad to her, but she leaned back anyway. “What does doing it right look like?”

“When we’re all ready, and all together,” he murmured back. Then, he looked back up towards the sky, turning to see the moon setting in the west. “It’s getting late. We should get back.”

“Do we have to?” she whispered.

He chuckled in response. “No.” Then he wrapped his arms fully around her and tugged her on top of his chest, cradling her head to hold her close. “We can stay as long as you like.”

Chapter End Notes
I used Polyvore for inspiration for their date outfits - if you wanted to know what they looked like irl, here they are!
A week later, Ryan waited up on the Avengers Tower roof, holding out one hand over the pool. Pamela wanted her practicing more, and Jane had suggested testing how many separate objects she could control at once. And Ryan had found it was a lot more fun when listening to music.

“If you said good-bye to me tonight,” she half-sung, half-mumbled, “there would still be music left to write – oops.” A small splash, but eighteen individual spheres of water still floated above the rippling surface. Refocusing, two more swam up through the air, making a line of twenty across the pool’s length.

She raised her right hand, then moved her arms in a circling motion; the water flew into a ring and spun clockwise, then counterclockwise. “I haven’t been there for the longest time,” she finished, and a small smile broke out across her face. Giggling to herself, she squeezed her hands into fists, and a crackling groan reached her ears as all the spheres froze into perfect balls of ice.

Then, she dropped her arms, and they instantly plunged into the pool. Water splashed up towards her, and she caught it in midair, swirling it up and around and back into depths with a flick of her wrist.

“Wow.” Steve’s voice came from behind her, and her grin widened as she turned around. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to how amazing that is.”

Ryan ducked her head to hide her blush as she turned off the stereo. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek, and Ryan felt the blush pinken further. “You ready?”

She nodded, and he took her hand and led them to a pair of lounge chairs, set up a healthy distance from the west edge with a small table between them. “So. What’re we doing?” she said.

“Well, I can’t cook real food to save my life, so that was off the table,” Steve said with a shrug. “But, I wanted to stay here tonight, keep it simple. So, Chinese takeout up here, and a movie inside after?”

“Sounds perfect,” Ryan said. “But, uh, you do know it’s only 4 o’clock, right?”

Steve smiled. “There was something else I wanted to do. If it’s alright with you.” He gestured at a chair, and they both sat, him beside her as they looked out at the view. The world felt quiet, like its chaos would soon fade away along with the sunlight, warmth and color smiling down as it
murmured the day’s good-night.

“I noticed… you’re still wearing long-sleeves, every day,” Steve began again, pulling Ryan’s attention back to him. His smile was gone, replaced with a tinge of melancholy. “Your scars, right?”

Ryan held back a sigh, fidgeting with her flannel’s sleeves buttoned down at the cuff. “Steve, I – “

“I know you don’t want us to see them,” he said. “I get it, I do. But… I love you, Ryan, and I don’t want you to feel embarrassed or – or ashamed.” He scooted a little closer, holding out a hand, and Ryan took it. “I – we don’t love you despite your scars. You got them saving our lives, we – if anything, they’re our fault, and I – “

“They’re not,” Ryan interrupted, looking down at her lap. “Please, don’t – we’ve established already that what happened was a huge mess, and… let’s just not go on that guilt trip, okay? Pamela told me not to.”

“She’s a smart woman,” Steve said, eyes looking far away. He squeezed her hand once, then abruptly lifted it to his lips, kissing the back. “If you don’t want to show me, I understand. But I had an idea, to maybe make them… better. If you want.”

Ryan blinked at that, surprised, but then paused before she opened her mouth to reply. It struck her suddenly that, tacitly at least, Steve was asking her to trust him. Giving her plenty of ways and time to back out, too, but…

She’d said she trusted him. Them. Time to prove it.

She took a deep breath, then took her hand out of his to unbutton her cuffs. “Okay.”

Steve smiled, and the world brightened with it. “Thank you, a mhuírnín,” he breathed.

Ryan paused again, nerves starting to twist in her stomach. To distract herself, she asked, “What language is that?”

“Oh,” Steve said, “I’m sorry, I forgot – Bucky and I both speak fluent Gaelic. Gaeilge.”

“Gwail-guh?” Ryan repeated, and Steve nodded.

“My parents were both first generation immigrants, like yours. My ma didn’t know English when she arrived,” he said. “She – you know, I think she knew Buck and I were meant for each other, right from the get-go. It’s my first language, and she taught Buck when we were just kids together.”

“Mm, got it,” Ryan mumbled, looking down at her wrists again. She was just seventy years too late, that was all.

“It’s kind of our special language,” Steve continued, nostalgia in the curve of his smile. “We could say whatever we wanted in most company, no one knew a word. It let us be… us, when we weren’t allowed to be.”

Ryan tried to smile at him. “Right. Well, um…”

He nodded again. “Ready when you are.”

She shifted slightly, turning away, and pulled off her flannel. It was a relief, on one level; her layers kept her hot all day. Her arms pricked with goosebumps now, though, as she sighed through her
nose and turned back around, holding out both arms for Steve to see.

He didn’t look at them at first. His eyes met hers before he turned them down, just a momentary promise that what they were about to see was less important than the sight they held now. It was the only reason she didn’t yank her arms away, hide them behind her back in shame when his hands cradled them, his thumbs stroking along the puckered, angry-red scars spanning the midsection of each forearm.

“You see why I hid them now?” she muttered, lifting her chin to blink back tears.

Steve didn’t reply. Instead, he gently lifted up her left wrist and pressed his lips to the inside of it. Eyes closed, he trailed kisses down the length of the scar, holding her arm steady as it trembled in his grasp. Then, he repeated the motion on her right arm, and the tears she’d only just stopped slipped down anyway.

“The day you got these,” Steve murmured, eyes still closed, “was the most terrifying day of my life.” Both of his hands now held both of hers, and he blew out a heavy breath. “When – when we were on that lawn, out in the cold, I honestly thought that was it. I’d failed you, Bucky, the team for the last time.”

Ryan choked back a sob, and he opened his eyes. “We owe you everything,” he said, voice breaking at the end. “Everything.”

He released her hands, and Ryan surged forward, throwing her arms over his shoulders and burying her face in the crook of his neck. He clutched her to him, his own shuddering breaths calming as he scented at her hair.

A few minutes later, Ryan pulled back, a cool breeze calming her tears as it drifted over them. Steve brushed away the last one with his thumb, cradling her face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize seeing them would… feel like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’d do anything to have them on my arms instead,” he murmured, low and intense. “You saved us, and you have to bear the burden. It’s not right.”

Ryan gave him a watery smile. “You haven’t even seen the one on my ribs yet,” she joked, nudging her knee against his. “But, you said you thought of something to make them better.”

Steve nodded, then reached for the basket he’d left on the other chair. From beneath the take-out boxes he pulled out a set of wood-handled paintbrushes and a miniature kit of paint bottles. “Some people tattoo over scars, but considering how you got them, I thought that’d probably be out. But, if you want, I can try what I know.”

Ryan stared at the paints, a lump in her throat. God, she’d never deserve Steve. Wordlessly, she held out her left arm, and Steve grinned in response.

“Here, turn to the side,” he instructed, and he positioned her arm in his lap and the paints on the little table next to him. “Don’t look, I want it to be a surprise.”

She obligingly looked off to the right, towards the last rays of the sun. “If you paint a dick on my arm, I’m never speaking to you again.”

Steve burst out laughing, and she chuckled, too. “Never,” he said, leaning in and kissing her cheek again. “On Bucky, though, it’s fair game. I like you much more than that jerk.”
A funny feeling struck in Ryan’s stomach. Logically, she knew he was joking, but. He couldn’t like her more than Bucky. He shouldn’t like her more than Bucky, why would he say that—

The first soft, almost-tickling brush strokes jerked her back out of her thoughts. She almost turned to look down, but Steve said, “Hey, no peeking!” and she caught herself in time.

“So. Is Gaeilge anything like Spanish or English? Cause I don’t know any other types of languages,” she said.

“Kinda?” Steve said, and she heard a brush clink against glass, water sloshing as he washed it. “The sounds are totally different, and the word order. Oh, actually, it’s kind of like in Spanish – when you ask a question, the verb comes before the noun, right? That always happens in Gaelic. And the verb tenses are more regular, like in Spanish, too.”

“No parece demasiado difícil,” Ryan said, and Steve stopped painting in surprise.

“Tu acento es perfecta,” he said, his accent far from it. “Cuándo aprendiste?”

She closed her eyes a moment. “My dad only spoke Spanish when he came here. I grew up bilingual.”

The brush strokes picked up again, the paint cool on the roughness of her scars. “Why’ve you never spoken it before?”

“Cause it makes me miss him.” She swallowed once. “Doesn’t Gaelic make you…”

“Every day.” He paused again, then drew one last stroke before holding her hand in his. “Alright, you can look.”

She shifted back around, then stifled a gasp. The scar was gone, invisible beneath a gradient of blue blending into deepest black, a nebula of green and magenta and violet atop a background of golden stars. A tiny galaxy sat on her forearm, and it struck her speechless.

“Do you like it?” Steve murmured. His eyes shone with intensity when she met them, and she sat entranced in his gaze, drowning in an ocean of blue. She leaned forward, just a hair, and suddenly found her lips crushed against his, a growl deep in his chest rumbling between them.

A tiny moan escaped her throat, and he pressed her to him, one hand tangled in her hair and the other holding her painted arm safely out to the side. She felt his lips part, breath sighing against her, and she responded in kind. Oh, god, but she suddenly wanted more, as much as he would give her, and she tried to press closer still as warm, delicious heat surged through her.

But the next moment he pulled back, one last gentle kiss pressed to her lips before he released her.

“Sorry,” he murmured, low and breathless. “I didn’t mean to get carried away.”

A small flare of frustration ignited in her chest, and she quickly squashed it back down to smile at him. “You didn’t, it’s fine.”

He smiled back, eyes crinkling at the corners. “Ready for the other arm?”

The Chinese food was cold when they finally ate, and they both fell asleep about five minutes into The Princess Bride. But the next day, she went into the common kitchen wearing short sleeves, and no one even batted an eye.
Ryan had taken to checking surreptitiously outside the library doors before fully exiting. She thought Nat, Clint and Darcy were really sweet for getting her ready for her first date, but she’d prefer to avoid any other “kidnappings” for the time being. Especially because tonight, at last, their trio date had arrived.

With the coast clear, she hurried down the steps, footsteps sloshing in puddles from the earlier rain. Would they be going outside? Darcy had offered to lend her nice shoes, she shouldn’t get them wet –

A car horn beeped twice, and Ryan automatically turned to look. Bruce waved to her from that infamous black sedan, and she raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“I’m gonna go out on a limb and say you’re not here to give me a makeover?” she said as she opened the door and sat down.

Bruce chuckled and turned them out into traffic. “Not exactly. I’m sorry, but I was elected bearer of bad news.”

Some of Ryan’s sudden alarm must’ve communicated through her scent, because Bruce shot her a reassuring smile. “Everyone’s fine, I promise. But, Bucky and Steve were called in for SHIELD mission, top priority.”

“Oh. I, uh… didn’t realize they were on call.” Ryan fidgeted her hands, staring at the taxi ad for *Hamilton* tickets beside them at the stoplight. They both could be swept away, just like that?

“I’m sure they just didn’t want to worry you,” Bruce said. “Steve’s been itching to get back into the field for over a year now, and Bucky was cleared ages ago as well; they’ve been looking forward to it.”

“Looking forward – “. Ryan caught herself before she said any more. Bruce’s words shocked her, though. After everything – even just with her – they wanted to… fight? On a regular basis? “Um. Are they going to make it back for…”

“I’m sorry,” Bruce murmured. “It’s a highly classified, internal communications-only mission; they’ll only be able to tell us they’re coming back when they leave. But, they’ll most likely miss the ceremony tomorrow.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Ryan said, waving a hand. It was only the unveiling of the plaque at the 9/11 Memorial with her parent’s names front and center, dedicated in her family’s name and to support unpresented orphans and foster children and set up by the foundation they created for her. Speeches, a ribbon cutting, press coverage, the whole nine yards.

Bruce pulled into the car garage, leaving the car idling for a moment. “I take it you haven’t really thought about – well. The long-term, yet,” he murmured, giving her a gentle smile.

“No.” She sighed through her nose. “I… try not to think about the future much. Or the past.”

His look of sympathy deepened. “Well. No one can really fault you that, I suppose. But, maybe take this time to gather some thoughts?” He shut off the engine, opening the door. “It might help
pass the time, if nothing else.”

She gave him a close-lipped smile, and he nodded as he headed toward the stairs to his lab. “Hey,” she called after him suddenly, and he turned back around. “Um, thank you for telling me. And the advice.”

“Anytime.” As he left, Ryan sighed again. Well, she had some free time, now, at least. But sitting around thinking would only make the churning in her stomach worse.

“Hey, JARVIS?”

“Hello, Ryan. Can I help with something?”

“Am I allowed to know anything about what’s happening with Steve and Bucky?”

“I’m afraid not. Their mission is classified, SHIELD level 10 clearance.”

About the opposite of what she wanted to hear. Anxiety panged through her veins, and she went into the elevator just to move her jittery limbs. What the hell could they be doing? Where were they? When were they coming back? What if they…

“Ryan? Your eyes are beginning to emit a low level of luminescence,” JARVIS informed her, and she sucked in a startled breath, unclenching her hands and jaw. “Should I put in a call to Pamela?”

“No, no,” Ryan said quickly. “I think I just need something to do. Distract myself.”

“If I may, can I suggest setting up an appointment time with Dr. Lawson?”

Ryan looked up at the ceiling in surprise. “Why?”

“He is a skilled, reliable, discreet physician who is already informed of your background and unique needs. Your health records are securely encrypted and stored in my databases, and they indicate you are in need of several vaccination updates, as well as the completion of your physical from several months ago. As you are now staying in New York for the foreseeable future and have the free time, it seems prudent to schedule them now.”

“Oh.” Ryan shrugged her shoulders. “Yeah, I guess. Could you give me his phone number?”

“No need, Ryan. I can set it up for as early as tomorrow morning before the ceremony, if you wish.”

“Yeah, alright. Thank you.”

A knock on her door jerked her fully awake, and Ryan blinked to clear her vision as she hurried to open it. She’d woken up every few hours throughout the night, flashes of anxiety-riddled dreams behind her eyelids every time. Reunited with her book collection now, she’d tried to pass the time with the Lannisters and the Starks and Targaryens between dozes as best she could.

“Miss Green,” Dr. Lawson greeted when she got her door open. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Ryan, please. And yeah, you too,” she replied automatically, stepping back to invite him in. He
blinked once, then grinned as he entered.

“Call me Hank. It’s nice to finally hear your voice,” he remarked, setting a leather doctor’s bag down on her floor. Ryan blushed, and he gave her a reassuring smile. “When did you come back to New York?”

“About a month ago,” she said, sitting on the edge of her bed and offering him a seat. He seemed entirely at ease, and his scent like a sunny field of wheat – a Beta, instinct told her – helped calm her nerves, too. “I hope you didn’t go out of your way to come here – ”

“Hey, when a disembodied AI with a nice British accent schedules you, you come,” he said with a laugh. “But no, I practice in the Hamptons, and coming back up here is no problem.” He took out a pen and notebook from his bag, resting it against his knee. “So. How have you been feeling?”

“Fine.”

By the look he gave her, Hank didn’t believe it. “Why don’t we start with checking how your arms and side healed, okay?”

He had her take off her flannel and lift up her shirt, gently inspecting each scar. “Take a deep breath for me,” he said, listening against her chest with a stethoscope. “Any residual pain from the broken ribs?”

“No, and my arms don’t hurt either.” He moved the stethoscope to her back, and she breathed in again, exhaling slowly. Hank stepped back and put the stethoscope away.

“Everything sounds fine,” he reported, jotting down some notes on his paper. “I’d doubt many others could heal so quickly and with such minimal scarring, but since it’s you, I guess I’m not surprised.”

Ryan furrowed her brows. “I don’t follow, I – don’t heal any different than anyone else. Steve and Bucky do, and Thor, I think?”

Hank paused writing to look up at her. “Well, I guess the time scale might not be affected if it’s never been an issue before, but given the nature of your powers, I’m sure you heal at least a little more effectively than the norm, right? I mean, even if you’d so much as sprained an ankle as a child, I’d think that – “

“I’m sorry,” Ryan interrupted, eyes widening in alarm, “but what are you talking about?”

Hank’s eyes widened, too. “Oh. I didn’t realize they – never mind. Um, as your doctor, I have some things to tell you.”

A cold weight sat heavy on Ryan’s shoulders, rooting her to the spot. He knew something about her powers that even she didn’t? “What?”

Hank opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, turning instead to rustle in his bag. “Honestly? It’s probably better the person who figured it out explains it. She’ll do it better than I will, I’m sure.”

“Who – oh.” She remembered now, that doctor from SHIELD! Matt and Foggy had told her, she’d done some illegal blood test, or something like that. “She experimented on me,” Ryan breathed in realization, and Hank paused, an iPad halfway out of his leather bag.

“Ryan, I want to be clear with you – Dr. Simmons did not experiment on you. It’s nothing like what
happened before,” Hank said, voice low and comforting. “She performed a blood test that was not ordered, but otherwise simple and non-invasive. I’m not defending her actions; they’re grounds for a medical malpractice suit. But you decided back then not to pursue it, the data were destroyed, she halted any further research, and nothing else has been done without your consent. I would never let that happen to my patients. Okay?”

Ryan exhaled heavily, then nodded. “Why do you trust her, then?”

“I don’t,” Hank admitted, turning on the tablet. “But, I also don’t believe she’d lie about what we need to tell you, and she does have a better understanding of it than I do. Is that alright?”

She nodded again, and Hank opened up Skype. “Um. I just realized, I don’t actually know how to contact her,” he said, frowning slightly at the screen. “Would Mr. Stark…?”

“Oh, um, JARVIS? Could you maybe help, please?” Ryan said.

“Of course, Ryan. Mr. Stark has a secure, encrypted line to SHIELD headquarters, where Dr. Simmons is currently based. I’ll patch you through momentarily.”

On the screen, a picture of a blond man and brunette woman, both with their eyes crossed and tongues sticking out, popped up on the video call, but the name only read CLASSIFIED. A dial tone rang once, twice, and the screen turned to a view of a glass-walled laboratory, the same man and woman looking up to the monitor amidst a chaotic mess of papers and test tubes.

“Dr. Lawson?” the woman said, sounding surprised. She had a British accent, voice crisp and clear like a bell. “Um, hello – I’m so sorry, this isn’t the best time necessarily – “

“There’s a lot going on down here,” the man jumped in, his Scottish accent softer and smoother than hers. “A few fires we’re trying to put out, so if it isn’t urgent – “

“Dr. Simmons, Dr. Fitz,” Hank interrupted, firm and authoritative. “It’s not just me here,” and he angled the tablet to include Ryan. “This needs to happen now.”

Both of their eyes widened to saucers, Simmons’ face paling while Fitz’s flushed pink. “Miss Green,” Simmons breathed, “I – I hardly know what to say, I – “

“It’s fine,” Ryan inserted tersely, and Simmons’ mouth snapped shut. “I – look, I don’t want to talk about what happened before. Just, Hank says that you have some things to tell me. About… what you found, back then.”

Fitz and Simmons looked at each other, then turned back simultaneously. “Yes, um,” Fitz stammered, “I’ll just – I’ll go make us some tea, yeah?” With that, he disappeared from the screen, and the sound of a door closing echoed from behind.

Simmons took a deep breath, and Ryan could tell she was fidgeting her hands under the lab bench she sat beside. “Yes, so – Dr. Lawson, should I start from the very beginning?”

He nodded, and she mirrored it. “Right. So, Miss Green – “

“Call me Ryan,” she interrupted again.

“Ryan,” Simmons echoed. “Before your abduction – well, your second abduction, I suppose is fair to say – several of the Avengers were subjected to a highly sensitive polygraph investigation.”

Ryan frowned. “A lie detector test?”
“Yes, precisely. To, um, ascertain their mental condition, as to… well, whether or not they were being controlled against their will.”

Ryan felt her jaw clench, and Simmons looked even more upset. “However, obviously, we found no sign of it,” she said pleadingly. “Fitz and I were the ones to actually provide firm evidence of your innocence, I promise. We were going to take our results to Director Coulson once we’d finished with the others, but…”

“Please, Dr. Simmons, speed this up,” Hank inserted, glancing over at Ryan.

“Of course. During the interview with Sergeant Barnes, he mentioned the history of your – abilities, that you had disclosed to him prior,” she continued. “That they developed over time, with no apparent environmental factors. Which led me to the hypothesis I illegally tested, using your blood sample.”

“What hypothesis?” Ryan muttered, hands starting to shake. Hank laid a hand on her shoulder.

“That your powers, as have been described, are a by-product of your true overall ability, and not inherent baselines that all developed separately.”

Ryan blinked, shaking her head. “What?”

“Your real superpower, if you will,” Simmons said, “is a new strategy for evolution, unlike any previously understood or encountered.”

Silence fell on both ends as utter shock coursed from her head down her body, like icy water gushing from a showerhead. “Wh–what?” Ryan stammered in horror, trembling all over now. “Evo–what, like I’m some kind of mutant?”

“No!” Simmons interjected, jumping to her feet and gesturing frantically. “No, you’re human! Ryan, you’re just as human as Dr. Lawson and I am, I swear it – just, your DNA somehow has the ability to rearrange itself without negative consequence, and that has resulted in your separate powers and their development.”

“How the fuck–“

“We don’t know,” Simmons said, shaking her head. “But, just like traditional evolution, the end result is fortuitous adaptation to your environment. I postulated that, for example, your telekinesis began to develop in your infancy as response to a baby’s normal lack of motor skills and coordination. The telekinesis makes up for it, if that makes sense. Telepathy developed in response to the normal need for improved social skills, around the time you began grade school. And… so on.”

Ryan’s breath came in short pants, head whirling and skin clammy. Some small part of her brain noted that her hands weren’t glowing, at least. A small comfort. “So–what, I just face something normal that everyone does, and my body decides to give me superpowers? What the fu–“

She cut off suddenly, feeling the blood rush from her head. “Oh my god, oh my g–is that why… I presented?”

“We think so,” Hank murmured, gently squeezing her shoulder. “Evolution is about survival, first and foremost–every ability you’ve gained has been to help you survive. And, on a very basic kind of level, mating can help with that.”

“You likely didn’t present before because you moved around so much,” Simmons added, “and there
were no mates of significant biological compatibility. But, we think… when you moved into Avengers Tower, that changed. Which also explains why your first heat was so dramatic; your body was attempting to… well, attract your chosen mates.”

Steve and Bucky. Ryan put her head in her hands, trying to calm her shaking breaths. Oh, god. “I presented… because I came to live near them?”

“…yes. We believe so,” Simmons murmured, a note of sympathy in her voice now. “But, it should be noted, it was both of them specifically, rather than any of the other available persons in the Tower. You could have presented as anything, but. It seems you and they are rather, on some level… meant to be.”

Ryan squeezed her eyes shut, clutching her head a little tighter so it would stop spinning. It was too much. It would have been ridiculous, if it didn’t make so much sense. Her whole life, explained in a few sound bites of science jargon. Why not?

“Is there anything else?” she said tonelessly, praying that was it.

“Just one more,” Simmons muttered, and Ryan heard her swallow heavily. “There’s one ultimate survival advantage, one that every species chases after in some form or another. And, you have it, to a certain extent.”

Ryan looked back at the screen then. Simmons took another deep breath, then looked her dead in the eye. “You’re aging at approximately one-third the rate of a normal human, according to the one estimation I took. Not immortality, by any means, but that’s physically impossible. But, still, you could live to be 300 or even beyond, at your physical prime, and I wouldn’t be surpri...”

Her words faded out as a high-pitched ringing sounded in Ryan’s ears. The world grew fuzzy at the edges, but she couldn’t concentrate enough to care. She clapped a hand to her mouth, pleading with what was left of her functioning brain not to puke or do anything else humiliating.

Strong, warm hands pressed against her shoulders, and she felt her head being guided between her numbed legs. Slowly, the rushing in her ears began to subside, and Hank’s calm and collected voice filtered back in.

“There you go, breathe for me,” he murmured, and she felt something cold pressed into the nape of her neck. It grounded her, and the dizziness began to subside. “Good. Here, I think I – yeah, don’t sit up yet, but drink this, okay?”

A plastic straw poked at her lips, and she obediently sucked on what turned out to be a small box of orange juice. When she’d swallowed the last drops, she managed a deep breath, and her vision cleared.

“I’m okay,” she muttered, and Hank carefully guided her back up, keeping hold of her shoulders afterward. He rubbed between her shoulder blades, and she wiped away the wetness on her cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Hank said, and she met his eyes. “That was a lot, all at once. I thought ripping off the bandage would be best, but obviously not.”

Ryan shook her head, now starting to ache. “Not your fault I’m a freak. Now confirmed by science.” Hank frowned, but didn’t reply. “Just… don’t tell Steve and Bucky, okay?”

A sudden look of worry crossed his face, smoothed over in a second, but she caught it anyway. “Doctor-patient confidentiality keeps me from discussing any of this with anyone, without your express permission,” he said. “But, I should tell you… Steve and Bucky already know. Simmons
told them back at SHIELD headquarters months ago.”

Chapter End Notes

It was about time Ryan found out, huh? Tying up the last loose ends of this story is harder work than I thought, mostly because I laid out too many strings to begin with. But bear with me, we're so close now!! <3 <3 <3
In Which There's a Lot of Yelling, If We're Being Honest

Chapter Notes

Aahh!!! Thanks SO much for all the kudos everyone, we broke 1000 and I'm super pumped!! <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ryan! Hurry up, we’re gonna be late!” Darcy kept pounding on the door, but Ryan didn’t move. Her face was buried in her hands, but no tears came this time. She felt perfectly calm and completely on edge all at once, like a rubber band just before it snapped.

“Should I tell her you’re not feeling well?” Hank murmured. When she didn’t respond, he got up from the bed, and Ryan heard him open the door and murmur something to Darcy.

“What? Ryan, this is like the biggest deal of your life! Come on, down some Advil and let’s – “

“I’m not going!” Ryan’s hands shook as she leapt to her feet, a frantic sort of fury igniting in her chest. She turned away from the door, gripping her hands in her hair. “Leave me alone!”

“What – the hell did you do to her?” Darcy accused, shoving her way inside.

“I’m sorry, but you need to leave.” Hank blocked Darcy’s way as Ryan growled in frustration, whipping around to glare at her.

“What – the hell did you do to her?” Darcy accused, shoving her way inside.

“I’m sorry, but you need to leave.” Hank blocked Darcy’s way as Ryan growled in frustration, whipping around to glare at her.

“He didn’t do anything, just – just go away, all of you! Get out!”

“What the fu – “

“Guys? What the hell’s going on?” Jane exclaimed in alarm, hurrying in from the hallway with Thor on her tail. “Ryan, we’re going to be late – “

“I’m not going!” she screamed at them, their wide eyes and shocked expressions only angering her further. “Now get out!”

The mirror above her dresser shattered to pieces. Shards rained to the floor as Hank gasped and tensed, Jane startled, and Darcy screamed and jumped away.

Immediately, Thor pushed forward and positioned himself between Ryan and the others, arms held out to hold them back. “Remove yourselves at once,” he barked over his shoulder, and Jane and Darcy took off in an instant. Hank hesitated, then murmured that he’d be just outside before closing the door.

Thor lowered his arms, an intensity to his expression she’d never seen before as she stared at him, frozen in place. “Ryan. You must calm yourself.”

Her breath came in short pants, panic and adrenaline now joining the roiling fury in her veins. “I’m – I’m sorry,” she gasped, clutching her arms across her stomach to keep from vomiting. “I’m sorry,
I’m sorry – “

“You have not harmed anyone,” Thor interrupted, taking a step closer. “But you are not in control. Whatever has befallen you, we will remedy, but you must have command of your abilities first.”

He sat on the floor then, gracefully lowering himself in front of her and looking up to make eye contact. “You are safe here. There is no danger both you and I together could not stop. Please.”

A sob tore out of her chest, and she fell to her knees, rocking back and forth slightly as tears blinded her. “I’m – I can’t, I can’t.”

“You cannot do what?” Thor laid a hand on her shoulder, and she clenched her arms even tighter as she desperately shook her head.

“I c-can’t watch them die!”

Thor pulled her fully into a hug then, and she lost it, sobbing uncontrollably into his shoulder. “Ryan. Your parents are already deceased. We go now to honor their memory and bring them properly to Valhallá’s rest.”

Ryan pulled back abruptly, shaking her head again. “N-no, not – S-Steve, and Bucky, I can’t, I can’t!”

Thor frowned. “I do not understand your meaning. Is this because of their mission with SHIELD?”

She shook her head again, trying desperately to regain her breath. Thor waited patiently as her shuddering finally slowed, offering her an honest-to-goodness handkerchief out of nowhere when she looked up.

“H-Hank just told me,” and she paused as the tears threatened to overwhelm her again, turning to sit back against the side of her bed. “I’m… not dying.”

“Most would consider that excellent news,” Thor replied with a small smile, mirroring her pose. “No, no, I mean – I’m…” She couldn’t get the words out. It’d make it final.

“Would you like me to retrieve Jane and Darcy? They’re not angry at you, I’m sure.”

“No,” Ryan breathed, suddenly realizing. Thor was perfect, he was the only one – “I’m aging three times slower than the average human. At least.”

Complete silence followed for a few seconds, and she braved a look at his face. His eyes were closed, understanding in the breath he sighed out. He reached an arm around her shoulders, and she leaned into his solid presence, a few fresh tears trickling down her cheeks. “I am deeply sorry, Ryan. It is not a burden I would wish on you.”

“They lied to me,” she whispered, and her heart broke all over again. “They knew the whole time, and – I can’t, I can’t watch them get old without me, I can’t – “

“Shh,” Thor murmured, squeezing her a little tighter for a moment. “You must put this aside for the moment. You should not miss the ceremony, for anything.”

She knew he was right. And so, a half-hour later, she stood in a numb haze as Mayor de Blasio and Governor Cuomo and a half-dozen others droned on at a podium, never hearing a word. At one point, people wanted to shake her hand, and she smiled unconvincingly at all of them as cameras
flashed in her eyes. It turns out, it was more than just a plaque: two slabs of black marble stood behind the plaque raised on a dais, the one on the right emblazoned with only her parent’s names. As soon as the ribbon was cut, she turned around and walked away.

*** *** *** ***

Two days later, Ryan lay prostrate on her bed. People kept knocking on her door, pleading voices filtering through, but she couldn’t let them in. Someone – Bruce, Darcy, Sam, she couldn’t remember – left her plates of sandwiches. She managed a bite or two of each, then threw them away.

“How?”

JARVIS’ voice startled her; he hadn’t spoken to her since suggesting the appointment with Hank. “What?” she replied dully, staring at the wall as she lay on her bed.

“Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes will be arriving in an estimated five minutes. A helicopter will be landing on the roof.”

She’d probably never understand how she could be so furious, and yet have her heart still leap in excitement when they came home. She sighed, then heaved herself off her bed. She should probably brush her teeth before seeing them.

A few minutes later, she stepped out of the elevator to air gusting around her, the whirring sound surprisingly quiet despite the wind rushing in her ears. The blades slowed to a crawl as the chopper’s engines turned off fifty feet away. The cabin doors opened.

Bucky came out first, his hair disheveled and silver arm uncovered even as a she saw at least three knives and two guns strapped across his torso. The sight unsettled her a little, but her relief as he moved freely outweighed it by far. Steve clambered out after him, and her heart plummeted as he clutched an arm across his ribs.

She dashed forward, terror fueling her steps, but stopped suddenly as Bucky stormed past her, ignoring her completely. She caught a whiff of pure, livid anger, and the door to the stairs slammed behind him.

“Oh, yeah, real mature, Bucky!” Steve shouted, and he stalked over after him and slammed the door back open.

And Ryan stood in utter shock, staring at the concrete steps leading down where they’d disappeared.

“Uh, ma’am?” a voice said, and she turned to see the helicopter pilot standing there, looking highly uncomfortable. “Captain Rogers left this on the vehicle, would you mind returning it to him?”

He held out Steve’s shield, and Ryan took it automatically. The white star in the middle caught the sun reflecting off the pool nearby, shining like a diamond encased in rubies and sapphires. With a sudden, furious cry, she stomped over and flung it with all her might into the water. A tremendous splash soaked her sneakers as it sank like a stone, coming to rest six feet under.

“What’re you doing!!” the pilot cried, scandalized. Ryan whirled on him, teeth gritted and bared, and had to physically restrain herself from throwing out a hand and tossing him in, too.
“If he wants it, he can get it himself!” The pilot stared at her in shock, mouth dropped open, and a sick sense of satisfaction twisted in her gut. With a furious growl, she stormed back into the elevator and jabbed the button for level five. Her idiot boyfriends had some explaining to do.

* * *  * * *  * * *

She heard their voices long before she could make out what they were yelling. Flinching open the door to their apartment, she found herself right in the middle of their shouting match, not even progressed past the entryway.

“Every fucking time, goddammit Steve – “

“What, you’re the only one allowed to jump in without thinking – !“

“I had a plan! I was telling you the plan when you decided to be a fucking hero – “

“They fucking surrounded us, I’m already halfway healed, I wasn’t letting you get hurt – !“

“So you get yourself hurt instead!? Jesus Christ, can you stop playing the martyr for one fucking – “

“Oh, now I’m a martyr? Not even a fucking hero anymore?” Steve slammed his hand on the wall, and the drywall shook with the impact. “Get it through your damn thick skull, I won’t let you get hurt again!”

“Neither of us had to, if you’d just – and what, you think I can’t handle my own against a couple of superpowered freaks?!”

“What?” Ryan gasped, eyes widening and taking an unconscious step back. Steve and Bucky noticed her for the first time, both looking simultaneously to her.

“Fuck – look, bad choice of words, but can we deal with this later, please?” Bucky snapped viciously, turning back to Steve. “Because Steve here needs to get it through his damn thick skull that I don’t need his protection!”

“That so? Well, too fucking bad!” Steve shouted, crowding in Bucky’s face. “If you think for one damn second that I’m gonna – “

“Hey!” Ryan inserted, stepping fully inside and slamming the door behind her. “Enough!”

“Not now, Ryan!” they both shouted together.

Silence fell, the words ringing in her ears. She gaped at them, blood boiling in her veins. “Not now?” she said, voice dropping to a low whisper. “When, exactly, then? Six months? A year? On your fucking deathbeds?”

“The fuck are you talking abo – “

“When were you gonna tell me?!” The floor shook under their feet as she screamed. “You knew, you knew the whole fucking time about my powers, Kilgrave, everything! Six months, and you never told me, you goddamn – “

She cut herself off with a furious growl, unable to come up with a strong enough insult. Dimly, she
registered the twin looks of shock on their faces, how Steve had backed away from Bucky, but she was too irate to stop. “Why? After everything, all the secrets you kept before – “

“We didn’t keep anything from you!” Bucky yelled, rounding on her now. “That was them, we had no clue about Barton and Romanoff – “

“You think this isn’t just as bad?!” Ryan jabbed a finger at him. “You had the secrets this time, and you didn’t – “

“You couldn’t handle it!” Steve interrupted. “We did it for you, you couldn’t even speak when you came back, we weren’t gonna – “

“Oh, so you get to make that decision for me?! Both of you?! Oh, of course, you’re mates, you wouldn’t keep secrets from each other, just from me!”

“Oh, come on!” Bucky shouted, narrowing his eyes at her. “You took off, what, two weeks later anyway? What, like you needed another excuse to run away again, like you always do!”

“Don’t you dare pin this on me.” Ryan clenched her hands into fists, nails digging into her palms. “I fuck up a lot of things, but I would never do this.”

“You don’t know that,” Steve said, clenching his jaw. “We did it to keep you safe, because it was the right thing – “

“The right thing to do!?” Ryan yelled. “No, the right thing would have been being honest with the person you supposedly love, you arrogant, lying son of a – “

“Don’t you dare call me a liar,” Steve growled, taking a menacing step forward.

Ryan gasped, eyes wide, and threw out a hand in front of her. A flash of blue light, and Steve froze in place. His eyes widened in shock, but his arms and legs were stuck motionless, lit a dim blue.

Bucky inhaled sharply, and Ryan realized what she’d just done. Immediately, she dropped her hand, and Steve stumbled forward a little before catching himself and looking back up, eyes still wide with shock.

She stared at him, dread coiled in her stomach like a rope tied in a noose. “I’m sorry,” she breathed, and wrenched the door open and tore down the hall.

When she’d disappeared, Bucky turned back to Steve. “Just great, Stevie,” he muttered, and yanked the door shut behind him.

*I * * *

“I fucked up, Sam,” Steve said, holding his head in his hands. “Real bad, this time.”

“Yeah, I figured.” Sam shrugged and held out a beer. “It’s Friday night, I’m not drinking alone.”

Steve sighed, then swigged the whole bottle in one go. Sam dutifully went to his fridge and grabbed another. “Anytime you like.”
Steve sighed again, and Sam rolled his eyes. He couldn’t decide if Captain Drama Queen or Drama Queen America was a more accurate title. He gave Steve a second, then swallowed down part of his first as he settled on his leather couch beside him. The Yankees game played on mute in the foreground, down by three in the bottom of the sixth. “Spit it out, man.”

“Bucky, Ryan and I had a fight,” Steve started, and Sam just kept himself from rolling his eyes again.

“You know, I figured that much, Steve. Was it actually worse than your usual white boy nonsense?”

“Ryan used her powers on me to hold me back, so, yeah.”

That shut Sam up for a second. He took another swig of beer, and Steve put down his second empty bottle. A moment later, hunched over, he continued, “Bucky and I were fighting after we got back. The same old shit since 1944. Then, Ryan came in, and… it escalated.”

Sam narrowed his eyes at Steve. “Nuh-uh. Girl’s too damn smart to get involved in something that stupid. What else did you do?”

Steve swallowed, fixing his eyes on the silent TV. “You remember at SHIELD, back last December, when Agent Simmons did that blood test on Ryan?”

Frowning a little, Sam nodded. “I thought nothing came of it, cause Ryan just wanted to leave.”

“It was a little more complicated than that.” Steve hesitated. “I – it’s Ryan’s secret to tell, I can’t say everything, but… she gave Bucky ‘n me permission to ask Simmons about it. And… it’s pretty big stuff.”

“Oh, my god,” Sam breathed, closing his eyes and collapsing back against the cushion. “She didn’t know, and you didn’t tell her.”

“Yeah.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, until Sam felt like choking on the stench of Steve’s guilt-ridden scent. “What else happened?”

“We all screamed at each other for a while. Then, Ryan called me a liar, and I got pissed and took a step towards her. She held me back.”

Sam groaned, then got up and grabbed another two more beers, finishing his first on the way over. “What then?”

Steve shrugged, then downed his third. “She took off, I don’t know where. Bucky, too. And I came here.” He turned to Sam, the expression on his face reminiscent of a kicked puppy. “Jesus, Sam, what do I do?”

“Alright, just – “ Sam put down his beer, turning in his seat to face him square – “you know what you did wrong, right?”

“Shouted a lot, and kept secrets I probably shouldn’t have?”

“No, you moron – put yourself in her shoes for one second, huh? One, she’s never been in a relationship before and doesn’t know how to deal with fights; two, she has horrible trust and self-confidence issues that you just stomped your big stanky feet of justice all over; three, she’s a sexual assault survivor, Steve, and you took a physical step towards her in a fight.”
“Alright, I get it,” Steve said miserably.

“No, Steve, you don’t.” Sam stood up, gesturing forcefully at him with his beer. “We’re both dudes and not Omegas. We’ve never had to worry about half the things she does every single day, just walking out the door. If you’re gonna fix this, you need to get in her perspective.” He put the bottle back down, folding his arms. “Honestly? I’m impressed she was even brave enough to stand up for herself at all, even if it was the shittiest way to go about it.”

“We were trying to – “

“Protect her? Keep her safe? Let her be happy in the dark for a while?” Sam inserted. “That’s what everyone says, Steve. But people don’t like secrets, because secrets put up walls. Especially in a situation like yours.”

“What do you mean?”

Sam sighed, then handed Steve the rest of his beer to finish. It wasn’t settling in his stomach well. “You’re in a brand-new relationship, for one. And if what happened with Nat, Clint, and Darcy is any indicator, there could be jealousy issues that just augment every other problem. Like keeping secrets, for instance.”

“What happened with them?” Steve asked, brows furrowing. “I didn’t know there were any problems.”

“I forgot, you were in a cell for a bit then – before we got to SHIELD, they had a big shouting match of their own on the plane,” Sam said. “Jane told me after, they’d been having some trouble for a while. All the secrets Nat and Clint have to keep from Darcy, cause of their jobs. Darcy got pissed when they didn’t tell her what they suspected about Ryan, cause she and her were already good friends.”

Steve was quiet for a few moments, digesting it, then muttered, “Oh, fuck.”

Sam narrowed his eyes again. “What did you do?”

“Ryan said something I just remembered,” Steve said with a groan. Sam arched an eyebrow at him, and he muttered, “Something like ‘you and Bucky are mates, so you wouldn’t keep secrets from each other, but you would from me’.”

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “So, yeah. You should probably address that, too.”

Steve chuckled humorlessly. “Guess it’s a good thing we got called out before our first trio date.” When Sam gave him a questioning look, he said, “Bucky and I were gonna recreate our first date through Brooklyn with her.”

“Oh, my god.”

Steve winced, then sighed again. “Bucky might also have used the term ‘superpowered freaks’ somewhere in there.”

Sam closed his eyes. “Steve. I know for a fact that someday, you and Bucky want kids, a little picket fence, the whole apple-pie life.”

He opened them again to bore into Steve’s, who actually shrank back a little. “Ryan is not what you expected, but she is the best addition to our family anyone could’ve asked for. You make things up
with Bucky, then you get on your goddamn knees and beg for her forgiveness.”

“Yes sir, Airman.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

Bucky saw Bruce out of the corner of his eye, and paused his punching. Natasha had whispered to him a year ago to let Bruce use the gym alone. When he’d questioned why, Nat had shrugged and said, “He asked us to.”

_Goddamnit._ He wasn’t done yet, anger and guilt still roiling through him, but started taking the tape off his hand anyway.

“You don’t have to leave,” Bruce said mildly, giving him a friendly smile. “Watching people spar is a trigger sometimes, but punching bags are fine.”

Bucky grunted, then resumed beating on the heavyweight bag like each sand grain had done him personal wrong. He felt Bruce’s eyes on him for a few moments, then heard him go to the pull-up bar. Small grunts of exertion filtered through the room over the sound of fists pounding leather.

Ramping up his speed, Bucky let his anger course through his fists. The feeling of resistance against him only egged him on further, each blow coming harder and harder. With a ferocious yell, he punched a hole clean through the leather with his flesh-and-blood hand, and on the next beat the bag flew off its chain and across the room, sand spraying everywhere.

Panting, he felt Bruce’s eyes on him again, and turned to glare at him. “What?”

Bruce only smiled again, small and close-lipped. “Something on your mind?”

“No.” He crunched through the sand to grab another bag, dragging it back with one arm. Bruce watched him as he hoisted it up, securing the chain on a fresh loop. When it was set up, Bruce walked over and held onto the opposite side from him.

“Not a great idea, Banner,” Bucky growled, trying to keep his cool. He didn’t need to deal with the Hulk tonight.

“I’m stronger than I look,” Bruce replied, raising an eyebrow in challenge. “Better resistance this way.”

“Fine.” Bucky threw a punch, and the bag didn’t move.

“You can do better than that,” Bruce said, and Bucky growled in frustration, grabbing the sides of the bag to keep from punching through it again.

Bruce gave him an unimpressed look. “If you can stay in control, so can I.”

“What are you trying prove!”? Bucky yelled, throwing his hands in the air. “I’m not playing games.”

Bruce looked him dead in the eye. “Bucky. Punch.”

He growled in frustration, then punched the bag again, hard. “Happy now?”
“Again.”

Bucky snapped. Each blow landed harder than the last, but the bag barely moved at all. He kept at it, feeling his knuckles split open and blood spring up. Smears of red shone dark and wet against the tan leather, and still he punched harder and harder.

He loosed an almost feral yell, and Bruce stepped neatly aside as he snapped the bag from the chain just like before. It sailed through the air to land atop the first, Bucky left panting and oddly drained.

“Good,” Bruce said, then walked to the entrance and grabbed the first-aid kit. “Sit.”

Bucky sat, piles of sand surrounding him on the floor mats. Bruce lowered himself to sit cross-legged in front of him, then took his hand and dabbed at the cuts with rubbing alcohol.

“I know they’ll heal by tomorrow on their own, but it’s good practice regardless,” Bruce commented lightly. He wrapped a bit of gauze around them and tied a gentle knot. Then he rested his hands on the floor, leaning back with a contemplative look. “Have you heard of the Four Noble Truths, James?”

“The noble what?”

Bruce smiled, eyes twinkling. “No, then. I’m not a strict follower of Buddhism, by any means, but I’ve found its beliefs can grant some peace.”

He held up one finger. “One. Problems are fact of life. Suffering, it’s technically called, but I think it’s more pragmatic to think of it as solvable problems. Two – “ and he put up a second finger into a peace sign – “every problem has a source. A root issue, action, et cetera. Like Newton’s third law, almost. Three: there’s always a solution, to every problem. And four, the solution is always achievable.”

“It’d be a pretty shitty solution if it wasn’t,” Bucky snapped, and Bruce chuckled in response. He drew a finger through the sand piles, leaving a pattern of swirls behind.

“The Noble Truths are meant to comprise a worldview, of sorts. Accept the world how it is, no matter how where, who, or what we are. Realize the underlying source of what’s wrong, so you can treat the disease instead of symptoms. Then, you can take hope in the fact that there’s always an answer, and that you can do it, no matter what.”

Bucky sat sullen for a moment, staring at the wall. He saw Bruce smile again out of the corner of his eye, then stand up and offer him a hand. He took it, and Bruce pulled him up with surprising ease.

“If you need help finding a solution, there’s a lot of smart minds here,” Bruce said, their right hands still gripped together. “Not Tony, though, he’s useless.”

Bucky cracked a small grin, then shook Bruce’s hand before releasing it and grunting, “Thanks.”

Bruce nodded, then turned and walked away. “Hey, wait,” Bucky called after him, and Bruce looked back at him. “What was the deal with the heavy bag, then?” he said, pointing to the deflated sacks lying limp across the room.

“Made you listen, right?” Bruce grinned mischievously, then laughed as Bucky rolled his eyes.

* * * * *
Ryan didn’t realize where her feet were taking her until she arrived. A uniformed guard was about to close the entrance gate when she pushed through past him.

“Ma’am, we’re closing soon!” he yelled, but she ignored him and went straight past the draining fountains and lists of names. A small fence blocked the way past the raised plaque, and she hopped it without stopping.

“Hey! You’re not allowed back there!” the guard exclaimed, and she heard a few tourists murmur in excitement. She didn’t stop, only halting when she stood in front of the ten-foot marble slabs, towering over her. “Ma’am, I need you to come back to the other side of the fence, or I’ll have to call –”

“I’m talking to my parents!” she shouted, whirling back around and glaring at the taken-aback security guard. “This is the only grave they get, you’re not keeping me from them!”

A camera flash went off from somewhere on her right, and some part of her still-rational mind screamed that she’d completely lost it. The rest of her didn’t care, and she rounded on the security guard, keeping just out of arm’s reach. “Ten fucking minutes, is that too much to ask??”

The guard actually took a step back, eyes wide in fear and surprise. “Um – w-wait, you’re the girl – you’re their kid?” he stammered, pointing at the display on the right where Mary and Alexander’s names stood a half foot tall.

She nodded, and he looked furtively around at all the cell phones held out. “Look – fine, okay? Just get out of here after,” he muttered, then turned back around and exclaimed, “That’s enough, folks. Time to leave, everyone! Sir, that means you, too!”

Ryan sighed, then turned around. Suddenly, the last few steps seemed impossible to take, her feet leaden as she slowly made her way to the foot of her parents’ memorial.

She stood in front of it for a moment, staring up, then sank to her knees, overwhelmed. They’d been gone for years, longer in her life now than she’d had them – but seeing their names up there felt like the book was finally closed, never to reopen.

She sniffed, closing her eyes. “Thor says you guys are in Valhalla now,” she murmured, then chuckled wetly. “Yeah, I’m friends with Thor. You know, the Norse god? He’s real. He’s an alien from a planet called Asgard. I’ve heard it’s nice there.”

Their names swam in her vision when she looked back up. “You guys probably learned about Steve in school, though, like me. And maybe Bucky, too. Those idiots.” She laughed some more, humorless and despairing. “I love them so much, guys. I know they don’t feel the same way, but… I mean, they can’t, I – they love each other too much. Even though I literally presented for them. Yeah, I presented, too – life got really fucking crazy after you l-left.”

She broke down for a few seconds, gulping deep breaths to try to calm herself. There was more she had to say. “I’m an Omega. Please don’t be mad, I – I didn’t mean to. Believe it or not, it’s cause of my powers, apparently. Which aren’t really what we thought they were, either. And, I found out that Steve and Bucky knew, and they kept it a secret from me.”

Exhaling a shaky breath, she moved in a little closer, turning to lean her back against the stone and resting her elbows on her folded knees. “I’m pissed. I’m so angry, I – I haven’t been this mad since I was a dumb kid, and I don’t know what to do now, cause… I don’t know what to do.”
The stone had nothing to offer her, it seemed, as they both sat there in silence. Exhaustion crashed over her in waves, the floods of adrenaline finally receding. “I’m trying my best, I swear,” she whispered. “But I don’t know how to work this out. I mean, who even falls in love with two people at once out of nowhere, especially a couple of geriatric super-soldiers? It’s fucking ridiculous.”

She felt a sudden squirm of guilt, and quickly said, “Sorry, Mom, I know I’m not supposed to swear. I’ve done a lot of things I’m not supposed to, and I’m sorry for those, too. I – I know I’m not supposed to fight with people, because I can hurt them. And you were right, Daddy, I have.”

She leaned her head back against the stone, staring up at the darkening sky as a few more tears fell. “I killed someone,” she whispered, quiet as a shadow. “He was a bad man, and he was going to kill Steve and Bucky and everyone else, but still. I’m so sorry. I don’t know how to make any of it right.”

_Tomorrow._

She gasped, whirling around and looking back up at her parents’ names. She could’ve sworn she just heard –

“Miss Green, ma’am? Would you like to set up a time to come back tomorrow?” The guard from before was back, giving her a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry, I just really have to close now.”

Ryan blinked, then stood up. “No, um – I’m sorry about before, I was…”

“It’s totally fine, ma’am,” he replied, giving her a small smile. “I, um, I’ve lost a parent too, I can empathize a little. Sometimes, when it’s tough, you just have to take it one tomorrow at a time.”

She stared at him, probably a little too long, before hopping the waist-high fence again. “Right. Thank you,” she said in a daze, and his polite whatever was lost in the haze of her exhausted mind. One thought still stood strong, though, and it propelled her tired feet back downtown, the buzz of the city drowning out everything else.

She wasn’t running away this time.

Chapter End Notes

_Some parts of this chapter are actually some of my favorite sections I’ve ever written. I hope you enjoyed it!!_
SO CLOSE TO THE END GUYS. I apologize in advance for one extremely long scene in here, and some liberties taken with the MCU timeline; hopefully I’ve explained it all in my story’s world sufficiently.

Hover over or go to the end for translations.

Steve hesitated, then opened the door. To his surprise, Bucky already stood in the entryway, exactly where the three of them had fought for the first time. His arms were crossed, his eyes tired as he looked at where Ryan had stood.

“I can’t even believe what I said to her.” He shook his head. “Jesus.”

“Not nearly as bad as what I did,” Steve said, closing the door behind him.

“Banner preached at me for a while,” Bucky continued, almost in a mutter. “Something about looking for the root of the problem, and solving that. Guess it made sense.”

He sighed, then turned to face him. “I lost you, too, you know. You think I can stand the thought of you getting hurt either?”

“I know you can’t.” Steve took a step closer, and Bucky held out a hand. Stroking his thumb over the back, Steve said, “I don’t know if there’s a good answer here.”

“Banner said there is. Just have to look a little harder.” Bucky leaned in, and Steve met him halfway, their kiss the same I love you, I'm sorry, I hate when we do this as it always was.

After a minute, Bucky pulled back, scenting at Steve’s neck in instinctual comfort. “Were you with Sam?”

Steve looped his arms around Bucky’s waist, pulling him in closer and scenting him back. He was thankful he’d showered quickly before returning, and it seemed Bucky had, too, his fresh-air-and-rainy-forest scent overlaid with the clean tang of soap. “Yeah. He helped.”

A worried thought crossed his mind, and he pressed a kiss to Bucky’s damp hair. “You don’t ever get jealous of him, right?”

The withering look Bucky gave him made him chuckle under his breath. “Just checking, mo anamchara.”

“You caught what she said, then,” Bucky said, stepping away to head into the living room. He curled up on the couch, leaning into Steve’s side when he sat beside him. “I honestly didn’t know.”

“It’s not like she’d ever tell us when she’s unhappy,” Steve said, guilt churning his stomach. “If she thought it’d make us upset. Not that it’s any excuse, though.”
“And here we thought we were communicating so damn fine lately.”

“I just…” Steve shifted a little, lifting a hand to card through Bucky’s hair. “You and I have been doing so well.”

“We are really shitty boyfriends if we just ignore what she’s going through just ‘cause we’re happy.”

“That is what we were doing, weren’t we.” Steve dragged his free hand down his face. “My ma would’ve taken a belt to my rear for treating a girl so poorly.”

“To both of us,” Bucky said, looking vaguely concerned that the ghost of Sarah Rogers would appear, leather switch in hand, like they were eight years old again and caught stealing penny candy from the Automat. “Alright, just – we’re the problems, then. How do we fix it?”

“We get in her shoes for a minute,” Steve answered, smiling a little to himself. “She feels like she’s on the outside, and that we don’t love her like we do each other. And finding out what we kept from her makes it all worse, cause she’s still not comfortable with her powers, and the secret-keeping’s an old wound we just poured salt into.”

Bucky’s scent dampened with guilt, like air gone heavy and stale. “Fuck, I just – god, Steve, I can’t live without either of you.”

“Me, too.” Steve sighed, blinking back the tears prickling his eyes. “I think… it’ll just take time. We just have to do a better job, every day.”

“What if she doesn’t come back?”

“Then we go after her, this time.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

The elevator stopped a few floors short, and Ryan’s stomach sank. She already knew why.

“Who told you?” she asked before the doors fully opened. Pamela half-smiled at her from the couch, an iPad in hand and her yellow notebook and pen beside her.

“Your friend Mr. JARVIS was worried about you,” she said, indicating Ryan’s usual chair. Ryan walked over and sat, not meeting Pamela’s eyes. “Apparently, he’s been programmed to monitor the mental health of everyone in the Tower. It’s a good call.”

“Did you watch it, then?” Ryan said, indicating the iPad.

“Not without your permission,” Pamela said, shaking her head. “I thought we could watch it together. Get a clear perspective on everything.”

Reliving her day was the last thing she wanted to do, but she knew by now that Pamela’s madness always had a good method. So she got up from the chair and went to the couch, huddling her arms across her chest. The screen showed her bedroom, with her and Hank sitting on the bed. Pamela pressed play, and Ryan forced herself to watch.

Twenty or so minutes later – was that all it took for her life to come crumbling down? – Ryan closed her eyes, tears leaking out the corners.
“Oh, hon,” Pamela murmured, and Ryan almost broke down completely when Pamela smoothed down her hair. “So. How do you feel right now?”

“Like shit,” Ryan said, and Pamela chuckled appreciatively.

“Fair enough. How about specifically, about the news on your powers?”

Ryan was quiet for a minute, trying to gather her thoughts. “I already knew I was a freak. It shouldn’t have been any kind of surprise. It makes sense, honestly. It doesn’t make any sense, it’s crazy, but… it does.”

Pamela hummed in agreement. “Good explanations normally do. What about that last part Dr. Simmons said?”

“About how I now have to keep running away every few years until the year 2200?” The words tumbled out without conscious thought, and it surprised her even as she said them. “About how I can’t ever tell anyone about my powers ever again, or I’ll get experimented on as a fucking fountain of youth? About how I have to watch everyone around me d – “. Her voice caught on a sob, and she gasped a few shuddering breaths.

“Yeah, that one,” Pamela said nonchalantly, and Ryan glared at her, tears ruining the effect. “Come on, Ryan. Is that any attitude to take about it?”

“What the hell else am I supposed to – “

“You know perfectly well that you’re not the only one who has to deal with this,” Pamela interrupted. “That’s why you told Thor, right?”

“Yeah, so what?”

“So, that demigod is the cheeriest one out of all you, that’s what. He was born with powers, just like you, and things have turned out alright for him. I know it’s not the same,” Pamela added as Ryan opened her mouth, eyebrows drawn in anger. “You have gone through horrible, horrible things because of your powers, and nothing makes that right. But I’m saying that if there was ever a place where you could be accepted and understood, it’s right here, hon.”

Ryan glared for a second longer, then suddenly realized what Pamela was saying. “You – want me to tell everyone.”

“Do you want to keep this a secret?” Pamela countered. “Will that help you come to terms with who you are, and who you want to be?”

“I can’t!”

“Why not?” Pamela took up her notepad, raising one eyebrow at Ryan. “I thought you were planning on sticking around this time.”

“I can’t! Not if I’m just going to have to – “ Ryan cut off, gritting her teeth. “Watch them all… get old. Without me.”

Pamela nodded sagely. “That’s something you’re going to have to consider. Would you rather have some time with the people you care about and know it’ll end, or would you rather not care about anyone at all?”

Ryan heaved a sigh, slumping back into the couch. “Well, when you say it like that.”
“That was the point, sweetie,” Pamela grinned. “That’s something for you to think about, and we can talk more later, when you’ve had some time. Now. How about the fight with Steve and Bucky?”

Ryan close her eyes again. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I disagree.” Ryan looked up in surprise, and Pamela quickly added, “Well, the yelling and harsh words shouldn’t have happened, no doubt. But, I’m honestly very impressed you stood up for yourself like that. Seems the only way to get you to do it is to completely piss you off.”

“Great,” Ryan muttered under her breath, and Pamela chuckled again.

“I think why you were mad is fairly obvious – they kept secrets about you, and your jealousy issues and old problems regarding your powers just magnified everything,” Pamela said. “Care to talk about the jealousy part?”

Ryan squirmed in place a little. Why did Pamela have to be so damn blunt? “I was being stupid.”

“How you honestly feel never is,” Pamela declared. “Why did you feel that way, and why do you think you were being stupid?”

Ryan sighed in frustration. “They just – “ and she suddenly found herself pouring out everything. How they would talk about each other with such reverence; how they could just look at each other and know what the other was thinking; how they’d known each other so long that she could never compete.

“They have their own special language!” she exclaimed, finding herself on her feet and gesturing wide with her hands. “That almost no one speaks anymore! I just – there’s no way they love me like they do each other. And I just keep trying to tell myself that it’s fine, I’m lucky to even have this much, but…”

“Oh, Ryan,” Pamela interrupted. “You are not just second place.”

“I am, though!”

“No, you’re not,” Pamela insisted, standing up herself now. “You listen to me, Ryan Adelina Green. You are strong. You are important, you have worth, and you are a kind, brave, and all-around good person. And you are too damn smart to keep lying to yourself. It’s time to stop.”

Ryan was frozen in place, shock rooting her to the floor. The last person to ever call her that was her mother.

“I know you have problems with trust, and self-confidence, and guilt and fear and shame,” Pamela continued. “But either you’re going to keep going and not let them hold you back, or you let yourself get dragged under. It’s your choice, and I’m here for you, either way. But you have to decide to get better, sweetie.”

“I – I want to,” Ryan whispered, shuddering a little.

Pamela nodded. “I know you do. So stop calling yourself a freak, and start realizing you’re already a part of this family here. And family works it out.”

Family. It’d been a while since she’d had one of those.

Pamela smiled at her. “Okay. I think we’re good, for now.” She picked up her bag, putting away
the legal pad and tucking her pen behind her ear. “And I’m sorry, but I have to go, now.”

Ryan blinked in surprise. “Wait – like, for good?”

“I have other people that need my help back home down South, hon,” Pamela said, smiling sadly. “I’ve already been away for a while. But we’ll be on video chat twice a week, and whenever else you need it, alright?”

“Yeah, of course.” Ryan hugged her arms to her chest, not knowing what else to say. “Um…”

“Oh, come here, you,” Pamela said, and pulled her into a bone-crushing hug. Ryan threw her arms around her, holding her back just as tight. “You remember everything I told you, sweet girl. And I have more homework for you, until we talk again.”

“I don’t like your homework,” Ryan said petulantly, muffled into Pamela’s shoulder, and Pamela laughed.

“I know you don’t. But you might not mind this one.” She pulled back, gently wiping away the last tears on Ryan’s face. “I want you to go on upstairs, bust down Steve and Bucky’s door, and go right to bed.”

“Wait, what?”

“You heard me.” Pamela grinned, a hint of mischief in her eyes. “You are one-third of the relationship, Ryan, and with them is right where you belong. Going to bed angry is no sin, and you all need some sleep before you can deal with everything.”

“But – it’s late, and what if they don’t…” Ryan hedged, fidgeting a little. Pamela raised one eyebrow, giving her a sharp look, and she sighed. “Fine.”

“Good girl. Just a few seconds of bravery.” With that, she turned and went to the elevator, pressing the button to open the doors. “I’ll see you soon, Ryan.”

Ryan hugged her arms to her chest again, a bittersweet feeling in her chest. Just before the doors closed, though, a thought suddenly crossed her mind, and she gasped in realization.

“Wait, Pamela!” she called, and Pamela stopped the doors with a hand. “You – we just hugged, and you… you don’t have a scent.”

Pamela burst out laughing, almost doubling over with mirth. “About time you noticed, sweetie.” With a wink and one last smile, she let the doors close. Ryan watched as the numbers dropped to the ground floor, heart a lot lighter than before.

* * *   * * *   * * *

The bedroom door opened, and Steve opened his eyes in alarm, keeping entirely still. Bucky was still in bed next to him, his arm over Steve’s waist, breath slow and deep. But whoever was tiptoeing inside was doing a shitty job of staying quiet, if they were trying to sneak in.

A stumble into the dresser, and a muffled swear reached Steve’s ears. Relief coursed through him, followed by surprise and wonder as he sat up in the darkness. “Ryan?”
She groaned softly. “Hi,” she whispered, slowly making her way to the edge of the bed.

“Hi,” he whispered back. “Are you… um. Is everything okay?”

She exhaled a laugh through her nose, rubbing one hand on the back of her neck and looking down. “Yeah. I, uh… Pamela told me to go to bed. Uh. With you guys.”

“O-oh,” Steve said, then quickly got up before Ryan could say anything. He pulled back the covers, standing aside to let her in. “Of course, please.”

She hesitated a moment, then scooted into bed, settling down next to Bucky before Steve lied down again. She didn’t move at all for a minute, and Steve lay stock-still in response.

Then, she turned on her side and leaned into him, and Steve breathed a silent sigh of relief. He held her against his chest, the aching in his chest finally ceasing enough to drift off into sleep. Bucky only stirred to pull more blankets over his head.

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Ryan startled awake, a hand gently shaking her shoulder. “Hey, it’s just me,” Steve whispered, morning sunlight shining off his hair. “Sorry – do you have to work today?”

“Oh, um – no, Sam told me he got me off ‘til Monday,” she said, trying to remember what day it was. “It’s not Monday, right?”

“No, Saturday,” Steve said, smiling softly. “Sorry – you go back to sleep, I’m gonna make some breakfast.”

“No,” she said, a sudden, strange urgency making her catch his hand as he made to get up. “Please, stay.”

Steve blinked once, then squeezed her hand, lying back down. “Alright.”

A groan came from beside them, muffled under the covers. “Shut up, Steve, it’s Saturday.”

Ryan snickered, and Steve grinned as he leaned over Ryan, putting one finger to his lips. Silently, he gripped the sheets where Bucky was buried, then unceremoniously yanked them straight off the bed and threw them to the floor.

“Aaugh – goddammit, Steve!” Bucky yelled, thrashing around for the sheets, and Ryan and Steve burst out laughing. Bucky blinked blearily, somehow looking murderous and adorable all at once as he glared at them, hair mussed into bedhead and wrinkles pressed into his face. “Wha – Ryan?”

“Hi,” she giggled, and he furrowed his brows in confusion.

“When – what?”

“She came in last night,” Steve said, smiling at them both. “You didn’t wake up.”

“Well, wake me up, next time!”

“Thought that’s what I just did.” Steve dodged the pillow aimed at his face, and Ryan laughed as it
bounced off the wall, almost knocking over a lamp. Pamela was right, as always: she did feel better after some sleep.

“Ryan,” Bucky said, and she turned back to see his face turned somber. “I – “

“No, don’t,” she interrupted, shaking her head. “Let’s – could we maybe just eat breakfast first?” She wanted just a few more minutes of make-believe, if they were the last she could ever get.

Steve and Bucky looked at each other, and she immediately stomped on the thread of jealousy that popped up. She wasn’t doing that anymore.

“Of course,” Steve said, and a few minutes later, they sat at the kitchen table, Steve and Bucky each with six pancakes and a huge bowl of fruit, and Ryan with two and a handful of strawberries. No one talked while they ate, and Ryan felt nerves start to spark in her chest.

When they’d finished, Steve held out a hand to Ryan, and they settled into the living room, the air thickening with anticipation.

“Can we start?” Bucky asked softly, and at Ryan’s nod, he continued. “I guess the first thing to say is, we’re so sorry.”

“We shouldn’t have kept that secret like we did,” Steve added, Bucky nodding on Ryan’s other side. “But, I swear to you, we were going to tell you, and soon. We decided on right after the ceremony forever ago. Can we try to explain why?”

“I think I get why,” Ryan murmured, looking down at her hands. “I was a mess, I – you were right, I wouldn’t have been able to handle it.”

“No, that’s not true,” Steve countered firmly, leaning in with a fierce expression. “You can handle anything, we know that. We just… I mean, it’s the same reason Bucky and I were fighting when we got back,” he said, gesturing at them both. “We try to protect each other, even when we shouldn’t, sometimes.”

“When you left, back at SHIELD,” Bucky said, and Ryan turned back to him. “We decided together not to go after you. And that’s the biggest mistake we’ve ever made, because it made you think we didn’t love with everything we’ve got.”

“I know we’ve been making you feel… secondary,” Steve added, “and that’s our fault. Completely.”

“No, guys, it’s not,” Ryan said. She sighed, leaning back into the couch. How did they just blurt out heartfelt speeches so easily? “Just – look. I told you from the start, I don’t know how to do this. And I just tried to trust you guys, and I couldn’t do that right, ’cause I was jealous. And then I didn’t tell you, and then I found out you guys lied, and… and now I don’t know what to do.”

She saw them exchange a glance, and then look back to her. “What do you want to do?” Bucky asked, almost in a whisper.

“I want to forget everything,” she confessed, looking up at the ceiling. “I want to go back in time four damn days and have you be at the memorial ceremony with me instead of god knows where doing god knows what. I want to go on our damn date!”

She clenched her jaw, squeezing her eyes shut. “I want to pretend that I can keep waking up next to you both. That we can actually have this, and that it’s not all on borrowed time, and that I don’t have to disappear over and over again for the rest of my life, now.”
“What?” Steve breathed, and the fear in his voice startled her. She opened her eyes and met his, wide with shock. “Ryan, please – please, give us another chance, I swear we’ll – “

“Steve, what’s the point?”

Steve reeled back like he’d been slapped. Bucky looked pale, and his flesh hand trembled a little as he scooted himself away, giving her more space. “Please, sweetheart,” he whispered. “What’re you saying?”

“I can’t watch you guys die,” she whispered, a feeling like a straitjacket constricting her chest. “I just can’t. And people are gonna notice, eventually, when I still look the same, and I – I can’t, I can’t.”

Steve inhaled sharply, muttered a curse under his breath, and suddenly her face was cradled in his hands, thumbs stroking along her cheekbones. “Ryan. Buck and I are aging slowly, too.”

She stared at him, lips parting in shock. “What?”

“The serum,” Bucky said quickly, taking one of her hands in both of his. “Both of them – we’re aging like you, we didn’t – “

“We knew about both, we forgot you didn’t – god, we’re so sorry,” Steve finished, desperation coloring his tone. “No one else knows, we haven’t told anyone.”

Ryan sighed out a shaky breath, head buzzing with some mix of fury and joy and sheer, utter relief. Love and relationships came with a lot of extra complicated feelings, she was discovering, and she wasn’t too thrilled about it.

“Are you okay?” Bucky asked, and she managed a nod. Steve released her, still looking wary that she might just stand up and walk out the door. As if there was anywhere else she ever really wanted to be, anymore.

“Let me just get this straight,” she said, looking between them both. “You both knew, the whole time I was gone, all that stuff about my powers? And you were in love with me, at least somewhat? And you knew that the three of us were all aging slowly? And you didn’t tell me, or anyone?”

“Um. Yeah,” Bucky said, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand.

“And… uh, in the fight, you mentioned that we knew about… Kilgrave?” Steve added quietly. “I assume you meant about what he did to you, before. We knew about that too, from watching the security footage of the mansion. Everyone that was there knows. Except Scott, maybe?”

Ryan loosed a heavy sigh, eyes dropping shut as shame coursed through her. “That’s how Pamela knew, and why Clint wasn’t surprised.”

“We’re sorry for that, too,” Bucky murmured. “We thought you knew that already.”

“No one thinks any differently of you,” Steve added. “Really. I mean, we’ve known all this time and you didn’t know that, right?”

Ryan swallowed once. “Then why won’t you guys kiss me?” she whispered.

Steve and Bucky looked at each other again, surprise and confusion in their expressions this time. “Look, I get it if you don’t want me,” she continued, “you don’t have – I’m okay if you don’t, I don’t expect anything, and it’s – I know I’m not – “
She was cut off suddenly by Steve’s mouth overtaking her own, his hands tangling in her hair and gently tugging her forward. She found herself in his lap, and she leaned into him, electricity sparking inside where her chest pressed against his.

Then, he opened his mouth, and she drowned in the sensation of his tongue gently tracing her lips, silently asking for invitation. Following his lead, she let him in, and moaned at the feeling, hot and wet and passionate as he dominated the kiss.

“Fuck,” she heard Bucky mutter, and she pulled back for air, halfway breathless. Bucky’s hands clenched and unclenched in the couch seat like they yearned to be doing something else, and his eyes were darker than usual. “Think I could get off on just watching you two.”

Ryan flushed bright red, unused to the hunger in his gaze but suddenly craving more. Steve grinned, rumbling low in his chest, and a shock of heat coursed through her at the sound.

“Want every part of you,” he murmured in her ear, sending shivers down her spine. His scent surrounded her, heavy with something she’d never scented before, and it made her head dizzy and her knees feel weak. “Want whatever you want, gorgeous, I swear. We didn’t want to pressure you, after… well. We thought you wouldn’t want us.”

“You’re all I’ve ever wanted,” Ryan blurted out, blush deepening as her brain caught up. “Um, I mean – I’ve never wanted anyone before, except you two.”

“Fuck,” Steve muttered this time, closing his eyes. Bucky chuckled at that, a mischievous grin spreading across his face.

“Steve likes that,” Bucky murmured, leaning in and brushing his nose in her hair. “His Alpha lizard brain, anyway.”

“Shut up,” Steve said without any heat. “Sides, I think we’re getting off-track, here,” he added, pressing another kiss to Ryan’s cheek anyway. “We were trying to apologize.”

“No more apologies,” Ryan said, and they looked at her in surprise. "Except, I'm sorry for my horrible timing, losing my temper, and... using my powers on you," she directed at Steve.

"No," Steve said quickly, shaking his head. "No, I should not have taken a step towards you like that. I was completely out of line, and I can't believe I did that. If you ever, ever feel unsafe, I want you use your powers, or whatever you have to, to fix it."

She smiled to herself. How was she so lucky? "Oh," she added, cheeks turning pink again. "And, I'm sorry for throwing your shield in the pool."

"You what?" Bucky exclaimed, sounding like Christmas had come early before dissolving into laughter. "Oh my god, I love you so much."

Steve chuckled too. "I deserved a lot worse than that." He squeezed her hand again, then asked, "Are we okay?"

“I’m still mad,” she admitted, pushing forward and standing back up. “And – if you ever do something like this again, I don’t know what I’m going to do. But... I miss you, and I love you, and I want to put this behind us.”

“That’s all we want, too,” Bucky said, standing up as well.

“No more secrets,” Steve proclaimed, getting to his feet. He looked to Bucky, who nodded
enthusiastically. “We swear.”

A huge grin broke out over her face, for what felt like the first time in years, and she threw her arms around Bucky, then turned and did the same to Steve. “Thank you.”

“Anything for you, ghrá mo chroí,” Steve murmured, then looked at Bucky. “Conas is fuoi sin amháin?”

“Is maith liom é,” Bucky said, something like fondness but deeper in his tone.

“What’re you saying?” Ryan inserted, a small flash of annoyance coming through. Steve quickly took her hand, raising the back of it to her lips.

“We’re going to teach you Gaelic, as soon as possible,” he said. “It’s all of ours, now.”

“Steve and I have, uh, special names for each other,” Bucky added, the tips of his ears turning pink. “From back when we couldn’t say some stuff in English around other people.”

“And yours,” Steve finished, “means ‘love of my heart’.”

Ryan ducked her head, hiding her blush and silly grin. “How do you say ‘sappy’ in Gaelic?” she muttered, and they both laughed. “Well. What now?” she added, looking back up.

Steve frowned a little then, brows pinching together. She didn’t like that look. “In the interest of not keeping secrets,” he said, looking to Bucky, “there’s more stuff we should talk about.”

“Like what?” she said, worry dropping like a heavy stone in her stomach. Bucky took her hand, and Steve took the other, smiling reassuringly.

“Like the future,” he said. “And… what we were doing on our SHIELD mission.”

“Oh. Um, are you allowed to tell me that?”

“He’s Captain America,” Bucky said with a laugh. “What, are they gonna fire him?”

“I don’t know how all this works,” Ryan chuckled, sitting back down on the couch. “I’m literally in my pajamas on Saturday morning in Avengers Tower, talking to my super spy-soldier-hero boyfriends about their top-secret missions. My life hasn’t made sense for a while.”

“Well, it’s about to get a little weirder,” Bucky muttered, “but it’s something you need to know.” He sat down next to her and pulled her into his lap, scenting at her neck for a moment. He pressed a kiss into her hair, then rested his chin on her shoulder, looking over at Steve.

“There’s a group of people,” Steve began after a moment, “who were… well, genetically experimented on, several thousand years ago. By aliens.”

Ryan’s eyes widened, and she looked to Bucky for confirmation. “I know, it’s fucking batshit crazy,” he said, rolling his eyes. “But, those aliens are long gone, and now, those people have had a ton of descendants.”

“And, when those people are exposed to a certain reagent, called Terrigen,” Steve added, “they undergo a sort of transforming process. Like Buck and I did, but not the same way. And, like Buck and me… they come out with abilities.”

“Abilities more like yours, though,” Bucky finished. “They call themselves the Inhumans.”
Ryan stared at them both, looking from one to the other. “Wait – am I, then – “

Steve shook his head firmly. “No. There’s no way you could’ve been exposed to Terrigen when you were a baby. It’s extremely rare, and the only sources on Earth were kept secret by the Inhumans for millennia. Until – well, a few months ago. Which leads up to our mission.”

“Terrigen got sent out into the environment as a mist, somehow,” Bucky explained. “Some idiot SHIELD agents got in over their head, and it jetstreamed all over the world. So, random people have been popping up with abilities out of nowhere.”

“That’s not exactly what happened,” Steve said, rolling his eyes. “Coulson didn’t tell us everything.”

“Close enough,” Bucky snapped. “That Johnson kid gets exposed and got a big head, sided with the Inhumans for a while, and got her partner killed when everything went to hell.”

Steve sighed. “Well, yeah. It was a shitshow, basically,” he directed at Ryan. “SHIELD’s been keeping everything as quiet as possible, but someone started brainwashing a bunch of Inhumans, while we were on leave a few months ago. When we came back, Coulson – he’s the director of SHIELD, I don’t think you met him before – asked us to step in, but we said no, at first. We needed to be here, with you.”

“But things were getting worse for them,” Bucky picked up. “And Coulson’s favorite agent got brainwashed, so he asked us again.”

Steve frowned, a pleading look in his eye. “We wouldn’t have missed the ceremony for anything less, I swear. But they really needed our help. And it was us, or he’d ask Clint and Nat, and… they don’t have abilities, they’d be at a disadvantage. We had to make a choice.”

“I understand,” Ryan said automatically, not sure if she really understood anything anymore. The world was making less and less sense the longer this week went on. “But, just – back up a second. What kinds of powers do these ‘Inhumans’ get?”

“Agent Johnson can manipulate natural frequencies, sort of?” Steve said. “Mostly, she just makes things shake or blasts them back. One guy produced electric shocks, one could make clones of herself. Another just melted all the metal he touched, and one would have visions of Inhumans dying. Some of their powers aren’t really useful.”

“But, the Inhumans only get one,” Bucky said. “Whatever they can do, that’s it. You’ve got at least four, and the potential for more. Even if it’s all kind of based off of one, there’s no Inhumans like that. None of them would even stand a chance against you.”

Ryan blew out a breath, and Bucky squeezed his arms around her a little tighter, grounding her. She leaned into him gratefully, and he kissed her cheek again. “You doing okay?”

“Peachy,” she sighed. “Still the world’s biggest freak, even amongst the kids of people with alien-modified DNA.”

“There’s no one on Earth or elsewhere like you,” Steve countered. “And we love you for it.”

Well, fuck if that didn’t want to make her melt into a pile of goo. To distract herself, she asked, “Are you going to keep going on missions, then?”

They were silent for a few moments, communicating with their eyes. “We want to,” Bucky murmured. “I know it sounds crazy, but. At least for me, doing what I can do for good, this time…”
I’m still making up for what I’ve done.”

“And I’ve always felt drawn to this life,” Steve said, squeezing her hand in his. “Plus, we won’t be able to do it for too much longer. Work for SHIELD, or be an Avenger.”

“Wait, why?”

“Because of the aging thing,” Bucky said. “Which, I guess leads us into talking about the future.”

“Please tell me there’s no aliens or evil powered people in your immediate plans,” Ryan groaned, and they both chuckled. “No, I’m serious.”

“None,” Steve grinned. “Long-term, though, you were right before. We’re going to have to leave, eventually, and go pretty underground. We’ve barely been able to keep people off our backs who want to recreate the serum; if they knew we were aging slowly, it’d go FUBAR.

“But, I guess talking short-term…” He paused, suddenly twisting his hands in his lap before running one through his hair, mouth twisting like he was holding back a smile. Ryan felt Bucky grin against her cheek, and a swoop of excitement danced in her chest before she quickly tamped it down. They couldn’t possibly be…

“We need to talk more about us, obviously. Plan how all of this is going to work, and what we all want from each other going forward. But, now that all of this shit has been dealt with, and assuming all that goes well… we’re gonna propose to you pretty soon.”

Chapter End Notes

OH MY GOD I’M SO EXCITED :D :D :D

Steve: my soulmate

Steve: What about that one?

Bucky: I like it.
“Oh my god, they’re gonna propose?!”

Darcy loosed an excited shriek, kicking aside the half-filled boxes at Ryan’s feet to grab her hands and bounce with glee, blazing sunshine bouncing off her hair through the window-wall. Ryan giggled and ducked her head, cheeks aching from smiling so much.

“Ryan, I’m happy for you, really,” Jane inserted, looking between her and Darcy with a concerned expression. “But don’t you think you ought to try dating first?”

“Hey!” Darcy stopped her ecstatic jump-dancing to jab a finger at Jane. “We’re lucky those two didn’t try to court her or something, we are happy for all three of them!”

“They’re not from the 1800s, Darce – “

“Like, 1917, close enough!”

“Ryan, you’ve only been on two dates!” Jane interjected again, sitting down on Ryan’s bed. “Come on, you don’t think that’s just a little…”

Ryan sighed, reality settling in again as she sat next to Jane. “I know what it sounds like. But – I’m happy. Like, really happy. And, I think it’s going to work.”

“You just think?” Jane voiced in disbelief. “Ryan, this is a huge decision – you guys were fighting the other day, and now – “

“Jane, come on,” Darcy interrupted, crossing her arms. “Why can’t you just be excited for them?”

“Guys, wait – you don’t have the full story.” Ryan sighed through her nose, contemplating what she could tell them. Well, part of it was just about her. “I… was unpresented, remember? And now I’m not. Because of them.”

Ryan saw Darcy look to Jane, eyes wide and brows furrowed. “Um, what?”

“What I was upset about the day of the ceremony,” Ryan explained, fidgeting her hands a little. “I found out some new things about my, uh. My powers.”

“And your powers, what, caused you to present?” Darcy said incredulously.

“I’m not following,” Jane added, one eyebrow cocked in concern.

Ryan sighed again. “Dr. Simmons at SHIELD figured out that my powers all come from one main ability, apparently. I… adapt, like getting telekinesis when I was a baby and couldn’t move stuff right on my own, and stuff like that. So when I came here, I – “
“– presented as a result of an extended period in which conditions were beneficial for – oh, my god,” Jane said, jumping to her feet and starting to pace. “Shit, that’s fascinating – wait, why them?” she asked to the room at large, stopping and staring out the window. “Oh my god, oh my god – heightened levels of biological compatibility with the two of them, that explains why you scent like mates already!"


“Shut up, Watson,” Jane said, waving her off as she resumed pacing. “But that would likely result in increased dopamine and serotonin levels, possibly even consistent with mating – “

“Good lord,” Darcy muttered, rolling her eyes. “Would you quit it, please? Ryan, listen to me,” she said, turning sideways on the bed and putting her hands on Ryan’s shoulders. “This is stupidly fast, okay? But it is also stupidly obvious to everyone who’s ever so much as looked at you guys that you’re fucking meant for each other. Like, soulmates and whatever don’t exist, but if they do, it’s you three! And as long as I get to be the flower girl at your mating ceremony, I’m behind you one million percent.”

“Really?” Ryan breathed, and Darcy rolled her eyes again.

“You need me to spell it out for you? Look – you understand everything about them, and they do about you, too. What you’ve all lost, the horrible things you guys have been through, the whole superpowers deal,” Darcy listed off, hands coming to hold both of Ryan’s now. “I mean, you guys almost died for each other, and you weren’t even dating yet! The fact that you got through all that shit and still came back? That’s what’s important. Getting through your problems and still loving each other, right? That’s all you really need.”

“Wow, Darce,” Jane said, wiping at one eye. “Didn’t know you had that in you.”

“Shut up.” Darcy pulled Ryan into a hug then, pressing a friendly kiss into her hair. “Plus, it doesn’t hurt that they’re ridiculously hot and crazy rich.”

“Wait, what?” Ryan exclaimed, pulling back in surprise.

Darcy grimaced a little. “Okay, yeah, you do need to talk finances before you mate, that definitely needs to happen. I mean, not that you have much to contribute there – “

“Darcy!”

“Okay, that came out wrong,” Darcy said, looking back up to Jane, “but talk to them about that, alright? Now come on, there’s only enough stuff here for like five boxes, let’s just finish moving already!”

“So, are you guys going to redecorate their apartment? Well, your apartment, too, now,” Jane grinned, carefully stacking Ryan’s book collection into an empty box. Ryan just ducked her head and smiled.

A few minutes later, after Darcy and Jane took up the first set of boxes, Ryan pulled her new phone out of her back pocket. She’d almost started another fight when Steve and Bucky tried to give it to her, but finally compromised when they agreed to let her pay back half.

Why did Darcy just tell me that you guys are “crazy rich”?

The typing bubbles popped up for a few seconds, and Steve replied:
Oh. Yeah, sorry, we probably should talk about that soon. Long story short, the government owed us a lot of back pay because they never officially declared us dead. With inflation over the last 70 years.

Bucky added on:

*Coming back to life has a few perks. Being a multimillionaire is one.*

"Wait, what?"

*** *** *** ***

A few weeks later – weeks where she went to sleep in Steve’s arms and woke up in Bucky’s, where she laughed and smiled more than in the past years, weeks she never wanted to end – Ryan sat on the couch in the common room, reading on her phone while the Red Sox played in the background.

"New mates often experience the aptly-named ‘honeymoon period’, in which emotional attachment strengthens alongside physical – oh,” Ryan muttered, feeling her cheeks heat as she grinned to herself. Didn’t sound too bad to her.

"Mating on the biological level developed throughout evolutionary history as insurance of strong family groups,” she continued, the words inspiring even more questions as she searched for the answers. "Mating bonds, as they are commonly called, are mainly psychological in nature, though with a biological component; subtle scent changes to denote said family groups are well-documented scientifically and commonly observed.

"Modern studies have shown these adaptations to be a result of neurological changes in mates which foster the increased attachment and physical attraction, a positive reward system to ensure continuance of the species from an evolutionary standpoint. Though only Alphas and Betas initiate (and reciprocate with each other), Omegas rejecting their advances will not allow for said bonds to manifest."

"Ryan?" Clint’s voice called out, and she yelped and fumbled the phone, catching it at the last second before it crashed onto the coffee table. "Why’re you talking to yourself?"

"My god, you scared me," she replied, turning around. No one was there, and she stood up, looking side to side. "I do that when I read sometimes, it’s a weird habit – Clint?"

"Up here."

His voice drew her eyes to the air conditioning vent, high on the wall by the entrance to the kitchen. "Wait, are you – "

"I’m gonna prank Tony, down in his workshop!” he interrupted, followed by the sound of creaking metal. The grate swung open, and Clint’s head popped out, hair covered in dust and smile bright with mischief. “It’s been for-fucking-ever, he’s finally grown complacent. Oh my god, you should come!"

"In there?" Ryan said in alarm, shutting off the TV and standing below him, looking up. "How do you even – "
“There’s plenty of room, long as we’re not trying to crawl side-by-side,” he said. Then he gasped, eyes going wide with excitement. “Ryan, you can move his tools without touching them, you’ll be perfect! Get up here, we’re doing this.” He extended a hand down, still several feet over Ryan’s head.

“Clint, this is crazy,” Ryan said, laughing, “I can’t use my powers to prank Tony – “

“What else would you use them for?” Clint interrupted, sounding scandalized. “Rescuing kittens? Saving people from burning buildings? Please. Grab a chair and I’ll drag you up, come on!”

“I don’t know – “

“Barton, get out of the vents.” Ryan chuckled as she turned around to see Bucky come in from the stairwell, frowning up at Clint. “You’ll stench up the whole Tower. Hey, sweetheart,” he greeted, leaning down to kiss her hello.

“I happen to smell like soaring freedom eagles, according to the body wash Darcy bought me,” Clint sniffed. “Oh, wait, this is perfect! Lift her up here, we’re gonna play pranks on Tony.”

“Oh, alright.” Ryan let out another yelp as Bucky scooped her up with one arm and lifted her over his head, Clint seamlessly grabbing onto her arms and pulling her face-forward into the vent.

“Bucky! What the hell!”

“The only person I hate more than Sam is Tony, doll,” he called after her. “Prank him good.”

“Oh wow, you can fit on your hands and knees, lucky,” Clint said, his voice bouncing off the confined space in the darkness. He switched on a flashlight, white beams reflecting to bathe them in a silvery glow. “Come on, it’s not too far.”

He army-crawled down the shaft, surprisingly quiet for a grown man in a metal tube. Ryan hesitated for a second, then realized she couldn’t get back out without him. So she shrugged her shoulders and followed after, clanking and banging through the passageway.

A few minutes and two precarious, several-feet-deep-oh-god-I’m-gonna-die drops down the shafts later, Clint made a shushing noise, then waved her forward. Guitar riffs echoed down the passage, covering the sound of her muttered curses when she banged her head on the ceiling. The grate looked directly onto Tony’s lab, where he stood over the Iron Man suit with a blowtorch and welding mask.

Alright, here’s the game,” Clint murmured in her ear. “I use this – “ and he pulled out a tiny crossbow, the arrows modified with what looked like a miniature claw-game arm and a line of fishing wire – “to mess with him. You use telekinesis. The stuff you move glows, and mine obviously doesn’t, so whoever he catches loses. Ready?”

Ryan stifled a laugh, gave up on reason for the moment, and nodded. “Wait, is there a point system?”

“Oh, yeah – ten points for every object we move, twenty if it goes right over his head. And, go!”

Between the lines on the grate, he lined up and shot the crossbow. The arrow ricocheted off the ceiling, and a hammer on the bench behind Tony jerked ten feet in the air as Clint reeled it back, suspending it in place by tying the line to the grate. Tony reached back absent-mindedly, patting on the bench where the hammer had sat before looking around in confusion, and Clint and Ryan dissolved into giggles.
“Your turn, go!” Clint whispered, and Ryan flicked her left hand upwards. A set of wrenches flew up, hovering next to the hammer and glowing a dim blue. Not even a second later, Tony took off the welding mask and reached to the side, only to swear loudly and start searching under his worktable.

Ryan had tears of mirth running down her face, and Clint was practically wheezing when he aimed his next shot. Tony turned his back, and an entire toolbox hoisted just behind his head, the music so loud he apparently heard nothing. Ryan followed with the stool Tony had been sitting on as he went to retrieve another wrench from across the room.

“Wait wait wait – the suit, together!” Clint whispered in glee, and just before Tony turned back around, he bulls-eyed the helmet as Ryan levitated the rest of it, floating horizontal a few feet over Tony’s head.

“What the fu – BARTON!” Tony yelled, then loosed a high-pitched shriek and tripped backwards over his feet as Ryan made the suit dart out a phantasmal hand down to him. “GREEN! I know that’s you, put it down!”

“S-sorry,” she choked out over peals of laughter, echoing into the room as Tony silenced the music. “Clint made me do it!”

“Narc!”

“Get the fuck out of my vents, both of you!”

“I’m sorry!” Ryan called out again, concentrating for a second to snap the strings and lower everything back to its rightful place.

“No, the best part is making him get them himself!” Clint complained, still grinning wide.

“Barton, I swear by everything holy, I will stop stocking the fridges with chocolate milk and cancel HBO!”

“No, don’t, I’m sorry!”

“Too late, bird-brain! And come up with an original prank, for god’s sake!”

Ryan could barely breathe for laughing as Clint groaned dramatically, slinking back in defeat. Clint beckoned her on, and they started the long crawl back.

Just as Clint was about to open the vent to the common room, though, she called out, “Hey, wait a sec.”

“What?”

She crawled up beside him again, wiping away some sweat from her forehead. “Just – when Steve and Bucky propose, and we have a mating ceremony – would you officiate? Please?”

Clint’s eyes widened in shock, his mouth dropping open comically. “Wait, really?”

“Yeah. I want you to do it.”

He blinked at her, the scent of his shocked surprise filling her nose. “Why?” he breathed, “why – Ryan, I – “

“ – invited me back to the Tower that night,” she interrupted, giving him a small smile. “For video games. I was never going to see any of you again, and then, I ran into you.”
“I meant after that,” he muttered, a disbelieving look in his eye, like he thought she was about to yell “Psych!” and laugh in his face.

“Everything that’s happened brought us here, if you think about it,” Ryan said, approximating a shrug in the cramped space. “We’re all here, and we’re all okay, and I found the loves of my life. And, I want you to do it.”

A stray thought crossed her mind, and she quickly added, “I mean, if you don’t want to, then you don’t have to! Like, don’t feel obligated or – “

“No! No, of course I’ll do it!” A smile like the sun breaking through a week of rain shone on his face before he suddenly laughed. “Guess I have to get ordained online. I think Nat did it for a mission once, I’ll ask her.”

Ryan grinned back, then swung open the grate and looked out into the common room. “Bucky? Can you help me back out?” She glanced down, and her stomach suddenly churned at the ten feet down to the ground. “Oh crap, oh crap – “

“Oh, hang on,” Steve called out, and she saw both him and Bucky hurry over. Steve immediately lifted Bucky over his head, and Bucky held out his hands to her.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. We’ve got you.”

* * *   * * *   * * *

Ryan hummed softly to herself, enjoying the last of the warm sunset. Bucky squeezed her hand, and she smiled at him as they meandered toward Prospect Park. Steve chuckled under his breath on her other side, one broad arm slung over her shoulders to keep her close.

“What’s so funny?” she asked, grinning up at him.

“It’s a happy laugh.” He kissed her the top of her head, pulling her into his side for a moment. “I’ve never heard you hum before. Or sing.”

“Oh, I have a terrible voice, I don’t sing.”

“Shut up, I bet it’s great,” Bucky inserted, tugging them both past the Audubon Center and along the stone path to the lake.

“Nope. Haven’t sung for anyone since the third grade talent show and Billy Brown shot spitballs at me and made everyone laugh in my face.”

Bucky laughed this time, shaking his head. “Does everything in your life have a tragic backstory?”

“Buck!” Steve exclaimed, sounding half-horrified and half-amused.

“S not like we’re any different, Stevie,” Bucky said through more laughter. “But at least we sing.”

“I hate you,” Ryan said fondly, lifting on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. His scruff was scratchy against her lips, but she found that she loved it on him. “So you can sing, too? I knew Steve could.”

“Please, who do you think taught that mook to stay in key?” Bucky started humming, a slow,
smooth tune she half-recognized. Beside tall iron lamp-posts lining the lakeside, when they passed under a towering oak tree, he sang, “Have I told you lately that I love you?”

“Could I tell you once again somehow?” Steve joined in, just a whisper for only them to hear. The memory of a record player in the common room made her smile, the words coming back in the evening’s quiet.

“Have I told with all my heart and soul, how I adore you?” they sang together, Bucky singing melody and Steve dropping below. “Well, darling, I’m telling you now.”

Ryan ducked her head, willing herself not to cry. A cooling evening breeze wafted by, helping keep back the tears as her heart overflowed with happiness. “This heart would break in two, if you refused me,” she whisper-sung, mostly on key, and Bucky squeezed her hand again. “I’m no good without you anyhow.”

“Have I told you lately, that I miss you?” Steve sang solo, directing them to a miniature waterfall just off the path. “When the stars are shining in the sky?”

“Have I told you lately, when I’m sleeping? Every dream I dream is you somehow,” Bucky took over. “Have I told you who I’d like to share my love forever?”

“Well, darling, I’m telling you now,” they all finished together, both of them harmonizing off of her. The sunset glowed orange opposite the water, sparkling and bouncing off of Steve’s face as he cupped her cheeks and kissed her hungrily.

“We love you so much, Ryan,” he murmured against her lips, sending a thrill all the way down to her toes. More than that, a burst of excitement set her heart pounding when Bucky took her hand again. She had a sudden suspicion of what was coming. Or at least, what she hoped.

“C’mere, sweetheart,” Bucky whispered, a grin stealing across his face as he pulled her toward the rocks lining the pool, quiet and secluded. She caught a whiff of excitement in his scent, and her own anticipation doubled. “We didn’t want to make a big fuss, we thought you wouldn’t want that.”

“This was already way more romantic than I thought it’d be, to be honest,” Steve added, making Bucky roll his eyes. Ryan giggled at them, hiding her smile behind her hands.

“This was better than that time you fake-sang ‘Firework’ to annoy Sam for an entire afternoon,” she directed at Bucky, who had the decency to look slightly ashamed. “I mean, there’s a time and a place for Katy Perry, but – “

“– we’re getting off-topic,” Steve interrupted, and all three of them burst into giggles, nerves getting the best of them. When he’d recovered, he continued, “You obviously know what’s coming, but can we say what we planned on, first?”

She managed a nod, heart suddenly in her throat as Bucky took both of her hands in his. The metal one was cool and smooth as ever, but his right hand was almost trembling, warmer than usual in hers.

“Ryan,” he began, then dropped his head, blowing out a breath. “Oh, god. No, I’m first, we agreed!” he shot at Steve, who held up his hands in innocence.

“Ryan,” Bucky restarted, fixing his eyes on hers. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand whatever I did to get someone like you in my life. I get so happy, every time you so much as smile. And there were so many times I thought I’d never feel that again.
“But you bring it back out in me, the best parts of me. And I never want to lose that again.” He squeezed her hands, then looked to Steve, who gently replaced Bucky’s hands with his own.

“I thought I knew exactly how everything was going to go. Buck came back, and I thought he’d recover, and we’d recover, and we’d be together, just like before. And I know it’s cliché, but I’ve never been more glad to be wrong.”

He reached for his jacket pocket, and Ryan’s heart leapt. “You’ve changed us, for the better. And I’m so damn stubborn that’s a miracle,” he continued, all three of them exhaling a laugh. “Now, I can’t imagine life without you. All three of us have already seen the worst of each other, and now, I hope the best is yet to come.”

In matching, fluid motions, Bucky and Steve dropped to one knee, and warm tears streamed down her face as she covered her mouth with her hands. Steve pulled out a black velvet box, and Bucky opened it in his palm. Inside sat a simple silver ring, a line of tiny diamonds twinkling like a constellation.

“Ryan Adelina Green,” Bucky began.

“Will you be our mate?” Steve finished.

She nodded furiously even before he got the words out, dropping to her knees as well. “Y-yes, yes!”

Instantly, they engulfed her in their arms, relief and joy and sheer love bursting in their scents. Steve leaned back first, only to kiss her so passionately it left her breathless.

“Show-off,” Bucky muttered, winking at Ryan when they parted. Steve suddenly gripped the front of his shirt and crashed their lips together, growling low. Bucky melted against him, and Ryan felt heat swoop in her stomach.

“Show our best girl how it’s done, then,” Steve instructed, and Bucky’s smile dazzled like the noonday sun. He reached for the ring box first, ever-so-carefully plucking out the ring with his flesh hand. Ryan’s hand trembled as she caught it in his, slowly pushing the ring onto her finger. The kiss that followed was sweeter than anything she’d ever tasted, full of hope and promises. She’d keep every one, if it was the last thing she did.

Bucky smirked at Steve when he pulled back. “And that’s how you kiss a dame, Stevie.”

Steve rolled his eyes long-sufferingly, then stood and held out hands to them both. “Come on. The completely unanticipated surprise party on the Tower roof is waiting for us.”

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“My sincerest congratulations, Ryan,” JARVIS greeted as they entered the elevator. “And to both of you, sirs. Would you like to attend the party, or celebrate privately?”

“Gotta at least make an appearance,” Steve said cheerfully as Bucky grumbled under his breath. “Quit it, Buck.”

“Not like Stark, Barton and Wilson can’t get sauced without us.”
“Please, you like it when they’re drunk,” Ryan retorted, grinning to herself. “You’re finally the smart one.”

Steve burst out laughing, clapping his hands together, and Bucky cracked a grin. “Is fuath liom an bheirt agaibh,” he murmured, tugging Ryan into his side and kissing her hair.

“Okay, I caught the verb ‘is’ in there, I think?” Ryan said, scrunching up her face in confusion.

“Tá mé ag caint i nGaeilge anois. Make a fhoghlaím níos tapúla,” Bucky directed at Steve, who chuckled again.

“Cúl tóna,” Steve said fondly.

“What’re you guys saying?!”

“CONGRATULATIONS!” a chorus of voices screamed out, and Ryan jumped about a foot in the air. Multiple voices laughed, and she was suddenly dragged out of the elevator and into a swarm of cheers and hugs, everyone in the Tower all talking over a stereo blasting pop music.

“Alright, alright!” Clint shouted, voice slurred a little as he held a beer aloft. Everyone turned to see him standing on top of a lawn chair. “I grew up in the circus, right? And we had exactly one tradition when people got engaged.” A dangerous smile spread over his face, one Ryan didn’t like at all. “The engage-ee… engaged one? What are you even called, Ryan?”

“Get to the point, babe!” Darcy yelled, and everyone else chuckled appreciatively.

“Right, yeah – we would dunk them in the elephant’s pool!” Clint yelled, and Ryan yelled in alarm as she was suddenly hoisted up by a half-dozen people, scrabbling to keep her balance.

“Wait, guys, wait, I never learned to – !”

With a flip of her stomach, she tumbled through the air, and suddenly water engulfed her. She kicked furiously, arms thrashing, and her head broke water for a half second before the weight of her clothes dragged her back down.

Two strong arms grabbed her waist and yanked upwards, and she gasped a breath, coughing reflexively.

“That’s it, you’re alright,” Bucky’s voice soothed, drawing her sopping hair out of her eyes. He swam them to the edge, lifting her effortlessly onto the side of the pool.

“Oh my god, Ryan,” Clint said, skin white as paper and mouth open in shock. “I swear to god, I didn’t know, I’m so sorry – “

Ryan held up a hand to silence him, panting as she got to her feet. Everyone stood dead silent as she turned to face him.

Suddenly, the pool sloshed and frothed, water churning as a towering shape formed, glowing bright blue. A massive hand of rushing water stood tall for a second, then shot forward at Clint.

He shrieked an ear-splitting note, scrambling back. In a flash, the water closed around him and pulled him forward, flinging him headfirst into the pool. The water settled in an instant, smooth and calm without a splash.

Shocked silence met her, dragging on for what felt like hours. Ryan lowered her hand, dread
coursing in her veins as she started to rethink her decision. She turned back to face the rest of the Avengers, dripping hands starting to shake.

Then, Natasha burst out laughing, cutting through the silence. She doubled over, arms pressed into her stomach, and gasped for breath as peals of laughter echoed off the roof. It broke the spell, and everyone else dissolved into hilarity as Clint poked his head above water.

“That was fucking AWESOME!” he shouted over the sound of Darcy’s snorting, zipping back onto the deck. “Do it again!”

Ryan shook her head, smiling wide in relief. “I’m sorry, that was way out of line – “

“Are you kidding? You’re a fucking waterbender! This is the best day ever!”

Natasha came up to them both, wiping away tears of mirth. “Я люблю тебя, мой задрота.” She kissed him on the lips, then turned to Ryan, putting her hands on her shoulders and kissing both cheeks. “Добро пожаловать в семью.”

Steve wrapped a towel around her from behind, kissing the top of her head. Bucky shook out his hair like a wet dog, splattering Clint again as Steve handed him a towel and ushered them towards the elevator. “Come on, ghrá mo chroí. You and Buck should change.”

“You’d better be coming back, you crazy kids!” Tony shouted after them, Pepper catching him as he stumbled a little. “There’s a cake!”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Bucky shot back in a deadpan.

Ryan just smiled to herself, pressing the elevator button for level five. Today really was the best day ever.

“Oh, fuck!” she shouted as the doors closed. Steve and Bucky turned to her in alarm, and she slumped against the wall in defeat. “My phone was in my pocket.”

Chapter End Notes

The world's gonna end pretty soon now, but NOT BEFORE I FINISH THIS DAMMIT

Bucky: I hate you both.
Bucky: I'm only speaking in Irish now. Make her learn faster.
Steve: Asshole.
Natasha: I love you, my idiot. Welcome to the family.
Steve: love of my heart (traditional Irish endearment)
Ryan sighed through her nose, exasperated. “Guys, just – would you please quit it already and help me finish this?”

“Sweetheart, there’s – no way – he can do – more push-ups – than me,” Bucky panted, Steve’s grunts of exertion interrupting.

“You’re not even keeping track or keeping pace with each other! How will you know?”


“Liar!” Bucky huffed, speeding up his straining arms with a guttural groan.

“I can do this all day,” Steve half-wheezed.

Ryan tipped her head back, closing her eyes and convincing herself of the virtue of patience. She got why they’d searched out literally any excuse to avoid tying the hundreds of daisies and black-eyed Susans to the elegant wooden arch they’d already spent half the day constructing, but this was just ridiculous.

“You love them,” she muttered to herself, looping gold ribbon into a bow around another stem.

“This is the only decoration you wanted for tomorrow. You convinced Darcy not to throw you a bachelorette party, and you do not regret it. It’s bad luck to fight before your mating ceremony.”

A knock at the door, and Bruce entered before she could open it. “I figured you’d like some help,” he said, smiling mildly and chuckling at her fiancés on the living room floor. “Sam’s coming in a minute.”

“Thank you, JARVIS,” Ryan directed at the ceiling, handing Bruce a roll of green florist wire.

“You are quite welcome, Ryan,” the ceiling replied.

“So,” Bruce said, reaching up to start the section at the top of the arch, “how are you feeling?”

“Right now, or in general?”

“I can surmise this instant,” Bruce said, glancing back at Steve and Bucky again, “but overall?”

Ryan beamed, a vibrant giddiness overriding her annoyance again. “Really fucking excited.”
“It’s okay if you’re nervous, too,” Bruce counseled gently. “It’s a big change.”

She looked back at her soon-to-be mates, the smell of sweat and sounds of heavy breaths punctuating the air. “It’s a good one.”

The door opened again, and Sam groaned at the sight of the living room. “You two idiots don’t deserve us,” he shot at them, and Bruce and Ryan laughed as Bucky paused to give him the finger.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Oh my god, I’m gonna cry,” Darcy squeaked, fanning her face with her hands.

Ryan shook her head vigorously. “No! You’ll make me cry, and then Pepper will kill me for ruining my makeup.”

“Jesus, I thought I was detail-oriented,” Jane said, closing the bathroom door behind her. “Pepper is event planner from either Valhalla or Hellhaim, depending on how you like it.”

“Ladies! Five minutes!” Pepper’s voice called through the door, and Darcy jumped and grabbed the curling iron again.

“No, no, it’s perfect,” Ryan insisted, leaning away in alarm. “Really!”

“And besides, that was five minutes to the ceremony, not five minutes more of hair time,” Jane remarked mildly, then grinned at Ryan and Darcy’s horrified looks. “Kidding!”

“Oh my god,” they breathed together, Ryan clapping a hand over her heart.

“But seriously, time to zip you up,” Jane added, shooing Ryan towards the door. “Don’t try it yourself, you might catch your hair!”

“She knows from experience!” Darcy called after her, shoving blush and concealer and powder and a half-dozen makeup brushes haphazardly into her handbag.

“You guys know I can move stuff without touching it, right?” Ryan called over her shoulder, hurrying into the bedroom. A white garment bag lay flat atop the bed, and she paused as she reached for it, hand hovering over the hanger.

This was it. Bucky and Steve were going to be her mates. Her mates!

She closed her eyes for a second, forcing back the joyful tears welling up. She would not ruin Darcy’s perfect eyeliner job, for both Darcy and Pepper’s sake. Lord knows how the CEO of the biggest company in the world could find the time to coordinate the event, but at the first thought of oh man, we have to pick out things like invitation stationery, don’t we, Pepper had appeared, brimming files of entire mating ceremony plans in tow. Darcy had only been too happy to be named flower girl and jump on board about two minutes after.

“Ryan? How are we doing?” Pepper said briskly, blonde-red hair piled in curlers and holding a clipboard and pen at the ready. “Hang on, I’ll help you – “

“No worries, I got it,” Ryan smiled, unzipping the bag. Pepper helped anyway, and a moment later, Ryan was ready.
“Oh,” Pepper breathed, leading Ryan to the mirror and pausing for a second. “You look stunning.”

“Thank you,” Ryan whispered, smiling from ear to ear. “For everything, really.”

Pepper smiled as she checked her phone, then nodded at her. “Fifteen minutes. JARVIS will cue you, and everything else is taken care of, so don’t worry about a thing.” With that, she bustled out the door, and Ryan was alone.

She looked into the mirror again, turning side to side. Her dress was snowy-white, per tradition, but only reached just above her knees, a simple pair of white sandals on her feet instead of heels. She normally wasn’t one for dresses at all, but the soft, delicate lace all the way up to her neck and covering down her arms had appealed to some girlish fantasy she’d never realized she had. But she could indulge just the once. It was her mating day.

“I really wish you guys could be here,” she whispered into the mirror, holding back tears again. They were justified this time, but she still wouldn’t ruin her makeup. “You’d make some terrible joke about Steve and Bucky being older than you are, Daddy, and Mom would yell at you.”

She sniffed once, blinking rapidly. “It’ll be a long time before you get to meet them, now,” she whispered. “But you’ll love them, I swear.”

“Ryan? Miss Potts reminds you to not forget your bouquet, and requests you enter the elevator in the next minute,” JARVIS said. “Everyone who was able to attend is here, and the ceremony is ready to begin.”

Ryan breathed out heavily, nerves jittering in her stomach despite herself. Who’d have thought she’d ever have to worry about whether or not her mates would like her dress? “Thanks, JARVIS. Guess it’s showtime.”

She heard the music as soon as the elevator doors started to open, sunshine blazing through a crystal sky and warm breeze lifting her hair. Soft piano notes, a slow, romantic kind of jazz beckoned her forward in time, out into a lane between a few small rows of simple white chairs. She took a deep breath, then lifted her head.

Instinctively, she knew there were other people there, but all she could see was Steve and Bucky. They stood across the rooftop, immaculate in navy suits with gray waistcoats and staring at her like she was all that existed in the world. Steve’s jaw had dropped open, and she saw Bucky’s eyes sparkle with tears as she slowly walked closer. The smell of the daisies and flowers from the white arch permeated the air, sweet and light like the beautiful summer’s day it was.

The world suddenly widened again, and she found herself standing in front of them, the music stopped and her heart racing with excitement as they grinned at her, and she grinned back. Darcy grabbed the bouquet of daisies and dandelions from her hand and ushered her to stand between them, Bucky on her left and Steve on her right. They took her hands, and the rooftop went silent but for the clicking of the photographer’s camera as Clint came forward, opening his mouth to speak.

“What’s up, guys?” he greeted, and a titter of laughter went through the audience as Ryan giggled and Bucky glared at him. Clint wore a suit of aubergine purple, hair swept back and eyes glittering as he held up his hands in innocence. “Just kidding, man, I know the script.”
He reached into his breast pocket then, and pulled out a length of thin gold cord coiled in a loop.
“Friends, we’re here today for many reasons. To witness the love these three have for each other, and bind them together forever, sharing in and celebrating their joy. But, even more than that, to recognize that none of us would be here at all if not for them.”

He took a deep breath, smiling almost nostalgically. “Steve and Bucky have fought through impossible circumstances, and survived impossible odds, to make it back to each other. And, along the way, they not only saved the world a few times, but brought all of us together, too.”

“Gee, Clint, you’re making me blush,” Steve muttered jokingly, and everyone laughed again.

Clint smiled again. “It’s true! Aliens tried to take over the world, and you brought together a bunch of misfits and made it work. And then Bucky, you came back, and you made us realize Steve was actually fun.”

Ryan giggled again, squeezing Steve’s hand, and he leaned down to kiss her cheek. “More than that, though,” Clint added, “Bucky’s saved most of our lives at least once. We wouldn’t be here without him. And then, there’s Ryan.”

She felt her cheeks turn pink, and she ducked her head as Clint continued. “All of you here know her story, after she came into our lives. In most parts, it doesn’t reflect very well on most of us. But everything that happened brought us here, today, where we put the past behind us and go forward into the future. Today, we welcome Ryan into the family we’ve made here, as Steve and Bucky pledge themselves to her forever, and she to them.”

He uncoiled the golden cord then, and Steve brought her right hand forward, laying his on top and Bucky pressing his underneath. Clint gently wrapped the cord around their hands, securing it with a bow on top.

“Steve and Bucky couldn’t have a ceremony or exchange rings, when they first mated,” he said as he finished. “But they’re happy they didn’t, now, because they get to share their one and only with Ryan, as they reaffirm their bond and complete their family. They will now recite their vows, in the presence of God and these witnesses.”

Beaming, Bucky used his free metal hand to brush back Ryan’s hair. “We wanted to go simple and traditional with this, so we’re just gonna say them together.” Bucky and Steve moved to face her, all three of their hands still loosely bound in the middle.

“I, Steven Grant Rogers,” Steve said.

“And I, James Buchanan Barnes,” Bucky echoed.

“Take you, Ryan Adelina Green – “

“ – to be our lawfully mated Omega.”

“To have and to hold from this day forward – “

“ – to love and to cherish – “

“ – for better or worse – “

“’Til the end of the line,” they finished together.

Ryan felt tears streaming down her face, and she choked back a half-sob, half-laugh. Well, she’d
made it most of the way through, at least.

“Ryan will now recite her vows to them,” Clint instructed, nodding at her to start.

She exhaled a deep breath, smiling up at Steve and Bucky in turn. “I had JARVIS help me and I practiced really hard, but don’t laugh if I mess up.” They looked at each other, brows furrowed slightly in confusion, and she chuckled under her breath before she began.

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everyone, for coming today. We love all of you – “

“Most of you,” Bucky amended, and Steve shushed him.

“All of you, and we’re so thankful. And now, we’re leaving.”

“Have fun!” Darcy yelled, waggling her eyebrows suggestively, and Ryan just stopped herself from waving a hand and throwing her cake in her face.

At last, the elevator doors closed, and Ryan breathed a sigh of relief.

“You alright, sweetheart?” Bucky murmured, winding his arms around her waist and tugging her against him.

“Amazing,” she said, pressing a kiss to his jaw. “Just a long party.”

“Not too tired, I hope,” Steve whispered, fingertips tracing up her arm. A shiver went down her spine, and she leaned further into Bucky. He hummed low in his chest, hands slowly sliding down her body.

The elevator opened onto their floor, and Bucky paused a second. “Which of us is carrying her ‘cross the threshold, Stevie?”

“We already live together,” Ryan said with a smile, pushing away and heading towards the apartment door. “I don’t think it works that way.”

“Not a chance,” Steve called out from behind her. Ryan looked back and met his eyes, sparkling with mischief. Excitement bloomed in her chest, and she darted away from them, laughing as she hurried down the hall to the door. Instantly, Steve and Bucky caught up, and she dashed inside and into the kitchen. She made it to the far side of the island before she found herself cornered by them on the other.

Bucky grinned like the Cheshire cat and feinted to one side, and Ryan shrieked playfully and ran the other way. Steve blocked her way, and he swept her off her feet in half a second.

“Gotcha,” he growled, and crashed his lips to hers. Ryan melted against him, wrapping her arms around his neck, and intense heat surged through her. His scent thickened with desire, and she gasped as one hand stroked the back of her neck.

“Was that alright?” Steve quickly asked, pulling back. Ryan just kept from frowning. She loved how amazing they were about consent, but she was getting impatient.

“I promise to tell you if it’s not,” she said, stroking a hand through his hair and making him hum with pleasure. Steve had the softest hair, just long enough to run her fingers through and make it stand up. “I’ve talked with Pamela more about this stuff. I’m okay, really.”

“In that case,” Bucky inserted as he shucked off his suit jacket. “We’ve got a surprise for you.”

Soft music started to play, a pulsating beat thrumming in the bass. Warm light glowed from the bedroom as Steve walked them over, Ryan still carding her fingers through his hair. She blinked at the light of dozens of candles, flickering dimly throughout the room and illuminating –

“The bed wasn’t big enough before?” she chuckled, spying the new frame and expanded size. The sheets were covered in red rose petals, and she let herself love the cliché. “It was already the biggest I’d ever seen.”
“And yet, Bucky still rolls on top of you in his sleep,” Steve joked, laughing as Bucky grumbled under his breath. “It’s made especially for triads with two or more bigger guys. Do you like it?”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Bucky groaned, taking in the sight of her. She blushed, smoothing her hands down the short, silky night robe, black as pitch. “Like you weren’t gorgeous enough before.”

“Do you like it?” she whispered shyly, smiling up at them. They hadn’t even seen what was underneath yet.

Steve responded by slowly walking over, eyes roaming hungrily across her frame. He paused when they were just inches apart, meeting her gaze. His irises were swallowed in black, eyes never leaving hers as he grasped a hand, kissing the inside of her wrist and scenting deeply. “Bucky,” he called softly, his tone authoritative and sure. “Come kiss our best girl. I want to watch.”

Heat roiled through her again at his words, deep in her chest and traveling between her legs. Immediately, Bucky obeyed, gently at first, then opening his mouth and laying claim to hers. He deepened the kiss, walking them towards the bed until the back of her knees collided with the mattress.

“Want to make you feel so good, sweetheart,” Bucky whispered, kissing her one more time before pulling away. “But you set the pace, alright? We’ll figure it out together.”

“Keep kissing me,” she whispered back, and he obliged. Once more on her lips, then he traveled up her cheek before suddenly dipping down to her neck. At the joint of her neck and shoulder, he pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss before nipping there, just the slightest pressure making her gasp at the sensation. She bared her neck further, instincts crying out for more.

“Not yet,” Steve murmured, leaning in closer from where he’d been watching to whisper in Bucky’s ear. “Be a gentleman, Barnes, and show the lady a good time first.”

He reached for Ryan, kissing her gently on the lips before his hands settled on the sash of her robe, waiting for permission. She nodded, and he deftly untied the knot, the front of the garment slipping open.

Steve growled low at the sight, and Bucky’s eyes hooded with desire. Ryan shivered a little, a nervous thrill in her chest as she watched them take her in. She’d thought the lacy black bralette and panties were almost silly when Darcy had taken her lingerie shopping, but she was definitely glad of them now. It was like they didn’t even see her scars, the puckered skin along her torso still stained red.

“Our turn,” Steve murmured then, looking to Ryan and grabbing Bucky by the shirtfront to haul him into a kiss. Ryan sat on the bed and watched Bucky hurriedly stripping off Steve’s shirt, Steve’s hands tracing the sculpted lines of Bucky’s chest before unbuckling his belt. Oh, god, she wanted them more than she realized she could.
In a moment of bravery, she slid the robe off her shoulders, letting it drop to the floor along with the rest of their fancy clothes. Steve and Bucky stood in black boxer briefs, fabric straining at the tops, and Bucky groaned as they brushed together.

“Got some things we want to try, if that’s alright with you,” Bucky said, dim light bouncing off his metal arm. He chuckled quietly. “Been thinking about it a long time.”

“Have you?” Ryan whispered back.

“God, sweetheart, wanted you for so long now,” he breathed, hands skimming up her torso. His right cupped her breast, and she hummed with pleasure. “Thinking about getting to touch you. Taste you,” he growled low, his other hand now drifting to the inside of her thigh. “God, you’re a fucking wet dream, sweetheart, look at you.”

“Bucky likes to dirty talk,” Steve supplied, coming to sit behind her on the bed. He pulled her effortlessly against his chest, and she leaned up to kiss his cheek, holding onto his arms over her chest. “I like to put my mouth to better use.”

Bucky hummed deep, eyes slipping closed as he palmed at himself through his boxers. “Can we try something?” he breathed, opening them again to look at Ryan.

At her nod, Steve pulled back, and she made a discontented sound at the loss. He grinned as he moved down the bed, Bucky coming up behind her, aroused scent surrounding her. His hands lifted to her shoulders, and she let out a small moan when he started massaging gently. He kissed the side of her neck again, hair swept out of the way, and his hands moved down to cup her breasts.

“Your tits are so pretty,” he whispered, and she gasped as he squeezed them gently. One hand snuck back to the bra clasp, and he slid the straps off her arms when she leaned forward for him. “Thought Stevie had a nice rack from the serum, but nothing compared to you, sweetheart.”

He traced his fingers over the outer edges, caressing his thumbs gently underneath. “How’s that?”

“It’s nice,” she breathed, too busy feeling to think. Then, she felt Steve’s lips where they’d never been, kissing up the inside of her thigh, and her head tipped back against Bucky’s shoulder.

She felt Steve grin against her, kissing up to her hipbones, and then down between her legs over the panties, widening her legs with his hands. Heat flooded through her, and Steve mouthed at her for a moment, tongue wetting the fabric. Then, he grasped the lace with both hands and effortlessly tore it open.

“Hey,” Ryan protested weakly, stifling a moan at how indecently hot that one move was. Steve quickly looked up to check in, cheeks tinged pink and lips wet and red. She nodded at him, but said, “Those cost a whole day’s work at the library.”

“Don’t you worry, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured in her ear, rolling her nipples between his fingers and making pleasure shoot down her spine. “We’re buying you a hundred more of them, soon as possible.”

“Wouldn’t mind seeing you in one someday, too, Buck,” Steve grinned, and Bucky’s groan set Ryan’s toes tingling.

“Got any other kinks I should know about?” she managed, practically floating on the feeling.

“Plenty of time for that later,” Steve said with a wink. Without any further ado, he leaned back down and suddenly licked inside her.
Ryan jolted her hips in surprise, but Steve’s strong hands held her down, his tongue gentle but insistent. His hands slid up her thighs, thumbs pressing in the same rhythm as Bucky’s hands as she started to pant, sweat beading on her forehead from the delicious heat burning through her. Warm wetness bloomed between her legs, and Steve hummed in satisfaction, the vibration sending a jolt of pleasure through her.

Then, he suddenly moved a little higher, and a burst of sensation made her throw her head back. She distantly heard a click of a bottle opening, and when a warm, slick finger slid inside her, she clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound.

“Let him hear you,” Bucky murmured in her ear, the pleasure building higher and higher as Steve started to stroke inside her. “All the pretty sounds you make. You feel good, sweetheart? Let him know.”

“Steve,” she gasped, “god, please keep going.”

Steve hummed again, almost a growl, and quickened his pace. Ryan panted in earnest, high-pitched sounds gasping out of her without her permission.

Then, Steve crooked his finger, pushing a second one in alongside, and a rush of molten heat exploded through her. Bucky kissed her roughly as waves of pleasure crashed over her, leaving her breathless and baring her neck, waiting.

Steve’s warmth suddenly disappeared from her legs, and she saw his face glistening in the candlelight as he devoured Bucky’s mouth, Bucky groaning happily. Another jolt of arousal coursed through her as she watched Bucky chase the taste of her from Steve’s mouth.

“How was that?” Steve murmured when he pulled back, hair mussed and face looking thoroughly debauched.

Ryan didn’t have the words, so she just nodded, chest still heaving as she came down from the high. Steve grinned again, giving her a surprisingly chaste kiss to the forehead.

“Next time you come, it’ll be on my knot,” he whispered in her ear, and she was definitely interested in that, holy crap.

“Can we do that now?”

“Anything you want, sweetheart,” Bucky promised, and she started to lose track of time after that. Hands touched, mouths kissed and tasted and laved over skin, and at one point she discovered both Steve and Bucky really liked to leave marks, and she liked having them. She’d have to wear a high-necked shirt for a little while, but it was worth it.

Then, at last, Steve slowly pushed inside her, both of them groaning at the sensation. “Feel so good, ghrá mo chroí, so good for us,” Steve panted as he started to move, thrusting in and out. “Love you so much, fuck.”

He suddenly lifted her up, arms cradling her torso as he changed the angle, and she cried out, tears gathering in her eyes at the overwhelming pleasure. She grabbed weakly at Bucky, pulling him in to kiss her hungrily, hot and messy and perfect.

Steve groaned again, snapping his hips faster. “Kiss her again,” he ordered Bucky, a hint of Alpha voice coming through, and Ryan shivered happily.

It was almost too much, but she still panted, “More, please, Steve – god,” and Steve growled
possessively, kissing her breathless.

“Fuck,” Bucky muttered brokenly, scenting deeply at the curve of her neck. “Steve – “


Twin sharp sensations on either side of her neck, and a flash of blue light rattled the windows and shattered the dresser mirror, the candles blowing out and drenching the room in darkness. All three of them collapsed onto the bed, unconscious and unmoving.

Chapter End Notes

Still not the best at writing smut, but I hope it was at least a little enjoyable!

Only one more chapter in this one!! Wow. Nov. 15th was the one-year anniversary, and I can't believe how far this has come. I'll save the rest of the waxing nostalgia for next chapter, though.

Ryan: From this day it shall be only your name I cry out in the night, and into your eyes that I smile each morning; I shall be a shield for your back as you are for mine. I promise by peace and love to stand, heart to heart and hand to hand. (Combination of traditional Irish vows)
Ryan groaned, blinking at the sun blazing into her eyes. A heavy weight covered the left half of her body, and she shoved at Steve, who rolled away without waking up. Bucky still slept on her right, out like a light as normal.

She giggled to herself. All three of them fell asleep during sex? We’re ridiculous, she thought, climbing carefully over Steve and picking up his discarded dress shirt. It covered everywhere important, and she rolled back the sleeves as she yawned, heading into the bathroom.

Looking the mirror, she giggled again at the purpling marks on her collarbone. She was their mate. Their mate! Yesterday and last night were actually real.

She looked the same in the mirror, excepting two new additions to her scars. Welcome ones, this time. She didn’t feel different, either.

Well, that wasn’t entirely true, she thought, glancing back at the closed door to the bedroom. Logically, she knew they were in there, and that’s why she felt their presence in the back of her mind, like a slender, gossamer thread connected them.

That must be the mating bond she’d read about, she thought happily as she brushed her teeth and washed her face. Increased emotional attachment and all that. It was even better than she’d imagined, though. She loved them so much she thought she might burst with it.

A strange sense of happiness, foreign but familiar, meandered sleepily through the back of her mind. Love you too, sweetheart.

She gasped sharply, shock coursing through her. She tripped over her own feet, knocking over the toothbrush holder and shattering the ceramic on the tile floor. Surprise echoed in the back of her head as well, and she felt Steve’s sudden alertness at the sound.

“Shit – “

She concentrated for a second, and the connection shut off instantly. She slumped against the counter, relief coursing through her. She had not meant to be inside their heads, and guilt soured in her stomach. When had she…?

“Ryan?” Steve called out, knocking urgently on the door. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she answered, picking up the larger pieces of the broken ceramic. “I knocked over the toothbrush holder.”

“No, before that,” he said, “I – um. I felt you get startled at something.”

“Wait, you – “
Ryan cut off, heart dropping to her feet. Oh god. Oh god, oh god – the flash of light, how they’d all fallen asleep during sex – something had happened, she’d done something to them –

She heard Steve inhale sharply, footsteps coming up from the bed. “Buck?”

“Steve,” Bucky breathed, “what the hell – I can feel you.”

“I know, I can too – Ryan, please, open the door,” Steve said, jiggling the handle. “It’s okay, let’s just – “

A hysterical giggle escaped her, and she slid to the floor beside the shattered cup. “Oh my god, oh my god…” What had she done?

“Ryan, sweetheart, please – “

“I didn’t mean to,” she gasped, breath coming in pants, “I didn’t know, I didn’t – “

The door crashed open, Steve and Bucky’s panicked scents snapping her back to attention. Steve lifted her into his arms, tucking her nose into the crook of his neck. His scent calmed her somewhat.

Bucky’s hand smoothed urgently down her hair. “Sweetheart, where did you – what happened? I heard you in my head, then you disappeared – “

“Come back,” Steve murmured, “we’ll figure it out, I swear.”

With a shaky breath, she opened up the door, and relief that wasn’t hers flooded in waves from both of them. The tenors of their minds were similar, but still easily distinguishable, like two notes playing in harmony.

Okay, Steve’s voice said in her mind, confusion and curiosity and relief echoing across in equal parts. So, this happened.

“Yeah,” Ryan said aloud, hysteria tinging her tone as she pushed away from him, gripping her hands in her hair as she walked blindly back into the bedroom. “Yeah, you know, apparently my powers aren’t just a curse, they’re a fucking STD!”

Bucky laughed, and she whirled around to glare at him. “This isn’t funny – !”

“It’s okay,” he said, somehow radiating calmness across the connection between them, his mind somehow trying to soothe hers on instinct. “We mated, and something happened with your powers, I guess. It’s okay, it’s – it’s a little weird, yeah, but I’m not upset.”

“Is this what it’s like when you read someone’s mind?” Steve asked, only curiosity now burning from his end as he looked between her and Bucky. “It’s incredible.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Ryan said, panic slowly starting to ebb. Neither of them felt angry, or even freaked out. “The books I read about mating didn’t exactly mention this happening, though!”

Bucky laughed, and she whirled around to glare at him. “This isn’t funny – !”

“Yeah, no, it doesn’t,” Bucky chuckled again, shaking his head in wonder. “I mean, this doesn’t happen in normal mating bonds. Hey, no,” he comforted, pulling Ryan into his arms, apparently feeling her distress. “You’re reading my mind, sweetheart, you know I’m not upset.”

“Me, neither,” Steve declared, sandwiching her between them. “You turned it off a minute ago, so we hopefully can, too. We just understand you a little better now, that’s all.”

Ryan buried her face in Bucky’s neck, clinging to him. They were too good for her, too good to her
We love you, Bucky whispered inside their heads. *Forever.*

We promised, Steve added, brushing his fingertips over the mark he’d left on her collarbone, sending a shiver down her spine. *Til the end of the line. We’ll figure this out.*

“Now,” he said aloud, pulling back to kiss her hair. “Help us practice turning it on and off. We should get that down before tonight, if possible.”

Oh, god, she’d forgotten about that. “Shit,” she muttered, then shut out the connection to both of them. It startled her a little, how empty she felt afterwards. Sharing minds was invasive, yeah, but… intimate.

“Okay, how did you do that?” Bucky asked, furrowing his brows and staring at Steve. “I felt you… switch it off, or something.”

Ryan nodded. “That’s a good way to think about it. You don’t just think about it, though, you do it. Like, the difference between thinking about getting out of bed and actually doing it.”

“Oh.” Steve blinked, straightening up. “I did it.”

“I think I did, too?” Bucky echoed. “Wait, sweetheart, let me try – “

An odd sensation echoed in her mind, like a knock on a door but somehow silent. A tug on her consciousness, almost, a hand on a shoulder to get her attention. “Okay, we can’t read each other’s minds without permission,” she said, relief coursing through her. “Did you feel that too, Steve?”

“No, nothing. Were you just trying for Ryan, Buck?”

He nodded, then apparently aimed for Steve, judging by the surprise on his face a moment later. “Both sides have to be open to it, then. Wait, Ryan, that’s different than how your mind reading works. And your eyes haven’t been glowing either.”

“I’ve never known what’s up with the glowing, it does what it wants. But I don’t think you guys will be able to read other people’s minds,” Ryan said, thinking hard. “You feel the… connection between us, right? It’s not just me?” When they nodded, she continued, “I don’t know, it makes a weird kind of sense. I apparently was supposed to mate with you guys, like that SHIELD doctor said. Maybe this is another layer of it, or something.”

Steve nodded again. “You’ll still be able to get into our minds no matter what, though, I assume. Try it with me.”

“You could do it whenever you wanted before, too, Steve thought, the tenor of his words amused. *We know you won’t.*

“Hey, let me in,” Bucky complained, looking between both of them with a small frown. Ryan felt the same nudge in her mind as before, and she quickly opened the door between them, too. *No mind talking without all of us should probably be a ground rule.*

*You’re right,* Steve quickly agreed. *And we should keep it off as a general rule, too.*
Bucky’s mind went from annoyed to questioning, half-formed ideas bouncing around all at once. He was curious about what they could do, how it was happening, and snippets of thoughts echoed through to both of them, the space between them crowding with sound. Ryan felt Steve recoil a little, and Bucky looked up, eyes apologetic. “It’s loud,” Steve said, shutting off his side of the connection again. Ryan and Bucky quickly followed suit. “How did you get used to it, Ryan?”

“Well, my parents had me practice on them a little,” she said, trying to remember almost two decades back. “I figured out how to lessen it, kind of? Like a dimmer switch instead of a light switch.”

“So, what, you only heard parts of their minds instead?” Bucky asked.

“No, more like – there’s conscious thoughts and subconscious thoughts, and probably other layers of things, too. Steve, you were just hearing everything at once, and that makes it harder to pick out the individual stuff. It was like a ton of people in a cafeteria all talking at once, right?”

Bucky’s eyebrows raised. “So you can make it so you just hear one level? Wow. That’s amazing.”

“I’m sure you guys can, too,” Ryan added quickly, cheeks flushing a little. “It’s like… focusing a microscope, so you get what you want even if there’s other stuff there.”

Steve nodded, glancing away and looking deep in thought. “Oh, shit,” he exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “It’s after three, we’re supposed to be ready in two hours.”

“We slept all day?” Bucky said at the same time as Ryan exclaimed, “Wait, we’re still going?”

“It’s just the one night,” Steve promised. “We have to control our story, or people will think we’re hiding something.”

“We are, technically,” Ryan sighed, running her free hand through her hair. “Several things.”

“Yeah, and we need it to stay that way,” Bucky added. “I don’t like it either, sweetheart, but we have to. Pepper had a hard enough time keeping everything contained last winter, we can’t do that to her again. And besides,” he said, a smile spreading across his face. “I want the whole world to know you’re ours, now.”

She smiled at that. “Did it have to the annual Stark Industries Research and Technology Exposition and Gala, though?”

“Good enough way to introduce you to the world as our mate,” Steve shrugged, digging through the closet and pulling out garment bags and shoes. “And Tony likes it when we come to his big parties. Makes him look better.”

“Jesus,” Bucky grumbled, making Ryan giggle. “Did you hear him yapping about how the king and prince of Wakanda are gonna be there? He thinks they’re trying to steal his ideas.”

“Pepper said they’re his biggest tech competitors,” Ryan shrugged. “I didn’t even know countries besides England still had monarchies.”
“I can’t believe I’m wearing this,” Ryan muttered darkly. The evening gown was a rich sapphire that covered up to her neck, but dropped low on her back with slits on the sides. “I look ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously hot,” Steve said casually, guiding her to turn to the left. The brushstrokes tickled on her ribs, but she held as still as she could while he painted between the cutouts. “Just tonight, and then we get on a plane to Dublin and our honeymoon. We can make it.”

“Are you telling me, or yourself?”

“Both,” Steve said with a grin. “Alright, done. Don’t move too much while it dries, I’ll be back once I get dressed.” He pressed a kiss to her lips, then disappeared back into the bedroom.

Ryan looked at herself in the mirror and sighed. Red-carpet life was not for her. But the vines of white roses on arms were already dry, and she should make some effort with her hair, right?

A moment later, Bucky came in, dashing in a charcoal tie and suspenders. “Sweetheart? What’re you doing?”

Ryan chuckled, dropping the tangled mess she’d created. “I thought I knew how to waterfall braid my hair, and I was wrong.”

“Here, let me,” Bucky offered, and Ryan stood nonplussed as he started a neat, even braid, unruly hair falling perfectly into place.

“When did you learn this?” she said, starting to laugh. “Did you do your little sister’s hair?”

“Nah, braids like this weren’t as popular back then. My ma would just put a bow in Becca’s hair if she needed to look nice,” he reminisced, sounding fond before suddenly frowning in the mirror.

“And it’s Wilson’s fault,” he ended, tone soured. “Thought he’d be funny ‘n tell Thor I was trying to learn, ‘cause my hair used to be so long. Joke’s on him, though, I look fantastic in ‘traditional Asgardian warrior plaits’.”

Ryan was shaking, trying to stay upright through her laughter, Bucky’s deft hands gently twisting locks together. “You two are so pissy with each other sometimes, Jesus.”

“Asshole’s always had it out for me,” Bucky grumbled. “Just the other day, I ask him if there’s any more coffee in the kitchen downstairs, and he guzzles the whole pot right in front of me and says ‘no’ after. Fuckin’ lunatic.”

“You are aware that Steve does indeed like you best?” Ryan teased. “You give him sex, Sam can’t really compete with that.”

“Hand me a pin, would you, doll?” Bucky asked, starting on the other side a moment later. “And I know that, and you know that, but Sam apparently needs reminding, moron that he is.”

Ryan rolled her eyes even as she smiled. Bucky grinned back at her in the mirror, full and bright and devastatingly handsome. “Besides,” he continued, “Stevie likes you best, I gotta make sure I at least get second place.”

“What about who I like best?” Ryan dared, her hands unconsciously clenching the skirt of her dress.

Bucky just smirked at her, eyes sparkling. “Well, that’s me, obviously. Don’t see Stevie in here doing your hair for you.”
“You getting sweet on my best girl, Barnes?” Steve interjected, grinning mischievously in the bathroom mirror from the entryway. “Better back off.”

“How about you, Rogers?”

“Well, I’d say I’d have to knock you into next Tuesday, but. It’d be a shame to rough up such a handsome face,” Steve murmured, moving in closer.

“I’d hate to knock out one of those perfect teeth,” Bucky shrugged, pinning back the last piece of Ryan’s braid as she sniggered at them. “Just how will we solve this problem, then?”

“What problem?” Steve brushed his lips over Bucky’s cheek. “I can’t seem to remember.”

“Me neither,” Bucky breathed, then groaned as Steve crashed their lips together.

Ryan watched them in the bathroom mirror, almost mesmerized. It was beautiful, the way they fit together. The way they moved perfectly in sync, knowing each other’s bodies as well as they knew each other. The way Steve would let Bucky lead, then take over in a second, Bucky melting into his care. The way she now knew, assuredly, undoubtedly, that she belonged right there with them, too.

“Do we have to go to the party?” she muttered, and Steve chuckled, pressing one last kiss to Bucky’s lips before releasing him.

“You have no idea how bad I want to rip that dress right off you,” he murmured in her ear, winding his arms around her waist. “So fucking sexy, you’re driving me crazy. Both of you, god.”

Ryan hummed happily, leaning back against him. “Just tonight, then a plane ride, and we’re all yours. Right, Bucky?”

“Always,” he agreed, leaning down to kiss her and scenting in her hair after. “No one I’d rather belong to.”

He turned into Steve’s chest, his arm tucking Ryan against his side too. Steve hummed in satisfaction, low in his chest, and Ryan breathed in both of her mates. She was home.

* * *   * * *   * * *

“Are you nervous?”

Ryan blew out a breath, drying her palms on her dress. The limo crawled forward again, cameras flashing and crowds chattering not far ahead. “Yeah.”

Steve squeezed her hand. “We’ve got you. All you have to do is smile.”

“I don’t like them either, sweetheart,” Bucky murmured. “But it’s part of the job.”

She nodded. “Alright. I’m ready.”

A nudge at the back of her mind, and she met Steve’s eyes in surprise. He nudged again, and she opened the connection between them. *We can talk this way without drawing any more attention,* he said, reassurance comforting her across the bond. *Buck?*
A sense of relief swept through her, though still tinged with worry. *What about it being too loud for you guys?* *Or if you think something you don’t want us to hear, or –*

*We can keep our thoughts under control. We’ve got this,* Steve said. *Just until we get inside.*  *Besides…* He shifted a little, just a note of chagrin coming through. *I like being together like this.*

*Me too,* Bucky added quickly.

Ryan smiled at them both. She hadn’t wanted to admit how empty it felt without them already, their comforting presence to remind her she wasn’t alone. Steve and Bucky nodded in agreement, and a warm glow settled her nerves. *Let’s go, then.*

With that, Steve opened the limo door to shouts and cheers and clicking cameras. Bucky followed next, and a moment later, Ryan followed.

A collective gasp of surprise, and Ryan squinted against hundreds of blinding camera flashes.

*Smile, sweetheart,* Bucky reminded her, turning back around to take her hand. Steve put a hand on her lower back and guided her forward, an actual red carpet under their feet.

*“Captain America! Over here!”*

*“Turn this way, Sergeant Barnes!”*

*“Just a few questions – “*

*“Who’s the girl, Cap?”*

*I still hate this,* Steve thought to them, turning a dazzling smile on the crowd of reporters. *Did Pepper say which network to talk to?*

*She said it didn’t matter,* Ryan remembered, cheeks beginning to ache. *They’ll all have the story in a few minutes anyway.*

*Great.* He led them halfway to the hotel doors, pausing at a group of TV cameras. Journalists shouted questions and camera flashes blazed, and Ryan just kept herself from laughing as she heard Steve play eenie-menie in his head to settle on an anchorwoman a few feet away.

*“Good evening, Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes,”* she greeted as they approached, sounding professional but thrilled. *“Wonderful night for a party.”*

*“Evening, Cindy. It’s good to see you again,”* Steve replied. Bucky just nodded politely, and Ryan waited for her turn.

She couldn’t tell what network Cindy was from, but her hair was in a twisty updo much fancier than Ryan’s, and her heels were at least three inches taller, making her point the microphone down to reach her. *“And hello and good evening to you, too, miss. I don’t believe we’ve been introduced?”*

Ryan smiled as brightly as she could. *“You can call me Ryan. I’m Steve and Bucky’s mate.”*

* * * * *
As soon as they were past security, Steve pressed a kiss into her hair, breathing out a sigh of relief. *You were perfect. They loved you.*

*I think I’m gonna be sick,* Ryan thought in reply. Her head was whirling, the maelstrom of sounds inside and outside combining with her own nerves to leave her thoroughly nauseated.

*There’ll be water at our seats, come on,* Bucky directed. He led her through the much emptier foyer into a grand ballroom, dozens of round tables standing in front of a humongous stage, curtains drawn to hide preparations for whatever act would open the evening. Most of the seats were already full, classical music drifting over idle chattering.

To her surprise, Bucky veered them to the left, to a small, empty table almost hidden in the corner. *Pepper said the junket outside was the most important part,* he explained, concern echoing over the bond as he pulled out a chair for Ryan. She sank into it gratefully, her feet starting to hurt in the heels. *We can leave anytime we want.*

“No, I’m fine,” Ryan said aloud, switching off the connection. She shifted uncomfortably against the sudden sense of loneliness inside, but smiled at her mates. “We should be here for Tony.”

Steve poured her a glass of water, and she gulped it down. “The presentations should start in a few minutes. We won’t have to stay through all the dancing, though.”

“I like dancing,” she said, looking over at the polished dance floor gleaming under the lights. “Can we go dancing in Ireland?”

“Every night, if you want.”

Before she could reply, Darcy’s voice rung out, “Oh my god, you guys are still here?”

“Go on your honeymoon already, geez,” Clint added, Natasha just smiling as they approached. The trio looked incredible, Nat and Darcy in shimmering black gowns and Clint in a classic tuxedo.

“Duty calls,” Steve shrugged after they all said hello, sitting down together at the table. “We’re leaving right after this.”

“If Thor and Jane can get out of it, you guys could’ve, too,” Darcy remarked, taking a sip of wine.

Natasha looked to Darcy, frowning slightly. “Where are they?”

“I dunno. Jane texted me right before we got here, said they were going off-world for a bit instead. Asgardians probably throw great parties.”

Nat met Clint’s gaze for a second, then Steve’s. Ryan didn’t like the look in her eyes. “Is it weird for them to leave like that?” she muttered to Bucky, who frowned.

“A little. We don’t have a good way to keep in contact when they’re on a different planet. But Thor wouldn’t up and leave without a good reason. It’s probably fine.”

“Hey, I found them!” Sam’s voice cut in, and she saw him wave Bruce over as he approached. “Why’re you three still here?”

“We’re supporting Tony!” Ryan said, laughing incredulously. “We all live under the guy’s roof, you guys could at least pretend you want to be here.”
“Nah, we do,” Sam said with a wink, he and Bruce taking the last two seats. “I hate dressing up, but I look damn fine doing it.”

“Sam, Bruce,” Steve inserted, corners of his mouth pursed in worry. “Did Thor or Jane talk to you before they left?”

“They left?” Bruce said in surprise. “When?”

The lights suddenly dimmed, dramatic music swelling and cutting off conversation. Across the ballroom, guitar riffs sounded from the front, the curtain flying open to reveal –

“What the hell?” Bucky muttered beside her, leaning in closer. Ryan shrugged, staring in confusion. The stage was gone, a literal beach at sunset taking its place. The setting sun shone in Ryan’s eyes as if it was real, the image perfectly three-dimensional. Lapping waves and the occasional cry of a gull surrounded them, only the smell of the wind and spray missing from the illusion.

“Tony, this is nice, but we don’t have time – “

The screen turned to the side to show Pepper, holding a pair of pumps and wearing a crisp linen pencil skirt and dress shirt. She was smiling, but one hand still typed at her phone. “Pep, babe, the point of it being a private jet in a private airfield on a private island – “

“There’s no signal out here – someone has to run your company, and I know it’s not gonna be you – “

“Pepper, please.”

She finally paused her texting, face aglow in the magenta painting the sky. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, though her eyes looked almost confused. “This is sweet. Really. But China and India are waiting, and there’s a few billion of them and one of me.”

“Am I really this bad at romance?” Tony’s voice said, his hands gesturing widely at the edges of the view. “I swear I’m trying.”

“Alright, alright.” She sighed, laying her shoes on the sand and putting the phone inside them. “But we have to leave in a half-hour.”

“I’ll be quick then.” One hand fidgeted at his shirt, where the glow of the arc reactor peeked through, and Pepper furrowed her brows at him. “Come on, walking’s good for your heart, and all that.”

He held out a hand to Pepper, who gave him a strange look as they started strolling down the shoreline. The camera panned to a thicket of palm trees as Tony started to hum. “Beans, beans, they’re good for your heart. The more you eat, the more you – “

“Anthony Edward Stark, if you ruin our romantic walk with fart jokes – “

The entire ballroom laughed, and Ryan was startled back to reality for a second. The movie seemed so real, somehow.

“Oh, we finally reached romantic?” Tony snapped, drawing Ryan’s attention to the screen again.

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Just that I had to drag you away from the damn phone – “
Pepper pulled away from him, raising her hands in the air and backing away. “I’m not starting a fight with you tonight, Tony, I can’t – “

“No, please,” Tony interrupted, desperation laced into his tone. Pepper stopped in surprise, lowering her hands suspiciously. Tony sighed, running his hands through his hair. “I’m sorry.”

Pepper narrowed her eyes at him. “What the hell is going on?” She suddenly took a quick step towards him, sucking in a breath. “You were poking at it, is it the – “

“No, no,” Tony inserted, tapping a fingernail against the arc reactor. “Healthy as a quantum-ly entangled horse.”

“That was a terrible quip, and you never apologize for something that small,” Pepper said, eyes narrowing even further. “What the hell is going on?”

Tony growled in frustration, throwing his hands in the air as the camera turning back towards the sea. “I’m trying to propose to you, goddammit!”

Pepper gasped, and the view turned back to her. She had her hands over her mouth, eyes sparkling with tears. “It’s about damn time, you idiot,” she mumbled, and the screen faded to black.

The ballroom burst into applause, a spotlight on the stage following Tony as he sauntered forward. He wore some kind of headset, barely visible to Ryan from so far back.

“Yes, that’s how it really happened,” he started, to the laughter of the audience, “and no, I did not record it at eye level like an amateur sex tape.”

“Oh my god,” several people at their table all groaned at once, Ryan included.

“No, instead,” Tony continued onstage, tapping the headset with one finger, “binarily augmented retro framing, or "BARF" – god, I got to work on that acronym – an extremely costly method of hijacking the hippocampus, you today see that memory as I saw it five years ago.”

There was a collective gasp at his pronouncement, and Tony somehow looked even more smug. He stood directly center stage, the only light in the room shining down on him. “Ladies and gentlemen, friends and rivals, I introduce to you: the future.”

He held up a small remote, and pressed the red button.

A powerful blast rocked above them, shaking the glasses on the tables. More followed, rumbling and crashing like an earthquake. The sound came closer with each thunder blast, tremors intensifying every second.

Screams and shouts pierced through the din, and suddenly, almost seeming in slow motion, a fire blast erupted from over the stage.

“NO!” Ryan screamed, and flung out both hands.

* * *   * * *   * * *

Steve stared in shock as the fiery explosion stopped in place, raging against a wall of bright blue light across the entire ballroom. Beside him, Ryan stood with her hands outstretched, eyes and arms
aglow and face contorted in agony.

She shrieked in pain, arms trembling violently. “Run!”

“Steve!” Bucky shouted at him, and their eyes met for a tremulous second.

Suddenly, a switch flicked in his brain, and his training took over. “Sam, take care of Bruce – Nat, Buck, get the civilians out! Clint, get Darcy to safety and find Tony and Pepper! Move!”

A tremendous crack, and more screams echoed as the ceiling began to cave in. With another shout, Ryan threw out her right hand, shaking violently, and the biggest pieces halted in midair. Steve spared her one last glance before tearing into the fray, yelling for people to get out and moving them towards the exits. Natasha and Bucky did the same at the other two doors, almost half the ballroom out now.

More blasts from above, and the entire right wall imploded in a burst of flame. Steve ran forward and threw himself over a pair of screaming women, shielding them as best he could. A few chunks of rubble sprayed over them, and he turned to see the largest pieces encased in blue and floating in place. Ryan was holding up almost three-quarters of the ballroom now, and he saw the civilians he was shielding staring at her in wonder.

“Go!” he shouted, and they took off in a second. More explosions rocked the floor, almost knocking him to his knees as it shifted beneath him. “Bucky! Ryan!”

“Clear!” Bucky shouted, suddenly appearing at his side. “Civilians are clear, come on – “

Ryan screamed in agony, echoing across the ballroom. She was holding up rubble on all sides, teeth gritted and bared. Dust exploded in the air as the ceiling in the foyer collapsed, debris crashing down and blocking the exits.

“Ryan!” Steve and Bucky yelled as one, shoving fallen chairs and tables and whole chunks of debris clear. Her whole body was lit bright blue, like an angel descending from the night sky.

Another crack, and what remained of the ceiling just over their heads started to fall. Ryan yelled and caught that too, body convulsing with the effort.

“Just go! Get out of here!” she screamed at them, collapsing to one knee and panting desperately.

“No! Not without you!” Bucky screamed back, tearing through the rubble to reach her. Steve flung aside the last table, and as one, he and Bucky tore forward and grabbed Ryan’s arms, supporting them for her.

“I c-can’t,” she gasped, “hold – “

“It’s okay,” Steve breathed, coughing out a lungful of dust. “Everyone’s out, they’re safe.”

“You did it, sweetheart,” Bucky said on the other side. His eyes glanced toward the blocked exits, then met Steve’s, a strange sense of peace washing over them. “You saved them.”

Slowly, together, they let go of her trembling arms. Ryan looked to Bucky, and then at Steve, seeming to understand. They dropped to their knees, wrapping their arms around her, and she let her hands fall.

“I love you,” she breathed, and the world caved in to black.
“CLINT!” Darcy screamed, wrestling against the arms holding her back. “NAT!”

“Darcy, stop it!” Sam yelled in her ear, voice breaking. “You can’t, the whole building’s down – “

“I don’t care, I don’t care!” she screeched, clawing at his forearms, “I have to – “

“Darce!” Clint’s voice shouted, and Sam released her when he saw him and Natasha sprinting towards them. The trio collapsed into each other, Clint and Darcy sinking to the ground as Nat stood over them, eyes closed and lips mouthing something.

Sam closed his eyes for a moment too, sighing out a breath. Then, he turned to what was left of the hotel, ruins spilling out into the road. The dozens of TV cameras and reporters from earlier still stood nearby, broadcasting the devastation to the world. Emergency vehicles screeched and lights flashed all around him, a cacophony of input he barely noticed. His hands shook uncontrollably, but the rest of his body was almost sedate.

“Tony? Pepper?” he intoned, directing it back to Natasha. She nodded, jerking her head to point behind them. He glanced over, and saw the pair standing dirty but unharmed next to Bruce, Tony half-encased in an Iron Man suit covered in scorch marks. That’s how he survived the explosion on the stage, logic told him dully.

“Did everyone else get out?” he asked, turning his back to the rubble. Natasha shook her head, wiping away one traitorous tear.

“The stage explosion reached the first row of tables before Ryan stopped it. There was no time to check through the debris before total collapse. Civilian casualties likely, probable company heads or other dignitaries if they were seated up front. No sign of Rogers, Barnes, or Ryan,” she reported mechanically.

Sam’s heart clenched in his chest. “Alright. Someone get Coulson on the phone. And the President, probably. Everybody, get checked out by the paramedics, then wait for someone to take statements.”

Pepper stepped forward, unfocused eyes blinking back to attention. “I’ll deal with the logistics – “

“No, I’m military,” Sam said, straightening up. “FBI will be here any second, they’ll want my report. You and Tony will be taken into custody separately, cooperate with them. Bruce, they might try to restrain you, keep it under control. As soon as possible, everyone get back to the Tower. We’ve got a murderer to find.”

Miraculously, even Tony nodded, and Sam let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. He looked back at the demolished hotel one last time, then started forward towards the EMTs.

Suddenly, tremors shook and rumbled under his feet, and crashes of falling rock made him whirl back around. In the middle of the debris, under steel beams and piles of brick, a huge chunk of stone flew to the side on its own.

“No fucking way,” Clint breathed, rising to his feet with a look of wonder on his face.
A flash of blue light, and a hole blasted outward, spraying them with dust. Sam choked and coughed, blinking to clear his vision. When the air cleared, there knelt Steve and Bucky, Ryan glowing bright between them.

Sam dropped to his knees, closing his eyes. He really hadn’t wanted to be in charge.

*** *** *** ***

Shouts and sirens came in and out in waves, her vision blurring as she collapsed under her own weight. Strong arms caught her, kept her from pitching forward as she gasped for breath.

“…an you hear me? Ryan, sweetheart, stay awake – “

“We’ve got you, you’re sa…”

Blackness crept inside her brain, the ground shifting underneath her. Her stomach twisted, and she retched violently, bile spilling out her mouth as she coughed. The acid burning her throat gave her a sudden clarity, the world zooming into focus, lit a dim blue.

“Someone get help!” Steve’s voice shouted, and she managed to lift her head. “Ryan, can you hear me?”

“Wha – “ she panted, every muscle protesting as she tried to stand. Bucky’s metal hand seized her arm, pulling her back down.

“No, stay down, you’re alright – “

“Thank god,” Steve breathed, and suddenly crushed her to his chest. She melted against him, too exhausted to fight it. “Buíochas le Día, tá tú sábháilte, tá tú ceart go leor.”

“You three,” Tony’s voice cut in, shaking as it approached, “are the luckiest bastards in the world. And luck doesn’t fucking exist.”

Ryan peeked an eye open to find her vision clearing. The rest of the Avengers all came forward, sheer relief on everyone’s face. She took a deep, slow breath, and the glow started to fade from her hands.

“She needs medical attention,” she heard Steve say, and found a water bottle pressed to her lips. She drank it down greedily, strength starting to return. When she’d finished, she pushed away from Steve, who reluctantly let her go.

“How do you feel?” Bucky asked as she looked around, everyone else in a circle around her.

“Like I ran a marathon in five minutes.” She quickly took stock of herself, and surprisingly, nothing hurt apart from a few scrapes and bumps. A bit of energy was coming back, second wind enough for her to stumble to her feet, Steve and Bucky holding out hands to catch her. A few stars danced around her, but she stayed on her feet.

Then, her heart and stomach plummeted, and she reached blindly for her mates, breath coming in sharp gasps. A thousand cameras flashed, crowds stared and held out cell phones behind yellow barriers, EMTs and policemen and firefighters –
And they’d all seen her.

Instinctively, she took a step back, and suddenly Steve and Bucky caught her arms in their hands. “Stay,” Bucky plead, desperation in his voice. “We’ll figure it out, we’ll take care of it, just don’t run.”

“Please,” Steve begged, cupping her face with one hand. “It’ll be okay, I swear.”

She looked at the crowds, TV cameras and reporters broadcasting to the entire world, and then to her mates, their family around them. “Okay.”

Suddenly, a screech of tires came from around the street corner, drawing their attention to a line of black SUVs appearing practically out of nowhere, barreling through the police cordon. A second later, Bruce gasped, grabbing Tony’s shoulder. “Tony,” he breathed, eyes wide and voice laced with terror.

“Shit,” Tony breathed, air around them going stale with fear. “No, Bruce, it’s fine, I’ll take care of it – “

“Tony – “

“I’ll take care of it!” Tony hissed, grabbing Bruce by the shoulders and blocking his view as the vans screeched to a halt. The doors flew open, and dozens of men in tac gear and armed with huge guns poured out.

Immediately, Steve grabbed Ryan and pulled her behind him, and she stumbled over the hem of the ridiculous dress she was wearing. “Please tell me that’s SHIELD,” she said, dread coursing through her.

“Tony!” Bruce shouted, grabbing onto his arms. “Not me! Her!”

Tony turned deathly pale, then looked Ryan straight in the eye. “Ryan. Run.”

“What?” she gasped, Steve growling fiercely as he held her behind him still. The men with guns had paused, and out of the corner of her eye, a short man in a dark suit stepped out of an armored car.

“Tony, the hell is going on?” Steve snapped, fury plain on his face.

“She ain’t going nowhere, Stark!” Bucky raged, and Tony shoved away from Bruce.

“Muinín dom! Le do thoil!” he shouted, and Steve and Bucky startled at the words. “Ryan, run!”

In a rush of adrenaline, Ryan shoved away from Steve, stumbling back into the pile of debris.

“Ryan, no!” he shouted, and she felt a desperate tug in her mind as he reached out for her.

I’m sorry. With strength she didn’t have, she flung around and took off, rubble flying aside as she cleared a path with a thought. Shouts and screams echoed behind her, until the crash of rubble and the pounding of her heart drowned them out.

*** *** ***
“That was the scene as of five minutes ago at ground zero, where it has been confirmed that a series of explosions were responsible for the destruction of the Edwin Hotel, where the annual Stark Industries Research and Technology Expo and Gala was being held,” the anchorwoman reported. “Right now, you can see behind me most of the Avengers still gathered at what remains of the hotel lobby, with what looks like government agents taking jurisdiction. Again, a young woman was spotted fleeing the scene just moments ago after our cameras, along with dozens of eyewitnesses, saw her extricate herself from the rubble without a scratch, her hands and eyes appearing to glow bright blue.”

She cut off a moment, holding one hand to her ear. “Yes, new information has just arrived, confirming that young woman to be Ryan Green, introduced tonight as mated to Captain Rogers, better known as Captain America, and his longtime mate Sergeant Barnes. Authorities have put out an APB, and citizens are asked to stay clear of 39th and the surrounding streets as safety sweeps are conducted.”

Another pause, and she finished, “We’ll be back in just a moment with more updates from the scene, and the question on everyone’s mind:

”Who is Ryan Green?”

Chapter End Notes

Steve: Thank God, you're safe, you're alright.
Tony: Trust me! Please!

Wow. Here we are. 260K words and just over a year later. If anyone's stuck around this whole time, from the beginning, holy lord.

To all my fantastic, kind, loyal readers: you are the reason I kept this going, and will continue on soon. Thank you so much for all the love, you've given me many a smile on a bad day!!

Like I've said many times before, there's a sequel in the works, if anyone cares to read it. There's another piece that's been in the works for months now with a friend of mine which will be written and published before I start in on the sequel, but that won't take more than a few months. Weeks, if I'm optimistic - I really want to get on with this universe!! But a bit of a break wouldn't hurt the creativity, either. Plus, I'm actually planning out my work this time instead of making it all up entirely as I go along, so it'll definitely be more coherent :)

I love you all. Leave kudos if the spirit moves you, click subscribe to this series if you want notice of the sequel :) Be excellent to each other, and party on dudes! Ryan, Steve, and Bucky will be back soon.
Hi everyone!! I just wanted to send out this one-time update as a PSA - if you're interested, this story is now continuing in a sequel, *Light and Dark and Shadow!* New Marvel characters, old favorites, and lots more trio love and adventure are already underway - I'd love to have you come along for the ride!! You can find the story on my AO3 profile, or by clicking on the series name in the tags above, *Who Is Ryan Green?*

Be excellent to each other, and party on, dudes! Ryan, Steve and Bucky can't wait to see you again.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!